

Meanwhile

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The sky was laced with thin white clouds behind the buildings: big city towers, one red brick, one concrete bound with green glass and steel. A third—set apart—was a stair-stepped cake of lighter stone. Buttery, buttercream—just that sweet, just out of reach. As if she could reach, lift her arms straight up. Her body felt airy. Not weightless. Certainly not floating. The water had looked deep. Now the image in her mind was fuzzy, the water a shallow puddle, leftover rain. Lying on her back, she couldn't feel her legs.

Nen felt a nudge, twisted her neck toward a soft, slurping buzz. A woman was bending over her, with a sack on her back, a bagpipe bellows or a leaf-blower, connected to an accordion hose. The woman hadn't kicked her. It was a touch, a sweep of her foot, as if Nen were litter on the pavement—too big for the hose, not enough to bother picking up. Nen flinched from that pushing foot, but found no purchase. Her body was too heavy to move, or maybe too light.

Back and forth, back and forth—the woman ran the nozzle over the puddle like a wand. She pushed Nen again, harder this time, then stooped to finger the cloth of Nen's sleeve. Nen prickled with irritation even as her body prickled.

“Lay off!” She tried to swipe at the hose. Her arm didn't move.

Nen felt her lungs expand, felt tissue stretch and separate, a collapsed balloon re-inflated, a parachute made whole—the first full breath, coming up from under water. She felt a suction pull at her hip, felt her body rising around her, as if she were being drawn to the surface. The puddle was nearly gone.

“Where did *you* come from?” The woman looked from side to side, adjusted the brim of her hat, switched off her hose. The buzzing stopped. “This isn't public water. It's not for drinking.” Her eyes were clear blue; her hair, mostly hidden, was sandy. Her fine-boned hands were obviously strong,

with thick silver rings on her fingers. She wore what looked like a janitor's jumpsuit, long-sleeved but lightweight. The trim on her jumpsuit—pocket flaps, collar—matched the plaid bag on her back.

“More like swimming,” Nen said, shallow though the puddle had been. She knew she'd never meant to *drink* there. Not off the street. She tried to demonstrate a backstroke; her rubbery arms flopped to the ground as if deboned. She tried to sit up, pushing off the pavement in rising panic. Her elbows buckled and she rested back again, panting in fear as much as from the effort.

The woman's face went blank. Then she seemed to see Nen, see her for real, and her face took on an uneven smile. “I'm sorry.” She hesitated. “Did you fall? I didn't see you.” The woman knelt, careful to keep her knees out of any residual damp. “Can you sit up? Let me help you.”

Nen took the offered hand, tried again to bend her back away from the pavement. She pulled against the weird suction of the ground—had the nozzle come too close, had she been partially absorbed?—and felt the pinpricks of muscles that had fallen asleep being forced into action. Sitting upright at last, she kneaded her thighs and pushed her hands down her shins, stretching toward her toes, reassured by the feel of bone and skin under her fingers. Her hands felt her legs and her legs felt her hands. So far, so good. She raised one leg, felt it stick to the ground like sweaty skin to vinyl in the summer, but then her leg was free, fully extended. She did the same with her other leg, and then she sat, legs straight in front of her, hands on her thighs, trying to take in enough air.

The woman sat back on her heels. “Are you all right?”

Looking around, Nen saw a clean city street, a unanimity of sunhats, a woman pushing a stroller mounted with a green umbrella. “I'm fine. Thank you. Where am I?”

“Fourth and Pearl. Are you sure? All nobby?”

Nen shook her head, then nodded. She wasn't all right, if that's what nobby meant, but she had no way to argue. More than afraid, she felt hollow. Unmoored.

“What are you doing here?” the woman pressed. “Who are you?”

Nen blinked. Blinked again. These were easy questions, yet she didn't know the answers. She swallowed hard, her throat tight and unyielding. The woman pointed to Nen's collarbone. Nen raised her hand, felt cool metal script on a delicate chain. "*Nen*," the woman read aloud. "Is that your name?"

"Yes," Nen answered. "I'm Nen." That felt true. "Nen," she repeated softly. "Nen Renner."

The other woman pointed to herself. "Martina," she said shyly. She didn't give a last name.

"Hi, Martina." Nen rubbed her hip. She felt wide awake—wide, wide awake—but also pliable, as if she hadn't yet gelled. "Fourth and Pearl?"

"That's right."

Her jeans felt damp, but her blouse was dry. Maybe there had never been a puddle. But then how . . . ? Nen wiggled her toes, flexed her feet, glad she was wearing sandals. It was getting warm.

Martina pointed at Nen's feet. "Is that paint?"

Nen looked at her battered nails, flecks and smears of green from the last coat of polish. Her toes curled in embarrassment. "You sound like somebody's grandfather."

"I've never seen painted nails. Not in person." Martina looked more closely. "It's hard to clean off, isn't it?"

"It's chipped. It's not that I couldn't get it off—I'm not a slob." If only she were more limber, she could bend forward, cover the offending nails with her hands.

Martina shook her head. "The stuff was so toxic."

"Is it really that bad?" But Martina had said *was*, as if the toxic frivolity were a thing of the past. Last season's shade.

Martina was nodding. "I guess people didn't know. It's good they phased it out, fused off all that stuff that messed with the ozone."

“That’s chlorofluorocarbons,” Nen said, surprising herself. “They were banned thirty years ago.” Martina shrugged, a big *suit yourself*. “What’s that on your back? That leaf-blower thing?” Nen asked.

Martina looked over her shoulder, as if expecting something unusual—a giant sloth, a purple spider. “The water-sweeper?”

“How can you sweep water?”

The name sounded like a joke, but Martina wasn’t laughing. She tucked a wisp of hair behind her ear, straightened the wide brim of her hat. Her skin was pale, unfreckled, as if she had never been out in the sun. “It’s what they call us, too. Or Zinfers, Zinf-ladies. Like the machine.” She took it off. A brass tag was riveted to the sack: Zinfeld Industries.

“How much does that weigh?” The water had seemed infinite when she stepped into it, more a window than a shallow pool. Was it now contained within that pink and brown pack, like the bag of an antique upright vacuum?

Martina waved toward the street behind her. “It’s not bad. The water all goes in the tank.”

“Have you done this a long time?” The question was nosy, but Nen wanted to know.

Martina seemed glad to have someone take an interest. “Almost two years.” She looked around—a person used to monitoring her surroundings—as if considering how much she should say. “I do all right. What about you? You’re not dressed for—”

“Work? I guess not.” Nen thought about it. “I don’t know,” she admitted. “These are just normal clothes, aren’t they?”

Martina tilted her head. “Not the sandals. And you should roll down your sleeves. The sun’s stronger than you think.” Martina didn’t look a lot older than Nen, yet she spoke with authority. The sun was hot, but not that hot—not as hot as all the protective gear would suggest.

Nen took a breath. Her throat felt scratchy, her mouth, dry. People were beginning to notice them. One or two paused, looking more closely at the two women before moving on. A bus stopped

across the street, then another. No exhaust pipes, no fumes. A man passed holding a toddler by the hand, the child pulling to the side hard enough that he walked at an angle, his father steadily moving forward, not tugging the child but not deviating from his line.

Nen rubbed her thighs, feeling the circulation return, trying to find the right question. The stiffness had nearly left her muscles. She felt a forward impulse—rising bubbles, as if she were carbonated. It was time to do something. Do what? Was she late? She recalled no appointment. She cast her mind back over the last few hours and found—nothing. Her name was Nen, she was sitting in the street—a street—and Martina was kneeling beside her, starting to look impatient.

“You should get out of the sun. Can you walk?” Martina gestured toward a small stand of trees, poplars or birches, feathery leaves that filled the space opposite the buildings. Two benches faced the street, side by side under the trees. Behind them two identical benches faced into the park.

“I think so.” Nen stood, then faltered, lightheaded, and gripped Martina’s arm. She took a step, settled her foot, tested it. Martina guided her across the street, one arm for Nen, one dragging the water-sweeper, careful not to rasp it against the pavement. It made for an awkward, sloping lurch, Nen leaning on one side, the sweeper weighing down the other. Nen squared her shoulders and hobbled the last few steps to the bench on her own. Thirsty, she scanned the park, but saw no drinking fountain.

“I should get back to work,” Martina said, but she sat down and stretched out her legs, parallel to Nen’s. Nen wondered if Martina was keeping an eye on her, waiting for help for arrive—maybe she had some kind of panic button under her shirt. Either way, Nen was glad of the company. They sat quietly, staring at their feet, Nen still embarrassed by her half-polished toes. Martina’s shoes looked sturdy, comfortable, in a brown that matched her uniform. A few silent buses passed; otherwise, no traffic. Nen listened to the leaves move. She breathed deeply, an almost familiar scent

she couldn't place, like the smell of a river—a ripple of cottonwood, of water under heat. The sun had dropped, no longer directly overhead; the buildings' shadows stretched toward the park.

A couple approached along the sidewalk, the woman striding purposefully until the sight of Martina drew her up short. She wore a hat wide as a hula-hoop, a flopping platter of neon pink straw that reached past her shoulders and bumped the man beside her. She looked from Martina to Nen and then back.

"Is this why we pluck you ladies out of the hinterlands?" she demanded. Nen pulled her feet out of view, but the woman was addressing Martina. "Are you paid to sit on a bench?"

"Depends who's asking," Martina said. Nen admired her poise.

The woman drew herself up, full bosom and umbrage. "My tax dollars at work—hardly!"

Martina took a breath.

"Sweeper efficiency yields are magnified twelve percent, doubling year over year totals in the past biennium," Nen said primly. As if she had any idea.

The woman turned to Nen, opened her mouth to reply, decided not to stoop so low. She tossed her head, stirring the air with the brim of her magnificent hat, and sailed away, the man in her wake. Martina kept a straight face as long as she could, smothering her laugh against her own shoulder.

"I hope I didn't get you in trouble," Nen whispered.

"Oh, I doubt it," Martina said. "In these uniforms, we all look alike."

Nen stretched her arms over her head, rotated her ankles. Everything felt pretty normal. "Are there a lot of you?" Nen asked, hoping to keep her.

"Ten or twelve to a district. Depends on the terrain, and local budgets." Martina pointed toward the stair-stepped building, the one that looked like a wedding cake. "That's the headquarters. They always put the nicest buildings next to the river, right? Though they had to fill in the banks before they could build—that was a long time ago. Any road, the factory's farther away from the water."

“Probably better that way. Less contamination,” Nen said.

“Right, like when they fused off the nail enamel and all that—speaking of which, where’d you even get the stuff? You’re like some kind of throwback.”

“First day in the big city?” Nen kept her voice light, but felt a little hurt, remembering the pink-hatted woman’s snipe about hinterlands.

Martina shook her head. “Sorry. Only . . . it’s like you’ve never seen a water-sweeper.”

So what if I haven’t? Nen nearly snapped, but bit back the words in time. She felt like herself and yet different—artificial, altered. “It must be heavy,” she said instead. The thing was so quaint. Not municipal-industrial at all.

“They started with an old vacuum cleaner. During the last Warning Drought. Someone had the idea to sweep up all the water that might evaporate on its own. Because there were storms, too.” Martina paused to make sure Nen, who had somehow missed this most basic history lesson, was following.

“Warning Drought,” Nen repeated stupidly.

“You know, the summer they found the hole in the ozone, and then two summers in a row, no rain anywhere, and frying an egg on the sidewalk wasn’t a joke. It was the end of going barefoot.” It sounded like a recitation, something she’d said or read more than once.

“An uncalloused foot burns almost as fast as an egg,” Nen agreed.

Martina laughed. “Right. Supposedly, the first sweeper was made out of a vacuum. So it had that bag, and then, you know, it’s a tradition. Now they make them from scratch.”

“With the plaid? Do they all look the same?”

Martina looked at the bag again. “Why not? It’s a standard issue.”

“Why not call it a water-vac? And does someone go first, in case there’s garbage? Tissues or plastic bags or whatever?” Though when she looked, there was no trash on the street.

“That’s why I was surprised,” Martina said. “I saw something on the pavement, and I didn’t want to clog up the hose, and then, there you were.”

“How does it work?” The puddle, once deep enough to swim in—hadn’t it looked that way? *was* there a puddle?—had evidently been taken up into the pack, which should have been enormous to hold it all, but wasn’t.

Martina shrugged. “The water’s swept up, then there’s a condenser, then the densified water goes in the tank. The condensers collapse the molecules. The idea is to prevent inefficient evaporation by sucking up all the water we can find and putting it in tanks. Then it’s spread on the evaporation fields.” *Evaporation fields*, Nen mouthed silently. Like a water farm.

Martina paused for breath, as if surprised to have said so much at one go. She pointed to a gray cube resting on a trailer across the street, a vehicle with no obvious means of propulsion. Warning labels and No Tampering signs marked one side, but the larger lettering proclaimed *Water For Life* in shades of blue and green that seemed to shimmer wet themselves.

“The holding tank?” Nen looked again at the warning signs on the trailer. “Is water so scarce?”

Martina turned to her with the exaggerated patience the well-meaning reserve for the not-too-bright. “If we’re careful, there’s plenty.”

“What about the water cycle? Scooping all this water up—sweeping, whatever you call it. It has to evaporate at some point for there to be rain.”

“Of course it does. But the cycle runs more smoothly, the rains are more reliable, if water is concentrated in one place. In the evaporation fields.”

“Like what, the evaporation fairies can’t find the water if it’s spread around?”

Martina snorted. “I never thought of it that way. Rains are pretty regular lately, or regular enough. Not as heavy as they were prior era. Any road, it’s not a drought. Sweeping does its part.”

“What about the river?”

Martina blinked. “The river’s the river.”

“Not, I don’t know, enclosed or covered or anything?”

“No.” Martina seemed to think about it, sitting so still she might have become invisible, then shook her head sharply. “Where did you really come from?”

“I didn’t come *from* anywhere,” Nen said. That wasn’t right, either. “I don’t know,” she admitted.

Martina was once again contemplating Nen’s feet. “Honestly, for a second, I thought there was money. One time I found a 3-chit on the pavement.”

“That’s a good day,” Nen said, certain of nothing except that she was out of place. It seemed wise not to draw too much attention to her ignorance; a 3-chit sounded big. She reached for the sweeper. “Can I look at it?”

“Sure.” Martina picked up the apparatus. It was obviously heavy; still, Nen was surprised, hefting it, at how much it actually weighed. It must have held two or three gallons.

“Damn! I bet I could make it lighter. And if the straps were suspended differently, it would be easier to carry,” Nen said.

Martina raised an eyebrow, unconvinced, then seemed to recall her task at last. “So, are you nobby? You should maybe see a doctor.”

“I think I’m fine.” Nen stretched her legs again, still new, still grateful. She looked at the sky. The clouds had pulled a fraction to the left, thickened up.

“Do you need to find a phone? Call anyone?”

Good question. Surely there was someone she should call? There was not. “I don’t think so.”

Martina waited another beat, but Nen didn’t say anything further. “I should go,” Martina said. “I always give myself a break, if I can, but there’s a couple more blocks on my route.” She stood, picked up her water-sweeper. “There’s a café down the way. You should eat something.”

Nen didn’t want to let her go. “So then what? After you scoop it all up?”

“Sweep. It goes in the hover trailer.” Martina pointed again. She was speaking slowly now; she had already explained. “The trailer has a route. It’s like a time stamp for us sweepers. Oh, clap!”

The cube seemed to levitate, rising off the ground and beginning to move down the block, slightly faster than walking pace. “Clapping, clappety, clapping clap! You’re nobby, right?” Martina looked at Nen, obviously doubtful, but also pulled toward the trailer, nearly hovering herself.

Nen nodded and closed her eyes against the sun. Maybe food was a good idea. A bite to eat and a drink of water might help her think straight.

“I tried to swim once,” Martina whispered, looking down. Then she took off after the trailer, shrugging the pack into position as she ran.

I’m dreaming, Nen thought, kneading her thighs, digging her nails in. She didn’t wake up. She sat a while longer, then stood and walked toward the café.

The block was lined with wide sidewalks and well-spaced trees. Aside from the towers, most buildings were low. Buses passed, and bicycles, pedestrians pulling wagons. No one spoke to her. She thought people were looking at her feet. At her bare head. Maybe it was the way she moved—an old woman’s walk in a young woman’s body, a body out of place. She walked faster.

Nen crossed another street and then she was at the café Martina had mentioned, one story, bricks painted white, flush against a pharmacy on one side, an alley on the other. Until she reached the café, she hadn’t been sure she would take Martina’s suggestion, or if she might keep walking. Where would she go? She was hungry, parched. She pulled open the door.

The café was airy, high ceilinged; tall windows, white walls, white-painted tables. Blue tablecloths lay diagonally across the tops, with blue cloth napkins, glass shakers for salt and pepper and sugar.

“Order at the table,” said the man behind the counter, seeing Nen hesitate. “Sit anywhere.” She found a table near a window, one that let her look out at the street but also in at the dining room. The man brought her a menu.

“Can I have a glass of water?”

“Directly. Anything to eat?”

“Just a sandwich.”

The man glanced over his shoulder, to the chalkboard behind him, then scowled. “There’s supposed to be a specials board,” he said. “That’s yesterday’s. It should say the sandwich special is hummus on sourdough, comes with tomato and pickle.”

“That sounds fine,” Nen said. “That sounds good.”

It was good. The tomato slices were thick, the bread chewy, and it all stayed together, the right amount of every ingredient in every bite. She was going to compliment the chef, but that felt a bit over the top. And she was still thirsty. She waved, stood up to get the man’s attention. “Can I have that glass of water?”

He glanced at her table, at the half sandwich on her plate. “I’ll bring it directly.”

Nen sat back down. The café wasn’t crowded. Only three other tables were occupied—it didn’t seem like a usual mealtime. What struck her was how neat everyone looked. People wore light colors, pastel shirts with long sleeves; everything looked starched. Nen tried to peek at their feet—all their shoes looked like sensible slip-ons. Mostly leather, a few running shoes in complementary colors. No sandals she could see.

She finished the sandwich. Still no water, but then, as she looked up, the man was coming toward her, tall glass, three ice cubes, a thin slice of lemon. He was about her height, with cropped hair, dark skin, and a crisp yellow shirt under his striped apron.

“Thank you,” Nen said, offering a smile.

He nodded and returned to the counter. Nen tried to sip her water—everything here was so slow—but she really was thirsty and in two long swallows, the water was gone. She thought it was time for her to go, too. She stood, patted her pockets, felt an encouraging, stiff crinkle.

Instead of the bill she had been counting on, she found only a quarter sheet of paper with what looked like a hastily scribbled list on one side. She shoved it back into her pocket to look at later. Right now, she needed a way to pay for lunch.

She folded her napkin carefully, as if that would make a difference. She squared her shoulders and walked up to the counter, feeling every pair of eyes on her, boring into her back, though when she turned—nonchalant, carefree yet humble—people were looking at their plates, at their companions, at their own empty glasses.

“I’m sorry,” Nen whispered. “I don’t have any money. I don’t have my wallet.”

The man looked at her. He was going to make her say it again.

She leaned closer. Her hands were shaking. “I can’t pay.” What was it people did? “Can I wash dishes?”

Then he smiled. His laugh was gentle. “How’s your handwriting?”

“I don’t know. Pretty good, I guess. Why?”

He pointed to the chalkboards behind the counter and beside the door. “My special-writer never came in today. Re-do those for me and we’ll call it good.”

“Really? Okay.” Nen mostly felt bewildered, but she must look pathetic, in need of rescue. Martina had been gentle with her, too.

The man held out a hand. “Jick,” he said.

“Nen,” she offered, fingering the necklace at her throat.

Jick brought out a tin of colored chalk, a cloth to clean the boards, a list of the specials she should include. Nen wiped each board carefully, not a smear, no leftover smudge or residue of prior menus. She considered what colors might catch the eye, highlight the dishes on offer. She thought about proportion. She took her time, added swoops and flourishes and small decorations. Her

handwriting was beautiful. She was surprised herself. It was eye-catching, yet also legible. With any luck, it would make people want to order the hummus.

Jick pointed to the sandwich special. “Highlight that one. I made a lot—tripled the garlic by mistake and then had to keep adding more of everything else to get back to the balance I wanted.”

“Sure.” Nen was feeling more balanced herself, sure-footed in her composition, the letters and the color and the placement on the chalkboard coming naturally, as if she’d done it before. Jick watched as she worked, but didn’t hover. He was older than she was, maybe thirty—not a lot.

“Nice job,” he said when she was finished. “You haven’t been in before. New in town?”

She nodded.

“No trouble finding a place to stay?”

Nen felt her shoulders contract, took a step back. Jick pointed to the notice board against one wall. “Sometimes people post rooms. Mrs. Zinfeld had something, if it hasn’t rented.”

“Thank you.” Nen walked over to look at the patchwork of notices: dog-walker, garden help, tank cleaner; room for rent, apartment to share. One sounded promising, garage apartment, *quiet tenant only*. She looked around for a way to record the details. Having already shown herself ill-prepared, she didn’t want to borrow a pen. Jick had gone back into the kitchen. Nen chalked a number on her pant leg, hoping it would come out in the wash after she’d had a chance to call.

When he returned, Jick noticed the chalk on her pants. “I’d loan you a pen,” he said, smiling.

Nen felt herself flush. “This was easy.”

“That’s not far from here,” Jick added, looking at the address. “You can use the phone, if you want to call.”

She took the phone he offered, turned her back to the room, thinking the exchange required privacy. She felt exposed—something about her stuck out. It wasn’t only the sandals, the missing hat. She kept smoothing her hair, as if that might help.

The woman's voice that answered sounded cool, authoritative.

Nen cleared her throat. "I saw the notice of a room for rent. Is it available?"

"It's a full studio apartment," came the correction.

"Yes, that's what I meant. Is it still for rent?"

"It is." A pause. "You'll want to see the place. And we'll have to see how we might get on, if an arrangement seems suitable. Are you free now?"

Nen was free. What was she going to tell the woman about how she might pay? She'd worry about that later. For now, she took down the directions.

"Come back tomorrow," Jick called after her as she pulled open the door. "I open at eight. Wilton's not likely to be back. Specials change every day."

The directions sounded easy enough. Three blocks north (turn right out of the café), take a left, follow Division about a mile, right on Dryden, left on Etna; follow the curve as the road bends, house will be on your right. If you come back to the river, you've made a wrong turn. North Benton isn't that big.

Should have been easy, but she did come to the river, then had to backtrack.

It was not a wild river. The water she had glimpsed between the downtown towers had looked wider, spreading. Scarcely a mile upstream, it was channeled, close-banked and full, with a high, arched bridge flanked by stone lions. The bridge held a wide pedestrian lane, as if the vehicle space had been reduced to leave room for people on foot. The breeze off the river smelled clean, almost sweet; still that hint of cottonwood tickle. The water looked clear, deep enough to be cold. Nen wanted to climb down the bank, but it was too steep. She retraced her steps to the missed turn.

She had come farther than she thought, but it was a compact downtown, what she saw of it: that row of taller buildings, ten or twelve stories, opposite the park where she'd sat with Martina; a few streets of two- and three-story blocks like the one that held the café. As she walked, streets became more residential. Front yards held trees but no lawns; a neat bed of pale gravel might surround a shade tree. Gardens looked tended, more vegetables than flowers. Nen wanted to recognize a face, someone she had seen before who might acknowledge her in turn. There was no one. She saw people, bicycles, children in groups. She saw another sweeper at a distance. No one she recognized. She kept finding she was holding her breath. Warm and still like a Sunday late in summer, waiting for something to happen.

And there was the house, around the curve on the right, white clapboard with a detached garage. The woman who opened the door to Nen's knock was smaller, older than the voice on the phone had led Nen to expect. She was hunched—not so much she couldn't lift her head—with steel gray

hair in close curls, dark skin, wire-rimmed glasses; nothing fluffy, anywhere. It was hard to see her eyes behind the glasses, but Nen thought they were brown—light brown or hazel, like her own.

“Eleanor Zinfeld,” the woman said, stepping onto the porch, keys in hand. She extended her other hand for Nen to shake. She wore a modest straw hat for the walk from house to garage.

“Nen Renner. Pleased to meet you.” Nen held the hand a beat too long. Like that river smell, or Nen’s own handwriting on the café chalkboard, Eleanor Zinfeld seemed familiar but not familiar enough. Nen wanted to recognize her and tried to persuade herself that she did. Nothing. The old woman seemed kind—stern, but not threatening. But Nen had no money to pay for an apartment. She shouldn’t even be here.

“I want someone who will appreciate the apartment,” Mrs. Zinfeld said, opening the garage door. Enlarged knuckles suggested arthritis; it took her a moment to work the knob. “We redid it ourselves, my late husband and I, when we gave up the car. We took some trouble. I didn’t—don’t—want to rent to just anyone.”

Nen hoped she wasn’t just anyone. Over the phone, “garage apartment” had sounded dark, possibly cramped. This was neither. What had been the overhead door was now covered, but there were windows in the other three walls. Tightly woven carpeting looked as if it would feel good against bare feet, though Nen didn’t remove her sandals. To the left of the door, a table and two chairs; behind that, a counter defined the kitchen area. A picture window at the back overlooked a neat, shaded garden. A steel tank stood under the window.

Following Nen’s glance, Mrs. Zinfeld explained, “Since we were starting from scratch, we put in a graywater system, so our irrigation is unrestricted. I don’t care for those gravel beds everywhere. Too formal for our part of the world.” She set her hat on the table.

Nen said only, “Lots of people go for the gravel.” She’d seen that on her walk.

Mrs. Zinfeld pointed to a leather sofa. “That was the backseat,” she said. Nen stopped short. “From our last car,” Mrs. Zinfeld added. “Prior era. Sit down, try it out.”

“Wow.” Nen ran her hand along the bench. It had obviously been a nice vehicle. The leather was soft, a faded industrial teal. She leaned back. “This is really comfortable.”

“We reused as much as we could. We’d thought about making an apartment out here for years. When we wanted to give up the car, we had the idea of using it to decorate.” Floor mats refashioned into mud mats lay beside the front door. The shell of a side-view mirror held a tiny jade plant. Above the sink, the kitchen blind rose and fell with the crank of a car window. Nen reached for the faucet—the prospective tenant’s instinctive checking of the taps—but Mrs. Zinfeld’s stiffened posture made her pull back.

“Adam was horrified by the price of sinks,” Mrs. Zinfeld told her. “But I said, let’s use the hood, hammer it into shape.”

Nen ran her finger over the grooved surface, bumped and uneven as a steel drum, and saw herself reflected in the distorting metal. She made a face. Dimpled metal flashed pockmarked skin—still, it was reassuring to see herself all there, nothing missing.

“How long ago was this?” Nen asked. Mrs. Zinfeld didn’t seem that old. Her glasses weren’t thick; she could probably see well enough. Martina hadn’t said anything about cars being forbidden. Still, Nen hadn’t passed cars on the street. The walk to Mrs. Zinfeld’s was on the long side, but she didn’t seem to have given it a second thought, explaining the directions. “Did you have to stop driving? Did you just want to?”

“I don’t think any of us really wanted to give up driving, did we?” Mrs. Zinfeld mused. “But there were the incentives, and one wants to set an example.”

“Sure,” Nen said, as if it all made perfect sense.

“Our first aim was to use up our car as best we could, junk as little as possible,” Mrs. Zinfeld said. “Once we were underway, we went to a few recyclers, for extra door handles”—she indicated the cupboard pulls in kitchen and bath—“and for bucket seats to make bar stools.”

It reminded Nen of the pink and brown plaid of Martina’s pack. “I met a water-sweeper—I mean, a woman using a water-sweeper,” she said.

“Oh?” Mrs. Zinfeld was instantly alert.

“She told me how they used an old vacuum cleaner to make the first one, with that same funny plaid on the bag they have on the tanks now.”

Mrs. Zinfeld stood a notch straighter. “Funny?”

Nen had said something wrong. “Old-fashioned? Funny they’d keep it, I mean. Reworking the vacuum was smart.”

“Yes, I thought that was clever,” Mrs. Zinfeld agreed, her tone sharp. “When I think how much water used to be lost . . .”

“She helped me up. The woman with the water-sweeper.”

“Had you fallen?”

Nen shrugged. “I must have.”

Mrs. Zinfeld pursed her lips. “Usually, it’s we older people who are at risk of falling.”

“I guess anyone can lose her balance,” Nen said, too brightly.

Nen felt like a fraud. Her hands were shaking again. She would never be able to pay for this place; she shouldn’t be wasting the old woman’s time. But the Zinfelds had clearly taken delight in furnishing the space, and she could see Mrs. Zinfeld relished the tour. Each completed item was more pleasing than the last. The kitchen was an ingenious maze of drawers and cupboards, two-burner stove, refrigerator, the mammoth sink.

“We were especially proud of this,” Mrs. Zinfeld said, tapping a painting of a meadow in springtime—a huge painting, unusual for such a small space. She touched the frame, tap, tap, tap, and the painting began to pull away from the wall. Nen almost stepped forward to catch it before she saw it was a bed. A great space saver, but space had to be made to lower it. A coffee table (mercifully on casters) easily rolled aside. “These are high-quality brackets, but you don’t want to slam it up and down,” Mrs. Zinfeld said.

Nen nodded. Of course. Tired, she was tempted to lie down, but she returned the bed to its vertical position, taking care not to slam. Mrs. Zinfeld watched approvingly. Then she said, “Cats.”

Nen looked at her. “I don’t have cats.”

“I do,” Mrs. Zinfeld said. Nen waited for her to go on. “I would need someone to care for them from time to time.”

“I could do that.”

“Particularly now. I have a visit to my daughter planned.”

“Are you leaving soon?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Oh.” Nen shifted her weight. “Okay,” she said slowly. Maybe it would be like the café chalkboards, a graceful way to earn her keep. She didn’t know how long she’d even need this apartment, but she had no other place to stay.

“For years, there’s been the neighbor boy,” Mrs. Zinfeld told her. “Bradley. But he’s gone away to school, and I feel awkward asking his mother. Not quite a job for an adult, if you see what I mean—it would be awkward to pay her. If someone were living here . . . Bradley has a sister, but the parents are concerned to protect her free time. I think she’d enjoy petting the cats, taking a break.”

“I’d be happy to care for your cats,” Nen said. She thought she was an adult, but she wasn’t sure how Mrs. Zinfeld saw her.

Mrs. Zinfeld looked around the apartment, came to a decision. “Why don’t you join me for dinner? You can meet the cats while I get the meal on the table.”

Nen squared her shoulders, adult-like, and straightened her blouse. It was wrinkled and stale, not really nice enough for dinner, but it was all she had. “Thank you, Mrs. Zinfeld.”

Mrs. Zinfeld cocked her head to one side. “Call me Eleanor,” she said. “Mr. Zinfeld has been gone these six years.”

“All right.” Nen tried. It never stuck. There was something so *Mrs.* about Eleanor Zinfeld. Nen followed her into the house.

Nen had thought the automotive theme might be continued, but the Zinfeld house was decorated with family photographs and natural wood. An elaborate chandelier made from a wagon wheel, or meant to look like it. Paintings that might have been done by a friend. Kitchen wallpaper splashed with yellow sunflowers. Everything highest quality, lovingly maintained, no longer new.

The cats were named Misty, Martha, and Fizz. Two huge gray tabbies and a small, solid black, pouncing bundle of zip. That was Fizz. Misty and Martha were identical, as far as Nen could see. “It gets easier once you’ve known them a while. Martha’s fur is silkier. Misty’s eyes are rounder, her expression more prone to mischief,” Mrs. Zinfeld explained. Nen sat on the couch where Fizz was perched and concentrated on petting the cats. Mrs. Zinfeld’s rush of information washed over her, tips and details about the cats’ characters. Nen tried not to let her impatience show. If the animals were concerned that she understand their personalities, they’d let her know.

They were indoor cats. “I don’t care to have them digging in my vegetable beds. And while there aren’t so many songbirds as there used to be, but we do get juncos, chickadees. No reason my pets need to be out on the hunt.”

Martha, or maybe Misty, was shy, but over the course of fifteen minutes she reappeared from under the couch to sniff at Nen's hand. Mrs. Zinfeld smiled approval. "She doesn't warm up to just anyone. I'll leave you to get to know each other," she said, and went into the kitchen.

Nen began to relax. It was soothing, petting the cat, stroking it as it began to purr. She felt as if she had sat here, with this cat, petting its fluffy dense fur a hundred times before, a thousand hours together. It stood to reason she might have once petted a cat, no matter who she was or where she'd come from. It was hardly a badge of belonging. But maybe she didn't need to belong.

Nen stood up when Mrs. Zinfeld returned with a serving dish in her hands. "Can I help?"

"No, no, dear, sit down." She set the dish on the table, adjusted the napkin on a basket of rolls. It was a long table, suitable for a family gathering.

"I hope you didn't go to too much trouble," Nen said, taking a seat.

"Nothing fancy, but it's nourishing. After my husband died, I had to learn to cook. His was the kitchen magic."

Nen studied her plate. She recognized warm lentils on a bed of spinach; beside them, an odd, rubbery-looking mound, like strips of flat brown pasta. She took a bite of the lentils. "Delicious." That left two more dishes to sample, counting the rolls. She could always fill up on bread.

"Nen—it's an unusual name. Is it a nickname?"

"Not that I know of."

Mrs. Zinfeld served herself another spoonful of lentils, looked at Nen's largely full plate. "What did your mother cook? Or your father?"

"Excuse me?" Nen had been pushing the mushrooms—she thought they were mushrooms—around on her plate, not quite ready to try them.

"What did you eat at home?" Mrs. Zinfeld repeated.

“Not this,” Nen replied without thinking. She looked up, then down. “Sorry. I don’t mean to be rude. We ate, you know, regular food.” She couldn’t conjure a single meal, a family around the table, a favorite dish. She just knew she’d never eaten those floppy, slippery brown strips.

“Mycoccine,” Mrs. Zinfeld supplied. “One of the higher-protein fungi. Rhymes with fettuccine.”

“Right. Love a good rhyme.” As if how to pronounce it were the sticking point. Nen stared at her plate. It felt like a dare, like girding herself to jump into cold water.

“It’s very water conscious, quite versatile,” Mrs. Zinfeld continued. Nen couldn’t see how the stuff might be versatile, but decided not to ask the question aloud. Mrs. Zinfeld looked at Nen more closely. “You’ve never eaten it? That surprises me. Most parents—”

“I don’t think so,” Nen said quickly. She swept her mind, again and again. Like a water-sweeper, looking for scraps of information. She knew what a lentil was, recognized a noodle. She’d obviously been eating something. But what she’d been eating, when, where, with whom . . . nothing. Just nothing. She felt whole and yet hollow. There was a chipped glass inside her, a broken vase—a hollow with sharp edges. She skirted those edges, wary of cutting herself. She felt her throat fill, but she wasn’t a person who cried in front of strangers, or didn’t want to be. She shuddered the feeling back down. “Do you grow it?” she asked.

“Strictly vegetables for me—salad greens, herbs. Go on, try it.” Mrs. Zinfeld could have been her grandmother; Nen felt safe and judged at once. She took a breath, lifted her fork.

The fungus was cool on her tongue. The texture was pleasant enough, not as rubbery as it looked, and the flavor was mild. Mrs. Zinfeld watched Nen take another bite.

“It’s good,” Nen said. “Do you ever put cheese on it?” Mrs. Zinfeld raised her eyebrows. Changing course, Nen said, “Those water-sweepers we were talking about—do you know what those packs weigh?”

Mrs. Zinfeld dabbed at the corners of her mouth with a napkin. “Not precisely.”

“I bet I could make it lighter. It looked like a pretty simple design.”

“Are you a designer?”

“No.” The answer was almost automatic. “Not yet,” Nen amended. “But I think I could do it.”

“People vie for those jobs,” Mrs. Zinfeld said, sounding almost proud.

“As sweepers? It seems like hard work. Sort of boring, but also fussy, lugging that pack and running after the trailer.” She was overdoing it. Probably none of her business. She took another bite. The fungus didn’t exactly melt in her mouth.

Nen had a million questions, but everything seemed, from Mrs. Zinfeld’s perspective, to be so normal—the water-sweepers and the water saving and the recycled car. Nen weighed one question and then another, not sure how to keep from exposing her ignorance or—or she wasn’t sure what, she just felt uneasy, like she might be found out, and then she had been silent too long, chewing her mycoccine like a cow with its cud.

“And your family, dear?” Mrs. Zinfeld asked. “Do they live nearby?”

“No.” Nen thought hard, knowing that wasn’t enough of an answer. “They’re quiet,” she said.

“Quiet.” Mrs. Zinfeld rolled the word around in her mouth. “My daughter is not quiet,” she said after a moment.

“You said you’re going to visit?”

“Yes. Yes, it’s time.” Mrs. Zinfeld pulled a loose thread from the tablecloth, her expression hard to read, then looked up. “Would you like something to drink?” There were no drinking glasses on the table.

“Yes, please.”

Mrs. Zinfeld went into the kitchen, returning with a tray bearing sparkling water and two glasses of red wine. “I’m going to offer you the apartment,” she said, raising her wine glass and tapping it gently against Nen’s.

Relief swept her like a warm rush of the air she was having difficulty drawing into her lungs. She had been wanting this too much, must have been holding her breath. “Thank you. I would love to live here. There.”

“Then it’s settled.”

They smiled at each other, each one pleased with herself, each of them relieved. Nen sipped her wine, wanting to cement the offer but not seem too desperate. She waited for Mrs. Zinfeld to raise the matter of rent. She offered to do the dishes, afraid it might seem too forward, and found Mrs. Zinfeld welcomed the help. As Nen washed, Mrs. Zinfeld moved around the kitchen, putting things away. Everything had a place and she put each thing in its place. Just like in the apartment. “When would you want to move in?” Mrs. Zinfeld asked.

How to admit she had nowhere to go? “As soon as convenient, really.”

“Is there any chance you might move in tonight? Or start the move?”

“I could do that.” Nen thought, *she’s as nervous as I am*. Bubbles again—she almost giggled.

“I’ll have a lease drawn up. For now, I’d be happy to have someone here. I leave quite early.”

Mrs. Zinfeld paused. “Normally, I’d check references.”

Nen swallowed. There had to be a catch. “I just got hired on at Jick’s Café,” she said. Which was to say, she’d been invited back. Money hadn’t been discussed there, either.

Mrs. Zinfeld considered. “A trial basis then, for both of us. Let me show you the cats’ routine, so you know where everything is.”

It was simple enough. Much as Eleanor Zinfeld loved her cats, Nen wouldn’t have to cut up their meat or massage their little paws. She had trouble filling the watering vase, a tightly sealed canister that released a jet when the animal stepped on a weight-sensitive pad, but she got the hang of it after a couple of tries.

“The apartment’s furnished, but you’ll have luggage,” Mrs. Zinfeld said. “Personal items.”

“I travel light,” Nen said, then thought that made her sound jaded. She ought to have something.

Mrs. Zinfeld only nodded. “In that case, if you don’t have bedding and so forth—so often, young people don’t—I can loan you what you need.”

“Thank you,” Nen said again. Her knees felt shaky—and then she felt like a gushing idiot, ready to blurt out her sloppy thanks and confusion. Everyone was so kind: Martina, Jick, Mrs. Zinfeld. Everything she needed was supplied. And yet she felt hollow. Still. Were they simply generous, or did they see something she had missed, want to supply it if they could? She opened her mouth to ask—*do you think there’s something wrong with me?* was the question that came to mind—but that was a sharp edge, one of the sharpest, so she closed her mouth and pulled back and let herself keep floating a while longer.

It filled the evening—the dinner, the vetting, the introduction to the cats and their routine. Afterward, Nen felt as if she’d like to sit down with a book, as if that were the kind of thing she might do, but there were no bookshelves in the apartment. It hardly mattered. She could barely keep her eyes open. She nearly dropped off to sleep on the sofa, but it seemed important to keep up appearances. So Nen made up the wall bed, smoothed the sheets and tucked the corners and plumped the single pillow. She had been concerned the bed might be tippy, the structure warped, but it was solid, springy, not too soft. The sheets were clean and crisp yet faintly musty, clearly of long residence in a linen cupboard or drawer. She undressed, draping her jeans and blouse over the back of a chair. Finding a change of clothes would have to wait for morning.

Almost too tired to think, she totaled up the day. She considered Eleanor Zinfeld’s imperious trust, her caution cut with need. She thought about the cats, about the food, about the way no one would bring her a glass of water before she had finished her plate. She heard Jick at the café saying

her handwriting was the loveliest he had seen, felt his unconcern, yet generosity—Wilton wasn't coming back, but he said nothing about who Wilton was or where he had gone (and then again, why would he?). She sat up in bed when she remembered how surprised Martina had been at the nail polish.

Too much was missing. She recognized certain things as unfamiliar, but didn't know what she expected in their place. She felt sure she was used to having a plan, must be falling behind. Then she remembered the scrap of paper in her pocket. She had been too anxious about paying for her lunch to study it earlier, then had forgotten it in the walk to Mrs. Zinfeld's, the apartment tour. It had seemed cryptic and pointless at first glance, but surely there was something there she could use.

Nen got out of bed and picked up her jeans, went through all the pockets while she was at it. There wasn't much: a paperclip, a ball of foil that looked like a candy wrapper. She tried to make heads or tails of the list, switched on a lamp to see better. The words didn't make much more sense under the light.

1. shops on Third
2. 2mi at the lake; buoys?
3. check fellowship deadline
4. Market—Raspberries? Other fruit?
5. DEQ-NW report %s are off

The lettering resembled what she'd done on the specials board, though the writing here was hurried—small block capitals in slick blue ink. The last item was underlined, the number 5 heavily circled. The reverse side was typeset, a fragment of a larger page. A few words jumped out—*pollutants, instream structures*—but it was obviously scratch paper, not saved for the information it contained. The important part must be the list.

Except for the raspberries, it wasn't a shopping list. Martina had said she was at Fourth and Pearl. Where was Third? And where was the lake? Martina had whispered something about trying to swim. She hadn't mentioned any lakes, only evaporation fields.

Nen was tired and cold and the print was small. No closer to an answer, she got back into bed, leaving the list on the coffee table where it wouldn't get further crumpled or lost in the bedding. She tried to go back to the moment Martina had helped her up off the ground, what she had said. Her eyes were such a pale blue, like fabric washed too many times, and she had been so patient—but there was something else, something Nen couldn't put her finger on. She was still thinking about the water-sweeper when she fell asleep, fell through and into the quiet—the delicious, full, pillowy quiet—and slept until the sun woke her, when she saw she had not drawn the shades.

There was a note on the door: further instructions regarding the cats, and an invitation to eat whatever she might find in Mrs. Zinfeld's refrigerator. Nen hoped there was something other than leftover fungus.

Hospital Girl

“Do you know what happened?” The nurse wore minty green scrubs over a zebra-print shirt, her hair pulled back under a matching headband. Her tone was neutral, conversational.

Nen’s left arm throbbed, the pulse just far enough off the wall clock’s second hand to be jarring. She looked at the cast. “I broke my arm?” She had been awake for the setting, the plaster, the sharp smell of disinfectant and fiberglass or adhesive or whatever it was. Of course, the question was: before that. What happened before that?

“I was about to cross the street. I remember a perfect, glass-smooth puddle. Kind of raggedy-shaped—an uneven, stretched ellipsis of water. It looked like you could step right into it, like it just kept going. Tall buildings and just enough sky.”

“Nen’s an artist,” her mother said then. Margaret wore a long skirt and a pale yellow t-shirt and she looked worn out, but also proud. “You should see her drawings. She’s good with descriptions.”

The nurse nodded her appreciation, made another note. The emergency beds were separated by blue curtains hung from tracks on the ceiling. Nurses and aids slipped in and out, like molecules sifting from solutions of greater to lesser concentration.

“It’s not that,” Nen said. The reflected buildings had been skyscrapers—old ones, maybe; twenty floors, not ninety—but she had been standing downtown, at the Third Street shops, and none of those buildings was more than three stories high. The reflection marked something hidden that had been revealed, not something visible repeated.

And then she tripped, or fainted, or was hit by a bus—was anyone going to tell her what had happened? She had stepped forward. She had seen a way out. Now she had a cast on her arm and a threadbare peach gown more or less covering the rest of her, and her mother’s face was banked in worry under that maternal pride (“an artist!”). Nen sighed. “I don’t know what happened. How did I get here?”

“Jacob saw you fall. You’re lucky it’s a small town and someone recognized you, since you left home without your wallet,” her mother told her.

“So I could be anyone.”

“A whole new beginning.” Nen wanted to laugh, but the way her mother said it, it wasn’t funny.

“Doctor will be by shortly for a check before we move you upstairs,” the nurse said. “Do you have any questions?” Her voice was warm with concern, her gestures careful.

“Not really,” Nen said. Where to begin?

“Why upstairs?” Margaret asked.

“Observation,” the nurse glanced at her notes, “Ms. Renner.”

“Margaret, please.”

“They’ll probably want to observe her overnight.” The nurse was already moving away, adjusting the curtains as she went.

Nen thought, observe me doing what? But then the fabric of her cubicle rippled and a child slipped through, dark eyes, hair in tight braids, a dark green visor shading her face. She held a stuffed lion tucked against her chest, as if it were a kitten or a baby. The toy didn’t look new. Nen leaned across the space between beds. “The hospital takes care of big cats, too?” she asked the girl.

The girl’s eyes were solemn under the visor. “Toy ones,” she said.

“I hope she’s okay,” Nen said.

“She’s a hunter.” The girl pulled down her visor, shading her face.

“It’s bright in here, isn’t it?” Nen said, tapping her forehead in salute.

The girl nodded. “You don’t get new eyes,” she said, each word distinct, as if she’d practiced.

“That’s what my mom says,” Nen agreed. She glanced at her mother, who smiled in turn. The girl looked up, met Nen’s eye. Nen winked. She wanted to say she understood, only she didn’t;

wanted to say something to keep her. The corners of the girl's mouth rose, but she didn't get a chance to answer.

"Shh," the other mother whispered, invisible behind the watery curtain. The girl and her lion slipped back out of view.

"Reminds me of you at that age," Margaret said.

"I had a bear," Nen said, "not a lion."

And then it was morning. They had taken her out of emergency at last and into a semi-private room. Not hers alone, but for now there was no one in the other bed. With her arm in a cast, there was no longer anything obvious to treat, but Nen had been unconscious too long for them to send her home. Sound seeped in, hints of medical personnel busy elsewhere, unspoken promise of an end to all this waiting. Nen wondered about the girl with the lion. She hoped she'd come back.

Margaret saw Nen was awake, kept quiet as long as she could, giving Nen a chance to go first. "How are you?" Margaret asked at last.

Nen considered. "Fine, I guess."

The wash of relief so brightened her mother's face that Nen looked out the window, as if the sun had come out from behind a cloud. What sky she could see was flat, pale blue, almost white.

"How's the arm?" her mother asked.

"It hurts."

"Hungry? Thirsty?"

"Not really."

Margaret drew an energetic, busy smile. "Ready to get out of here, I bet. Get back to things." She was practically rubbing her hands together, but her eyes were wary. She smoothed her hair, tucking loose curls into a haphazard bun.

“Yeah, sure. Of course.” Nen could see her mother wanted more, some sign of cabin fever, eagerness to be released. Nen mainly felt tired. Not bad, but tired. Or still. Maybe that was it: she felt still, and just as happy to stay that way. Unmoving. “Quiescent,” she whispered, one of the last vocab words from cell biology.

Margaret leaned forward, waiting for Nen to repeat the unexpected word. Nen shrugged, pointed her toes under the limp hospital sheet.

“I have your clothes,” Margaret said. “For when they let you get dressed.” She was thin and wiry, strong. Her sleeves always seemed to be too short; she tugged at them now.

“Okay,” Nen agreed.

“You were on the way to an interview, weren’t you? With the—what was it? Clean water initiative?” As her mother gained in energy, Nen slipped further into stillness. “I’m sure you’ll be able to reschedule. People understand a medical emergency.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Nen said. “It was an informational interview.”

Her mother looked puzzled. “That doesn’t sound right. You were looking forward to it. You had questions you wanted to ask about the—”

“It’s fine. I can set up another one later. Or not.”

“Do you want me to call? Let them know what happened?”

“Just leave it, Mom. I’ll take care of it.” Nen thought maybe it had been important, but she no longer knew why. Rescheduling sounded like a lot of trouble.

Margaret sat down, stood up, did a few shoulder rolls, as if limbering up for the drive home. It made Nen’s skin itch to look at her. A force-field of uncertainty and worry, and maybe a strand of disappointment, surrounded her like a halo. It practically buzzed.

“Semi-permeable membranes,” Margaret said then, brushing the privacy curtain beside her. As if she heard Nen’s thoughts. “The diffusion of water through a semi-permeable membrane.”

“Toward a solution of lesser concentration,” Nen joined in, the two of them finishing in unison. Not quite laughing, as they usually did, but briefly together, in the same place, at the same point.

“Thank goodness for high school biology. If I remember nothing else, I’ll remember that definition—” Margaret stopped herself. She used to help Nen study.

Nen took pity on her. “Maybe some juice?”

“I’ll go find some.” Margaret smiled gratefully and bustled out. Nen took a breath of quiet, looked out the window, closed her eyes. Listened to the voices in the corridor.

“Just until she’s out of the woods.” Someone, probably the doctor, was talking to her mother.

“She seems . . . confused? Flattened,” Nen’s mother said. “No sparkle.”

“Just until she’s out of the woods,” the doctor repeated.

There are no woods, Nen wanted to say, *just cubicle curtains*, but she wasn’t supposed to be listening.

“How will we know?” she heard her mother ask.

“We should be able to tell,” the doctor said. “I’ll be there shortly.”

Margaret came back with the juice. Two juices, so Nen could choose: apple or cranberry, and a separate cup of ice. “I didn’t know if you wanted it cold,” Margaret said. She was trying too hard.

“Thank you.” Nen poured some of the cranberry over the ice. She sipped cautiously, propped up in bed, as if she were on a plane—the only place she regularly drank the stuff. It was cumbersome, being one-handed, but not impossible.

Then the doctor was in the room, solicitous questions, quiet and calm. Pokes, prods, blood pressure, temperature, pulse. How was she, did she have any discomfort? Anything other than the cast—always awkward—and maybe the arm itself; was it painful?

Yes, it was.

And her head? Did her head hurt? Any trouble with her vision?

The doctor held up a series of cards for Nen to identify, letters and numbers and shapes. She asked about the date, the president, what Nen had eaten for breakfast, her mother's name, her best friend's. Always a good student, Nen passed with flying colors.

There was nothing wrong with her memory. Except for that one moment, the moment of the fall, the trip, the accident—whatever it was. She knew who she was. Who she had been.

“I think you're fine,” the doctor said finally, “good to go. Extended unconsciousness is always worrying, but there are no signs of lasting trouble. See your own doctor in six to eight weeks to have that cast removed.” The doctor turned to Margaret. “A bit of extra vigilance,” she suggested, almost apologetic—unspoken acknowledgment that, medically, she didn't have much to offer. No absolute diagnosis, no clear, indisputable cause. No line in the sand.

“And what do I watch for?” Margaret asked.

“Queasiness, wooziness, memory loss, balance problems. Anything out of the ordinary.”

“Like if it happens again,” Nen volunteered.

The doctor smiled at her. “Exactly.”

And so her mother would be watching. Keeping vigil, all but the candles. Almost as if she were dead. Because everything would be out of the ordinary, distorted by worry, by that insistent looking for reassurance or hints of disaster, either or both in equal measure. Looking and looking and looking.

With the doctor dispatched, Margaret was brisk, authority restored. “Let's get you home. Get you back to swimming.”

Nen held up her arm, exhibit A. “With this cast?” The throbbing had subsided, and the cast wasn't heavy, but she obviously wasn't getting back in the water any time soon.

Margaret's face fell. “Of course, I didn't think. I'm sure we could ask. Maybe there's a waterproof—”

“It’s fine.”

“But—”

“It’s fine, Mom. I’ll swim when I swim.” Nen was a distance swimmer, outdoors; in the winter, she swam inside. Her eyes would burn after a workout if her goggles leaked—one reason for her interest in water pollution, and the awful things people put in water to make it “clean.” She swam miles at a time, endurance courses. She liked a course that sounded like a dare. She loved the feeling of cold water on her skin, the first shock and then the clean pull, stroke after stroke. There was a lake near town, a reservoir a bit farther away. All summer, she’d travel to swim. She could see the calendar in her mind, races marked in blue ink all the way through October.

She just didn’t care. Swimming seemed like so much effort—more than it was worth.

Margaret bit her lip. “You were so sure of yourself. What about your plans?” The weight in her voice said the whole world had changed, one day to the next. Nen had graduated with majors in environmental studies and art. Planned on working at a nonprofit before a grad program in public policy. She wanted some real-world experience before further study. That was the plan.

Only the plan no longer felt so urgent, or even like her own.

“Let’s get you home,” her mother said again.

“Better give me those clothes.”

The house was unchanged. The plaid recliner was still hideous, the same shade as the jade plant Margaret nurtured, almost forty years old, a gift from her mother-in-law before she died. The banana plant she kept indoors wasn’t even dusty. Growing up, it had been Nen’s job to wipe the leaves of both plants with a damp rag every week or so. The yard should have been overgrown, a jungle of neglect, but she had spent only one night in the hospital. That didn’t seem real, either, but she had the cast on her arm to show for it. Her bedroom was cluttered—a three-month training calendar, a

shoebox of race medals, saved textbooks and course notes yet to be organized, pamphlets for all the relevant regional nonprofits, the state's latest water-quality survey that she had sent away for because, for some reason, she felt she had to have a copy for her very own.

Nen found space for everything on her shelves, orderly, out of the way. She polished her toenails. With the cast on her arm, every task took twice as long. Her brother, Douglas, called, solicitous as always, touching base from his new job as a reference librarian, five hours away to the north. He was well, she was well, the cat was fine.

"Mom had me worried, but you sound the same."

"It was just a stupid fall."

"Any races coming up? Isn't that Libre Lake 5K always early in the season?"

"Not with a cast on my arm."

"Sorry. I forgot. How long do you have to wear it?"

"Six weeks? I don't remember. The doctor called it a clean break."

"I guess that's good."

Her mother bought presents, toys for her sick child. A luxury set of colored pencils, a stiff-backed drawing pad Nen could hold on her lap. The colors were beautiful, blues lapping the greens, reds fading to pinks. She shifted and sorted them, out of order and then back. She sharpened one, spoiling the uniform effect. Now she had to draw something to justify interrupting the ranks. She opened the drawing pad, but she couldn't begin.

She felt emptied. Hollow. It was already getting warm. The leather couch felt sticky. She tried the deck, sat in the afternoon sun. The light hurt her eyes. She remembered the girl with the visor, the way she'd held her toy lion up close to her face, where it could share the shade. She heard her mother in the kitchen, trying to be quiet. Margaret moved slowly—she meant well—but she lacked finesse; the result was a greater spacing of clanks and rattles, not a reduction in noise.

Nen wanted to go back to sleep, to lay herself flat and then flutter, thin as paper, weightless. To fold herself into a puzzle box, a cube with no visible opening. She went back indoors, touched the banana tree, touched the windows, found her bedroom as orderly as she had left it—unnecessary order, heedless, needless. She wanted to stir things around, drop books on the floor, muddle and twist, clothing and tissues and string. That, too, was needless. She had been in a hurry, had needed to get somewhere. Now she needed to rest, she couldn't be bothered, and yet the neatness bothered her. She wanted to feel a sense of disorder, of movement, but felt nothing.

Not nothing. She felt drained, a tangible absence of feeling. Soon her shell—snakeskin brittle, rice-paper thin—would collapse. She tried to breathe cautiously. Lungs, she knew, were delicate, could stick together, fail to inflate, the sides glued or wedded like an aging balloon. Wasn't that what happened with premature infants? She, too, felt unready, unfinished. But she could draw another breath. She could go upstairs. Or down.

"I have to go to the shop," her mother said then, looking into Nen's room. "Just for an hour or two. Call if you need me. I can always come home."

Widowed when Nen was in the fifth grade, Margaret had devoted herself to her two children and to Goldengrove Books, the bookshop she had expected to run with her husband. Nen had been nudged toward the swim team as a way to keep busy, and Margaret had thrown herself into being a swim parent, first with the high school team—Nen was a standout—then going to as many of the open-water races as she could manage while Nen was in college. Open-water events had all-ages divisions, wiry freestylers setting records into their 80s. Nen knew her mother had imagined cheering her on for years.

"I'm fine."

"There's pilaf in the fridge, some iced tea. Greens in the crisper, if you want something fresh. I can fix you a plate, I have time."

“I’ll eat in a while.” Her mother waited at the door. “I will. Promise.”

“Okay. Call . . .”

“ . . . if I need you. I will. Really.”

Nen saw her mother’s patience wearing thin, saw her weary panic as Nen skated around the edges of every question. By the end of the week, Margaret had grown almost obsessed with Nen’s lack of direction. She seemed to regard it as an amputation, as if the Nen they’d sent her home with from the hospital were somehow incomplete, parts left behind in a box—the stray arms or heads of once-loved dolls tumbled in the back of a closet after the children left home.

She lost track of time. Every day was the same as the last. Nen didn’t even fight back, which probably made Margaret feel worse. She dusted the plants. She read on the deck. She learned to fix a sandwich one-handed, to fill a glass without a hand to hold it steady on the counter, wipe up the inevitable spills without cursing aloud and exposing herself to further scrutiny. Pressed, she told her mother that no, she wasn’t looking for a job, not right away. “I’m catching my breath,” she said, as if that were an answer. A swimmer knows when to breathe.

Catnap

Nen was resting in the living room, as ordered. Maybe resting more than recommended. It hadn't been that long. The cast was still on her arm. She was reading a detective novel she had read and reread, maybe every six months, since she was a freshman in high school. She had the mystery largely memorized and yet, from time to time, she would identify a delicious clue she'd missed. Plus, she had a crush on the detective. The air held a crackle of early smoke. It was dry, not especially hot, but dry, dry, dry. Her sinuses were scratchy, and her throat; she felt her skin catch against the pages of the book. She could almost feel the ink, like Braille.

She looked up and there it was. *In the living room.* Just inside the sliding door. The animal—golden, elegant, paused and careful—was liquid movement, smooth and low to the ground, its paws padded and vast. Tawny face, white muzzle (just the bit below the nose, around the whiskers, under the chin) and pointed, black-tipped ears. It carried its long, heavy tail in a wide, shallow U.

She smothered her gasp with a fist, the strangled scream like a blow to the gut, wind knocked right out of her. She might never breathe again without gasping, a prey animal soft-furred and panicked. She needed to scurry away, hide in a hole. It was important not to scare the cat, not to draw its attention, or was it that she needed to draw herself up? Get loud, get angry. Raise her left arm in its cast like a banner or a club. She was as large as the cougar, surely. Not as strong. Then there were the claws, not so hidden in those paws the size of pancakes. She had read that cougars will make daybeds, somewhere to rest after a night of long-distance stalking. And there was Nen, occupying the daybed framed by the picture window. Now there were two of them, two animals in the same place and yet separate, each of them looking for refuge.

Make yourself big; make noise. That was the advice to hikers, what to do if you met a cougar on the trail. But she didn't want to make noise. A blanketing of quiet settled like weighted wool over the

room. That was how she wanted to describe it later, wool felt—a weight absorbing sound and motion and momentum.

“Shoo,” she said softly, when she could breathe again. “Go back outside.”

The door to the deck was open. They were usually careful about that—careful to keep out ground squirrels, houseflies, yellow jackets. Bears. The hills came right to the doorstep, summer gold now, the color of the cougar itself—beige, a deeper brown, and then golden; a true lion, crossing the sunbeam that crossed the room. Thin, it moved quickly, the patent definition of stealth. Nen thought the big cat might slump onto the warm wood like a housecat following the sun, but then the cougar took another step, and another, and as it stepped into the shadows, it became shadow.

Cougars hunt at night, at dusk or twilight. Nen wondered for the first time where deer slept, if they slept. Or were deer another animal that dozed but did not slumber, resting always with one eye open? And where was Lady Fluff, the cat Douglas had adopted (rescued, caged) and then left behind as he moved away to college and its no-pets-allowed dorms, then moved on to the real world and a no-pets apartment?

Finding itself in a full-length mirror, the cougar paused, then turned away. Nen thought she could hear it breathing, but that might have been her own heartbeat, newly loud in her ears. The big cat swung its head in her direction, then began to knead the rug. Nen’s first impulse was to scold, quash the destructive turn they were always trying to restrain in Lady Fluff, but she held her tongue.

“Shoo,” she whispered. “Kitty, go home.” She was shooing it like a pest, but she wanted it never to leave. She tried to focus, prepared to remember this day for the rest of her life. The cougar gave off a warm, clean smell, dry and fertile, as if it had been rolling in dust. Its ears bore the stiff velvet bristle of a teddy bear’s muzzle. It kneaded, kneaded again, lowered its haunches. If she called Animal Control, they would tranquilize it. Worse, they might panic and kill it.

Her father, Remy, had been hit by a car while trying to help a deer that had been hit by a car. Nen imagined the cougar pulling a deer down, pulling a deer aside. She had imagined her father that way, pulling the deer into the woods—for safety or delicacy or respect. But a cougar would be saving it to eat. Her father had had no such practical purpose, only an impulse to protect.

Hiking, they had often looked for cougar tracks, said to be the size of baseballs. No claw marks, unlike the tracks of wolves and other dogs—one way to tell what you were seeing. Nen had heard the eerie wails in mating season, like a child crying or a person in unbearable pain.

She had never seen tracks, but she had seen scratching posts. Once, her mother had shown her claw marks high on a tree trunk, six or seven feet up, deep, vertical scratches. “That’s how we can tell it was a cougar,” her mother had said. “Because it’s so high. A bobcat would be lower, two or three feet off the ground.”

“Unless it was a cougar kitten,” Nen had said.

Nen wasn’t tracking now. The cougar was right there across the room, asleep on the floor. She remembered a brochure from the Fish and Wildlife office: *cougars make their living by not being seen*. But houses were built right up into the hills, and what was left for the cougar and the bears and all the other creatures out there was less hospitable than ever when the summer got dry.

There was a pond in the yard, a small one, more of a bird bath. Perhaps the animal had stopped to drink. Early July, the hills were already parched. The banana tree in the living room might have confused the cougar, a blur of leaves through the window, the lure of green forest where it didn’t belong. All those earth tones, meant to bring the outdoors in, had done just that.

Through the window, Nen saw her mother’s blue cooler on the deck. Margaret volunteered at the foodbank Thursday nights. She had heard rumors of families—two, perhaps three—hiding in the woods outside of town. Close to the reservoir, or higher up in the hills. The children were citizens but the parents lacked papers. One day, Margaret met one of the mothers at the edge of her

garden (she never grew much, deer were a problem, but she couldn't stop trying). Margaret didn't ask how she got there, if she'd walked, if her car had broken down. She offered the woman fruit, some cash. She started leaving food on the deck. Picnic food—bread, cold cuts, tomatoes. Oatmeal cookies, pasta salad.

“Can't you leave something good?” Nen had complained.

“Not everyone hates pasta salad.”

“Everyone should. You're treating them like animals, feeding them that way.”

“They're living like animals, that's how afraid they are,” had been the answer.

Margaret knew from the foodbank what people took first. She knew it was important to leave food people liked. She wanted the food itself—beyond the calories on offer—to be welcoming. But she didn't know if they had anywhere to cook. If they owned a camp stove, they'd need to buy fuel. And if they were cooking over a fire, they'd have to worry about fire season burn patrols and smoke watchers and the real, right there on the ground beside them, risk of spreading flames.

Nen watched the cougar sleep, lying on its side, front paws curled. Big yawn, what big teeth you have, what a pink tongue. Three wishes for the fairy godmother: Don't let it attack. Let it get out of here safely. Let me hear the big cat purr.

She heard a thump of housecat jumping off a counter before Lady Fluff padded into the room, a regal, magnificent animal in her own right. Nen felt her chest contract. Lady Fluff froze, fur puffed nose to tail, doubled in bulk but still snack-sized. The cougar lifted its head. It was resting, not hunting. The smaller cat was no threat. Wisely, Lady Fluff retreated the way she had come.

The cougar slept for hours. Later, there were reports Nen had failed to take her family's safety into account, had privileged the wild animal above all else, tried to hypnotize it with incense and crystals and a small flute. She who had been so driven, methodical and motivated, felt ridiculed.

But also furious. It wasn't that she knew where her mother was and thus knew not to worry. It was that she became wholly absorbed in watching the cougar, in listening to it breathe, hoping it might purr. And, yes, in worrying it might pounce, those huge furred paws landing silent and lethal. Cougars are known for their ability to jump.

She didn't make a video. She thought about it, thought about the movement she might miss, watching at that remove. And of course she told people what had happened, what she'd seen. First her mother, unbelieving but intrigued and worried about her foodbank family, however far away; relieved for Nen and, naturally, sorry. That most of all, it seemed—the thought of Nen alone, something they hadn't shared, another moment Margaret hadn't seen up close.

Word slipped out—her mother, obviously, or Nen's own careless excitement. She wanted her secret and wanted to brag. Someone said something to a neighbor, a friend of a friend. It was a small town—a lost deer in the supermarket aisles had been big news the year before. Nen remembered a checker semaphoring with a broom, the animal bewildered but stately. Like the cougar, the deer didn't break anything. It left of its own accord when it was good and ready, but not before browsing the bouquets in the floral department, sampling a few of the tulips bunched for Easter.

"I had no plans," Nen answered, when asked how she could take all afternoon, letting the animal rest, then softly encouraging it to leave.

"Weren't you worried about your family?" people asked. "Wasn't there anyone else at home?"

"I didn't think so. So there was no reason to check. I didn't want to scare the animal."

"I'd have been terrified, I'd have screamed," one neighbor said.

"Is it true you used telepathy to make it go?" That was Barry next door, always on edge.

"I don't think it worked," Nen said, but no one laughed. She said, "I'm looking at this cat and I'm thinking, *please go outside, please go back outside and back to your home*. Is that telepathy, or an attempt at it? Maybe."

Naturally, that was the only thing anyone repeated. Telepathically-conveyed maps to the exit, to the hills behind the house. Feline-style eye-blinking to send a message.

What her mother picked up on was, *I had no plans*. Margaret pounced, quicker than a cat; a too-careful framing crept into her questioning when she obviously wanted to scream. “No plans at all?”

“Well, I *didn't* have plans,” Nen objected. She heard her voice rising, tried to drop the tone. “Nothing better to do than watch a cougar napping. Not that afternoon.” What she read on her mother’s face was, *not ever*. “I planned to protect the animal, to do no harm,” Nen suggested, but the offering was inconsequential. Beside the point.

What she told no one was how she had imagined swimming against the cougar, meeting it in a race in open water. She knew cougars were strong swimmers. They’d swim between islands in pursuit of prey, head above the surface, dog-paddle style, ears alert. All the ways humans were taught *not* to swim, sacrificing speed to sight, when the first lesson of competitive swimming was to keep underwater as much as possible, don’t break the surface, don’t magnify drag. But she wasn’t imagining an attempt to get away. She imagined the cougar accepting the race. Taking her as an equal. A peer, not a meal. Would the cougar have chased her, or let her swim by? Would it have let her win? Deer were strong swimmers, too, but maybe not strong enough.

Her last race had been a short one the previous summer, island to island in a mountain lake, the kind of pristine setting that made her wonder if they should be there at all—so many people, footprints and trash. At dusk, once the other swimmers had packed up and left, Nen and a friend had stayed, canoe on the shore, pup tent under the trees, their skin prickling with the tickle of water droplets they’d shaken off like dogs safe on land. Her friend’s admiration was a ballast, proof she belonged. But what if there had been a cougar then? Would they have jumped in after it, felt themselves privileged inhabitants of that borrowed wild? Would they have frozen in fear?

When the cougar woke, it met Nen's eye—she thought she might have dozed off, too, sitting there stiller than still, just staring—then looked away. It didn't recognize her, didn't need to. It padded out to the deck and into the yard, pausing for a long drink from Margaret's pond. Nen could hear the splash of its lapping tongue, drops like bells in the still air, not even an insect hum. Just the cougar drinking, so long, so noisily, the pool might have been empty when it left.

Nen waited until she was sure it must be gone before she went outside. She refilled the pond with the garden hose and waited for her mother to get home so she could tell her all about it. Once, she might have wanted to see it again. She'd been greedy that way. Now she knew she'd seen enough. The cougar had been with her all afternoon. Better not to risk it becoming a so-called problem predator with even the silent hope of a new encounter. Better for it to stay far, far away.

3

Nen heard a click, then a thump; a cat must have knocked something over. “In a minute, Fur-face,” she mumbled, absorbed in her sketch. She had an idea for a better water-sweeper; the kitchen table, twice as big as the table in the apartment, gave her room to spread out. She’d had a sense, looking at the machine, that there was wasted space and wasted fabric and wasted weight.

“I beg your leave?” Mrs. Zinfeld stood in the kitchen doorway.

“Oh!” Nen gathered the pencils together, pushed back from the table, flustered. It was Mrs. Zinfeld’s kitchen. But she hadn’t been expecting her, and the design had been humming along. “I didn’t expect you until day after tomorrow.”

Nen moved to stand, but Mrs. Zinfeld waved her back. “My daughter’s calendar . . .” She pursed her lips, looked away. “It’s difficult to accommodate a guest,” she said finally.

“I’m sorry,” Nen said, which only seemed to make her intrusion more evident. Feeling she should explain, she added, “I was looking for a better clip to seal the cat food bag. I found the colored pencils in a drawer.”

Mrs. Zinfeld took a half step forward. “Mara always enjoyed drawing,” she said softly. “I keep those pencils for when the grandchildren visit. Mara won’t find the time to sit them down to draw a picture to send to their gran.”

Nen wasn’t sure what to say. Maybe Mara was busy? The kids didn’t like to draw? She settled for, “I thought the cats might like company.”

“They do like to have someone around.” Mrs. Zinfeld picked up the cat at her feet—Martha or Misty, Nen couldn’t tell—and held it close as she looked over Nen’s shoulder. She smelled stale, faded rosemary and train. “What are you drawing?”

“I want to make the water-sweeper lighter,” Nen said. “I’d hate to carry it all day.”

“The women bibble along well enough.”

“The work could be easier, that’s all.” Nen felt herself on the edge of another misstep. She was thinking about Martina, dragging the thing, but also the way people seemed to not really see her—the public janitor effect, invisible staff.

Mrs. Zinfeld nodded. “You’re right, of course. I haven’t thought about that in ages—what it would actually be like to do the job.”

“Maybe it’s good I turned up,” Nen said, then put her head down, afraid she’d been too sharp. She tapped the end of the pencil she was holding against her teeth. “I thought . . .”

The cat jumped from Mrs. Zinfeld’s arms and shook herself, as if settling her skin back into place. “Like that,” Nen said. “You want the sweeper to be able to move like that. The ripple stretch cats do, how they shake themselves and the vibration runs down their body, head to foot to tail.”

“A tall order,” Mrs. Zinfeld said. She rolled her shoulders, as if about to attempt it herself.

“A worthy challenge, right? Worth a try.”

“In which case, you should see one up close. I have a sweeper in the closet.”

“Really?”

Mrs. Zinfeld looked at her for an extra beat, as if wondering if Nen might have snooped. Nen’s surprise was real. She hadn’t been all that interested in what her landlady might have tucked away; Mrs. Zinfeld didn’t strike her as a person with secrets. “Maybe not the latest model, but the design hasn’t changed much,” Mrs. Zinfeld said.

She brought it out with a flourish, carrying it with two hands, and set it on the floor. “Behold, the Zinfeld Precipitation Moisture Sweeper.” Nen’s mouth fell open as she only now made the connection. Mrs. Zinfeld smiled. “Yes, that Zinfeld. My husband and I made the first one together. Years ago. The official name was such a mouthful, users changed it to water-sweeper—*Zinjer* to its friends.” She winked.

“Your name’s a household word?” Mrs. Zinfeld must be rich.

Mrs. Zinfeld pursed her lips again. “It feels odd,” she admitted. “But it’s Adam’s name, really. It never felt one hundred percent mine.” She pulled out a chair across from Nen, though she didn’t sit yet, bracing herself on the back with one hand.

“Still . . .” Nen looked around the kitchen, wondering what she might have missed. It looked modest as ever, the wallpaper sunflowers gaudy, the scuffed white table with its silver confetti pattern valuable only because it was old. “Why is it named after you? Or after your husband?”

“I designed it, dear.”

Nen’s eyes widened. “You did?”

Mrs. Zinfeld accepted the tribute she was due. “You thought I was solely a decorator,” she said.

“I guess. I mean, the apartment . . .” Nen stammered. “So you designed it from scratch?”

“Adam drew the specs and made the calculations, but the idea was mine,” Mrs. Zinfeld said. “It was my invention. The shape, the materials. I could always make something useful out of old junk, turn nothing into something.”

“It’s sort of sad,” Nen said before she could stop herself. “That the name never felt one hundred percent yours, but it’s on your invention.”

Mrs. Zinfeld looked wistful for a moment, then shook it off. “That’s how we did things.”

Nen bent to look at the device more closely. “How’d you get the idea?”

Mrs. Zinfeld stood visibly straighter. “Vacuuming, believe it or not. I pitched upon the idea that concentrated water would evaporate more systematically. Not too deep, obviously, but brought together in a shallow pool. Waste not, want not. It’s not just a slogan.” Mrs. Zinfeld’s eyes were bright, her voice warm. Adam Zinfeld had thought his wife’s idea brilliant. They’d built the prototype together, took it around to demonstrate, started making them in a workshop behind the house, long since torn down. “We thought we were making a difference,” Mrs. Zinfeld said. “Prior era. Back then, we had a sense of urgency. People were tired of waiting around.”

“When was that?” Nen said. “How long ago?”

“The last Warning Drought, third or fourth year. The rains eventually returned—with a vengeance, people said—but only ten years later.”

“So the initial drive was controlled evaporation?” Nice promise, but Nen wasn’t convinced.

Mrs. Zinfeld nodded. “My contribution was determining how to gather the water. It was believed larger bodies—like the evaporation fields—would more reliably cycle toward rain.”

“While little puddles here and there were simply wasted. Not doing their part,” Nen said. It sounded silly, but maybe there was something to it. Wayward puddles, sloshing willy-nilly. Nen smoothed her hair, trying to formulate her question. It all seemed too easy. “Are there any problems? Mineral deposits or salinization from runoff, or . . . ?”

“Research has confirmed they work as designed.”

“The evaporation fields—was that you, too?”

“Adam and I worked that out together. Once we had a way to recoup the wasted water.”

“Where are they?”

Mrs. Zinfeld waved a hand. “Within transport range. They require open space. It was wasteland,” she explained. She puffed out her cheeks, released the air in a burst. “Well, that’s what we thought. Unproductive.” A salt lake had been created, an inland sea.

“And now? Since the rains returned?” Nen tried to keep her voice neutral.

Mrs. Zinfeld frowned. “Surely it’s wasteful to repeat the same surveys ad infinitum.” She shook her head. “It is *tidier* with all the water swept. Sometimes I think tidiness is all people care about—so they don’t have to think about it. It’s certainly what my daughter says. Once a system is established, there’s no going back.”

“Inertia?” Nen’s voice rose. She pressed her hands hard against the table. She was the guest in Mrs. Zinfeld’s kitchen.

“Otherwise, rising water becomes a problem,” Mrs. Zinfeld went on, indifferent to Nen’s uneasiness. “Any road, today there’s no longer so much attention to conservation as such.” She stepped back, giving Nen space to pick up the Zinfer.

Nen had lifted Martina’s sweeper that day in the park, but now she tried it on, wriggling into the straps. The weight pulled against her shoulders and neck. It was like a poorly designed suitcase with auxiliary straps—better-than-nothing for a run through the station, but nothing you’d choose as your main way to carry it. It was as if they really had stitched straps onto an old vacuum cleaner, figured out how to make it hold water, and left it at that. The thing weighed a ton.

“And how would this work? This lightening of the water-sweeper’s load?” Mrs. Zinfeld asked.

Nen shrugged her way out of the backpack and set the sweeper down, on the chair this time, to have a better look. “Some of this fabric could go, for starters.”

Mrs. Zinfeld raised her eyebrows.

“Keep the look,” Nen said quickly, “but see all these folds? The fabric’s heavy. It’s not what holds the water in or anything, is it?”

Mrs. Zinfeld touched the fabric with her fingertips, then rubbed a fold between her thumb and forefinger. “It is heavy. You’re right, the centri-spinner and pressure lock keep the water in, supporting the vacu-module. Adam made the first one out of an old car battery.”

“I get it, nothing wasted. But how would the battery work here?”

“It was mostly a casing. A first experiment.”

“Well, for a second experiment—or third or thirteenth, whatever it is—I would try shaving off some of that decoration weight, and then make the inside case out of a material that’s stronger but lighter. That centri-spinner or the vacu-module. And if the straps were placed better, it would be easier to carry, whatever it weighed.”

“How do you know all this?”

Nen considered. “I’m not sure,” she admitted. “It seems logical, doesn’t it? Maybe because I’ve thought about it less than you.”

“Fresh eyes on the question?” Mrs. Zinfeld was nodding.

“Maybe.” A benefit to her memory gaps—she wasn’t lugging around a dictating past, like another silly plaid pack. Nen hefted the sweeper again, splayed her hand over the lid, ready to look inside. There was a crash from the other room, a desperate scrabble of claws over slick floor.

“That will be my travel case,” Mrs. Zinfeld said wearily, making no move to go look. She sat down at last.

When she sat, it was as if the air went out of her. Her face slumped. Nen realized she had never asked about her trip. Mrs. Zinfeld had probably been traveling all day; she was tired and unhappy. Nen’s interest had been a boost—alone, Mrs. Zinfeld might have sagged onto the sofa, but she was intrigued by Nen’s plan, and welcomed the chance to show off her invention. Now, that was wearing off, and Nen’s plans for change implied Mrs. Zinfeld should have done better. Nen wondered if she could have been more delicate. She set the sweeper on the floor.

“Can I get you anything?” Nen asked. It didn’t feel right to leave her forlorn at the table, but she was afraid Mrs. Zinfeld might feel she should play host, invite her to dinner. Not that Nen was hungry. She’d eaten a sandwich at the café, snacked out of Mrs. Zinfeld’s fridge when she came in to check on the cats. That’s when she’d opened the drawer, seen the pencils and sat down to sketch.

“No, no, nothing.” Mrs. Zinfeld started to rise, then settled back in her chair. “A glass of water would be welcome,” she said. “Thank you, Nen. It has been a long day.”

Nen poured the water, set it in front of her. She got out bread and butter. Mrs. Zinfeld took a long drink, nibbled a slice of bread. Nen thought she might prefer to be alone.

Mrs. Zinfeld seemed to rouse. She pulled the drawing closer, ran a finger along the outline Nen had sketched. “May I keep this?”

Nen was surprised. She'd been doodling as much as anything, daydreaming, trying to make it pretty. It wasn't finished. "Sure," she said.

"Della will be interested in your ideas. These days, I'm not so closely involved."

"Della?"

"The company director. Adam's *niece*." She leaned on the word. Before Nen could ask, she added, "Mara couldn't be bothered. Can't be interrupted. She says, *You always worked so hard, Ma, you and Dad*, but that's not what she means." Mrs. Zinfeld looked at Nen almost accusingly, as if Nen had dragged it out of her. Nen hesitated, not sure if she should say anything more.

Mrs. Zinfeld went on without being asked. "Solar engineer," she said. "Collectors, panels. As soon as she had the children, she cut her hours to the minimum. Her life is timed to the minute."

Which, obviously, would make a visit complicated. Nen didn't know what to say to that, either. She slid the pencils back into their box, rainbow order. "More water?"

"Please."

She refilled Mrs. Zinfeld's glass. "I'll go now. Unless you need anything else?"

Mrs. Zinfeld shook her head. Nen closed the door as softly as she could.

Late afternoon sunlight slipped through slatted blinds. The office was quiet, only the scratch of Nen's pencil, fine friction of graphite into rag. She was shading in her sketch of the re-balanced straps for the sweeper. The air smelled faintly of warm dust. Though they weren't under the eaves of the stair-stepped, wedding-cake Zinfeld Industries tower, the room felt like an attic, like summer and naptime, idle drawing through the long vacation. Not like a job, not a real one.

Across the room, Cole faced the computing console raised on stilts above his desktop, keeping it near eye level and allowing him to maintain his perfect posture. He stared at his monitor, fingers hovering over the separable number sphere. Cole had been Nen's de facto supervisor since she started three weeks ago. His brief was to extend the sweeper's reach, to testify to sweeper necessity, keep things running—forward, not back. Nen had come in on Mrs. Zinfeld's recommendation; Cole seemed unsure if being assigned the old lady's protégé would be a boost or a drag on his forward momentum. Not a lot older than Nen, he did not wear his authority lightly.

The desks were arranged in a T, with Cole's desk presiding. Nen's was closer to the window, but not so close she could see out without standing up. The sills were deep, more suited to the building's past life as elegant hotel. Lucy sat on the window ledge, legs tucked up under her, a thick report on her lap. Lucy's job was to maintain the building; she knew the tower's history, its strengths and weaknesses. She drank a lot of fizztea (slightly fermented, not too sweet) brought from home in a blue glass bottle. Her brown eyes were magnified by thick lenses, and her short hair was almost white, probably bleached. Nen wondered what Lucy used on her hair, remembering how Martina had made such a fuss about her toenails. Nen hadn't seen Martina since, except maybe from a distance. It was hard to tell in the uniform.

Every morning, Nen woke feeling as if someone had moved the sun. She recognized herself without knowing who she was. She knew things: her handwriting was elegant, her vocabulary ample;

she could tie a shoelace, fix an omelet, read a map. Equally, she knew nothing. No family, no job history, no raging fights, scraped knees, childhood fevers. At first, she had been afraid she'd be found out; she hated to look stupid. Gradually, her uncertainty felt like a sliver of freedom. She learned to elide certain questions, shift the focus back to whoever was asking, and secretly relished her lack of obligation. Still, something was odd about her. Everyone else could say where they came from, and it mattered—people recited their paths, chapter and verse, at the least invitation. Lucy, she could tell, had noticed her reticence; Lucy had an apartness of her own.

“Water’s quiet today,” Lucy said from her perch. The towers looked out over the river and a wide park used by families and office lunchers and joggers. Lucy kept an eye on the river, tracked the weather, regularly took a walk along the bank during her lunch break. Nen hadn’t figured out how to invite herself along.

“How can you tell?” Nen asked. “The river’s so tightly channeled.”

“The whole area was swamp once,” Lucy said.

“But it’s so narrow.” Nen thought of the lion bridge, the current rushing between stone pillars.

“My grand-gran said the river used to look like a lake, before they drained so much marshland,” Cole said, looking up from his console. “Of course, that was a hundred years ago. More, even.”

“How old did you say your grand-gran was?” Lucy asked.

“She told my gran, or my cousins,” Cole answered. Lucy snorted and resumed her reading. Nen knew Cole came from a big family, but not much more. The one time he’d asked Nen about her family, she’d said she was on her own.

“So, the landfill came before the warning droughts?” Nen asked. The question had been nagging at her. She had heard from Mrs. Zinfeld that the land had once been squishy and damp. Once the riverbank was stable, the land leapt in value. The town that had huddled back from the water took over both banks, staked its claim and never looked back.

Never looked back and never looked down. People forgot how much of the land was filled, though the reclamation itself was a point of pride. Where another city—some of their neighbors to the north and south—might have left the riverfront an unworkable wetland, tangles of factories and warehouses and rubbish and brush, North Benton had seized the opportunity to expand. Nen had heard all this—from Cole, from her landlady—but for all her reading and asking, she didn't understand how the drive had begun.

Lucy closed her report, rested her hands on the stack of papers. “Long before. They called it reclamation, as if something had been taken away that should have been rightfully theirs.”

“Whose?” Nen asked. “Who paid for it all?”

“The builders, the founders. The people ready to put the land to good use, if they could claw it back from the squandering forces of nature.” As she spoke, Lucy's voice took on the pompous weight of those determined founders.

“And you said there was a lake?” Nen was thinking of the list she'd found in her pocket. *2mi at the lake; buoys?* That question mark—what was in doubt? And could she ask Lucy?

Lucy's eyes narrowed. “Some people like to pretend the evaporation fields are lakes.”

“That's all settled now,” Cole cut in. Leaving his desk, he leaned over Nen's shoulder to look at her drawing. His crisp white shirtsleeves were turned back just so, as if he'd used a ruler to measure the cuff. His hair was neatly trimmed, his fingernails unbitten and clean. Nen was never really sure how Cole spent his time, but he was in near-constant motion.

Nen had come with Mrs. Zinfeld's blessing, and with those exquisite, detailed drawings—more like art than mechanical schema—that showed she knew what she was doing. Or could make it look like she did. Before Nen was hired (or given the job, which was more what it felt like), redesign wasn't on the horizon, as far as Nen could tell. The official line was that all meaningful water issues

had been solved through the combination of the ingenious sweeper and the fortuitous return of the rains. Nen had met Della Zinfeld—Mrs. Zinfeld’s niece, now company director—only once.

Cole rounded the heavy desk, likely too heavy to move without a crane. The finish had worn off and the wood had a soft, bare look, polished by hands and leaning sleeves and the weight of paper rather than lacquer or urethane, now that so many paints and solvents had been banned. Nen had been told, in the sweeper redesign, what materials were no longer approved; she kept rigorously within the stated constraints. Naturally, the trademark plaid would be preserved, her newfangled sweeper retaining its due nostalgia.

Cole continued to hover. Nen sharpened her pencil, shaded a little more, trying to get it just right. She liked to draw—it was a design, a proposal, but it was also an end in itself. Feeling Cole’s eyes on her only made her more deliberate. Cole ran a finger along the margin. “Here, right? You’re planning to reduce the mass?”

“Exactly.”

“So what’s the goal?” Cole clearly welcomed this sign of the sweeper’s importance, the company’s ongoing investment. He seemed less sure of Nen’s priorities for the design.

“I think we can make it lighter,” Nen said for the thousandth time. “Make the job easier?”

“Job’s easy enough,” Cole said. “Nice work if you can get it.”

“No reason not to make it nicer.”

“Good point,” Lucy said without looking up.

“They’re good jobs,” Cole said. He cleared his throat. “What else are some of those women going to do?”

“What do you mean? What women?” Nen asked.

“People come from all over to get Zinfer jobs,” Cole said, not answering directly.

“Maybe it’s a lack of better options, not the thrill of being a Zinfer?” Lucy suggested. She uncoiled her legs from the sill, didn’t stand up. “People are beginning to wonder if there’s any point to the whole operation,” she added.

“Do you think there’d be a full redesign if the sweeper wasn’t significant?” Cole’s voice was tight with irritation.

Lucy took a sip of fizztea. “Obviously, it’s a priority for Zinfeld. But maybe it shouldn’t be for everyone.”

“Why do you say that?” Nen had thought the sweeper an established good, though Mrs. Zinfeld had said there wasn’t much follow-up study once the sweep-and-concentrate program was in place.

“At this point, water sweeping is basically public relations. We don’t know it’s doing any good, beyond as a jobs program for people displaced by the evaporation fields. But government has spent a lot of money to establish those fields, and we make our living selling sweepers,” Lucy said.

Nen had an idea. “When we finish the redesign, we should bring in one of the sweepers for the demo. So it’s not just us, who never have to carry the things for real.”

“Those Zinf-ladies aren’t all camera-ready, if you know what I mean,” Cole said.

“Sorry, I don’t know,” Lucy answered. She took another sip, eyeing Cole over the rim of her fizztea bottle.

Cole frowned. “They can be a skim . . . shrill. They get so worked up.”

“Maybe because their jobs are boring and the machinery’s heavy?” Nen offered. “Maybe one of them should get a little limelight, a scrap of credit.” She was overreaching—she didn’t know much about the sweepers’ job, though it seemed obvious. She’d noticed how people rolled their eyes when sweepers were mentioned. *Those women. I guess someone has to.*

Cole sighed. “It’s just how they make their points. Too insistent, grizzling on. And only some of them. We want to choose carefully, that’s all.”

“Of course we do,” Lucy said sweetly. “Only the finest spokespeople. No hint of controversy shall graze our precious—”

Cole cut her off. “People love the Zinfer. And the Zinf-ladies. The public does.” He stood a little straighter.

“Of course they do,” Lucy said again. “Clean and quiet and under control. Except when they protest.” She took off her glasses, inspected them, polished the lenses on her shirt.

“There are protests?” Nen asked.

“Not protest-protests—you know, marching in the streets. More like complaints. There are those who say the sweeping is part of the problem.”

“They’re protesting their own jobs?”

“No. A few have complained about working conditions, but they’re pretty discreet. Afraid of losing those jobs, I imagine,” Lucy clarified.

“So what problem?”

“Low pay, long hours, lots of talk of heroism without corresponding wages, few options back home,” Lucy rattled off. “Meanwhile, official denial of any need for change. North Benton’s a magnet for people displaced by salt pan, and it’s not all hicky-hocky here. There’s groundwater contamination.”

Contamination, Nen mouthed. Lucy shook her head impatiently and returned to her report. From time to time she made a mark in the margin; between annotations, she chewed on the end of her pen. Nen tried to focus on her drawing, but Lucy’s speech was a lot to absorb. She scuffed her foot back and forth across the carpet, in time with the movement of her pencil.

“Clapping hell!” Lucy stood up, slapping the report to the floor. “It’s not even in there. The gracks left it all out, not even a hint.”

Startled, Nen felt her chest tighten. “Hint of what?”

Lucy picked the report back up, rattled it for emphasis. “I sent all the data anyone could wish for. Along with a clear request for further investigation. And nothing. Silence.”

“What are you reading?” Cole had returned to his desk.

“Regional infrastructure report.” Lucy looked at Cole and then at Nen, as if one of them should have an answer. When neither one spoke, she said, “First level corruption is just fancy accounting. Paper over the need for major repairs that would obviously cost a heap and cut into profits.”

“What are you talking about?” Cole asked carefully.

“I’m talking about structural integrity. I’m talking about this building, hamstrung and hobbled as ever.” Lucy and Cole locked eyes. Lucy went on, “The usual attempts to downplay crumbling supports and saltwater intrusion. My contribution deleted as usual. A lot of these old buildings close to the river are seeing seepage.”

“Sort of to be expected, wouldn’t you think? I bet even our basement here at Zinfeld Industries isn’t completely dry,” Cole said.

“It’s not,” Lucy said. “That’s my point. I’ve been warning about seepage for months.”

“I thought water shortage was the problem,” Nen said. “Now there’s seepage?”

“Water control,” Lucy said shortly, but then her tone softened. “Easier said than done. You know, fix one problem, cause another.”

“Sure, but seepage from where?” Nen was confused.

“We’re right by the river,” Cole said, as if that made it obvious.

“How unstable is the landfill?” Nen asked.

Lucy waved impatiently. “Anybody’s guess—they won’t investigate!” She paced, frustration almost visible in the air around her, like heat. Then she stopped, looked at Nen. “Mrs. Zinfeld must be glad to have you,” Lucy said. Long retired, Mrs. Zinfeld still made her presence felt.

“I think she is,” Nen said.

“Mara Zinfeld was always too good for the family business,” Lucy went on. Nen waited.

“I think Della’s doing a fine job,” Cole said.

Lucy ignored him. “I need to get back to the basement, back in the archives,” she announced.

Nen sat up straighter. “There’s an archive?”

“More like storage. Archives sounds too formal. No one really goes down there,” Lucy said.

Nen wondered. She’d had a tour on her first day, the materials lab, the upper offices. *Not much to see in the basement*, Cole had said, and then it was lunchtime and they never went down.

“You’d need Della’s authorization,” Cole said.

“So I’ll ask Madam Della.” Lucy turned to Nen. “They have all the old sweeper designs stored down there. Maybe you want to have a look.”

“Of course I want to see!” No one had mentioned anything about previous designs before.

“There aren’t many. Once they got the sweeper established, Zinfeld was never exactly pushing to innovate.” Lucy set her empty bottle on her otherwise clear desk.

“Just as no one rose up in arms to redo the janitor’s mop and bucket,” Nen said.

“That’s hardly fair,” Cole objected. He rubbed the back of his neck, seemed to realize what he was doing, thumped his hand down on the desk. He inspected his nails; still immaculate.

Lucy returned to her window, leaning against the ledge with her feet on the floor. “Building plans, from before the Zinfelds bought the tower, sweeper plans—it’s all down there.” She ran a hand through her hair, then went on, “Adam Zinfeld was quite the silver-tongued salesman. Visionary, if tales are true.”

“That’s the man, from A to Z,” Cole interrupted. “He *was* a visionary.” Then, after a moment, “You never met him.” His voice was reverent.

“No, I never did,” Lucy allowed. “Probably my loss.” She pushed her glasses up on her nose, turned to Nen. “Is Mrs. Zinfeld aware of the building’s decay?”

Nen had no idea what Mrs. Zinfeld did or didn't know about the state of the headquarters. "I'm sure if she knew—"

"You should tell her," Lucy said. "You should tell her what you know."

"But I don't know anything."

"So come look. Learn something."

"You need authorization. There's the risk—" Cole began.

"There's a pool in the basement," Lucy cut him off. "A swimming pool. By the archive room." She stressed the last two words, looking at Cole as she spoke, then back at Nen.

"Why would there be a pool?" Nen asked.

"This used to be a hotel," Cole reminded her. He loved explaining the building's glamorous past. It had been the first luxury hotel in North Benton, built on the new strip of riverfront, sold for offices when the Warning Droughts brought an economic downturn and people stopped spending. The hotel ran into hard times as the Zinfelds were coming up flush. The Zinfelds were proud to move in and make it their headquarters.

"I thought no one was allowed to swim." Nen had wondered, ever since Martina's stunned expression when she'd said the word *swimming*, and the way Martina had whispered that she herself had once tried.

Lucy raised an eyebrow. "Not exactly. It sort of fell out of fashion. Prior era."

"People don't know how to swim," Cole said.

"That hardly seems safe, so close to the river." The river that ran through downtown was duly controlled, its banks built up in places almost like canal walls but still, in extreme weather, it might be vulnerable to tides. Hadn't they just been talking about landfill? What if someone fell in?

"People know to be careful," Cole said tightly. "The river's not there for sport."

Nen was impatient. "That's not *why* it's there. But that doesn't make it less dangerous."

“Any road, the pool’s empty now,” Cole said.

Lucy, at the window, said nothing.

It struck Nen as sad. Not the pool so much, but that no one would swim. She couldn’t remember a time she had been in the water, but she imagined her hair floating free, the soft rocking of waves. Powerful strokes pulling forward into the current—she knew what that felt like. She felt it now, as if her body remembered. Her breath came a little quicker.

“I wonder if we could refill it,” Nen mused. “Now that water’s not so scarce.”

Cole looked shocked. “What for?”

“Offer lessons. People should know how to swim.”

Cole turned back to his console. “We should get to work. I need to send those new specs for calibration.” Now that the project had begun, he would see it through at speed.

“Let me show you what I’m thinking for the inside.” Nen reached for the sweeper propped against the wall behind her and pulled the machine onto her lap. Like the one she’d examined at Mrs. Zinfeld’s, it had a palm-sized lid, a metal disk held in place with threads like a giant screw, and also a lever—an odd contraption, but clever. “This is how I think it will work,” she said, grasping the disk. When the latch stuck, she tucked the sack under her arm for leverage. She tugged and jiggled, thinking it must be threaded wrong, a jar lid carelessly replaced. When she felt the lid begin to give, it was practically under her chin.

“Wait!” Lucy yelled, too late. Water rushed out, cannoning into Nen’s face. She felt her nose collapse under the pressure of the lid weighted with the force of the full canister behind it.

“First aid!” Cole snapped, as if he’d been drilled. He seemed momentarily unable to move, then began opening drawers. “Who left the thing full?”

Nen leaned back, fingers pressed uselessly against her nose, blinking water out of her eyes. After much fumbled clatter, Lucy came up with a pristine white box and handed Nen a wad of gauze.

“Tilt your head more, keep pressure on it,” Lucy said.

“Is her nose broken?” Cole asked. “My youngest brother broke his nose twice.”

“I don’t think so,” Lucy said. “I’m not a doctor.”

“Lucky it missed your eye,” Cole said.

Nen shuddered. *You don’t get new eyes.* She heard the words clear as if someone next to her had spoken. She licked her lips and tasted blood, pressed the gauze harder against her nose. Her lap was soaked, her sketches awash.

“Your beautiful drawings,” Lucy said sadly, picking one up by the corner and trying to shake off the wet.

“I can redo them,” Nen burred. She should keep her mouth closed until her nose stopped bleeding, but it was hard to keep quiet. She had made two drawings, one that showed how the water-sweeper might be made lighter, another that showed the inside—as she imagined it. She hadn’t opened the sweeper at Mrs. Zinfeld’s, hadn’t taken it apart. Of course, Mrs. Zinfeld would have emptied her sweeper. “I thought the water was condensed,” Nen said when she could breathe.

“Much of that’s achieved by plain old compression,” Lucy said. “Didn’t anyone explain?”

Cole had secured the lid of the sweeper Nen had emptied. He began to collect the water at her feet. He clearly didn’t use a sweeper often—they weren’t home-use machines. “Are there filters?” Nen thought to ask. There must be blood; her nose had been gushing like a hydrant.

“Multiple inspection points,” Cole said, another clear answer that told her nothing. Nen smelled salt in the air and remembered what she’d been told about the tides, something Lucy had said about the river’s mouth. Maybe it wasn’t only the blood in her nose.

“This is going to hurt tomorrow,” Lucy said softly, brushing the air near Nen’s cheek. “I’ll get you a cold pack.”

“Lucky that didn’t hit your eyes,” Cole said again. He seemed newly protective, older brotherish. Nen found his reaction comforting, grateful that he cared, and for the mark that she fit in.

Lucy returned with the cold pack, pressed it against Nen’s face, then settled Nen’s hand so she could hold it herself. “That happened to a sweeper last year,” Lucy said. “Blinded.”

Cole’s smooth olive skin turned pink. “You’re making that up.”

Lucy rolled her eyes. “Please. It’s not the only case.”

“Zinf-ladies are not being blinded every day,” Cole said. Lucy waited. “There are some repetitive motion problems,” he conceded. “Back pain.” Nen tried to remember if Martina had worn a brace.

“Something feels too neat,” Nen said slowly, voice muffled by the cold pack. “But you’re telling me it’s not neat. Problem solved, only it’s not.” She dabbed at her face, testing, prodding her cheeks.

Cole and Lucy continued to debate the workers’ complaints. Nen let the conversation wash over her like relief, until the way Lucy said *protests* called her back, and she asked, “What would a real protest look like?”

Then she started to shake. She felt shattered, dispersed, as if she herself had been the water, now explosively released. She had been held together under pressure like the hyper-condensed liquid in the sweeper tank. Now it felt as if parts of her were scattered about the room, thoughts here, arms there, legs at some further remove.

Nen tried to quell her body’s panic. She tried to believe herself a sturdy, planted tree, but her leaves fluttered in the wind. She directed her attention to each part of her body in turn, willing her limbs to still. It was no use. She let herself shake, helpless to stop it.

Lucy stepped closer, placed a hand on her shoulder. “It’s all nobby, you’re all right,” Lucy said awkwardly, but she looked frightened.

“Shh,” Cole soothed, ever the older brother. He snagged the first jacket he could reach off the pegs by the door. It was a summer cardigan, but even its slight weight was calming as a blanket. Nen’s body began to settle.

Nen exhaled—a bare whisper of air through her nose—afraid to restart the bleeding. “I don’t know what happened,” she said.

“You don’t have to explain,” Cole told her. Yet his saying it made her feel that she did.

“Put another cold pack on your face when you get home,” Lucy said.

Maybe it was nothing more ominous than loosening her grip after weeks of keeping herself under control, but Nen felt as if something had been shaken out of her. She smiled up at Lucy.

“Thank you.”

Lucy smiled back, squeezed Nen’s shoulder. She looked relieved, and ready to get back to her report.

“I’d like to see the old plans, and the pool,” Nen said, before she turned away.

“Count on it,” Lucy said.

Habitat

Six a.m., still morning cool and Nen was still an early riser. The sun was still behind the hills, the neighborhood still hushed. She found her mother on the deck. Margaret looked up, then returned to her reading. They had long observed a solitude in concert—Margaret with the news, Nen with a book.

July was nearly over; Nen's cast had been off for more than a week. Nen felt the way her mother looked at her. Puzzled, a little sad, just as often relieved. As if it could have been so much worse. Almost two months since the accident, or whatever it was. Her mother's pale blue summer robe with its waffle weave and fraying hem was reassuring. The give of the lawn chair under Nen's weight was familiar, the garden scent of straw and rosemary and lavender, the damp-dry river hint of cottonwood, even this late in the season.

Nothing had changed—meaning the same old questions, over and over. This morning, the quiet did not hold. “So, now that your cast's off . . .” Margaret began, setting down her glass—before eight, she drank only water.

“I'm a lot more comfortable,” Nen finished for her. “Yes. Thanks for asking.” That wasn't what her mother meant, but so what? Nen kneaded her arm. Since the cast had come off, there was something putty-like in the skin or the muscle, she wasn't sure which. Good as new, fully healed—she had x-rays to prove it—and yet her arm wasn't the same, or didn't feel that way. None of it, none of her, felt quite the same.

“What did Dr. Marshall say?” Margaret asked.

“About what?” When she had removed Nen's cast, the family doctor had drawn on long acquaintance to ask a few questions. Leading questions. Nen suspected her mother's hand in the doctor's implied and sometimes stated worry that something was amiss.

“About your arm. About anything.”

“Nothing? Work the arm gently, take it slow. What you’d expect.” Dr. Marshall was one more thread of recognition and assumptions—Nen felt her both fortifying and unwelcome, another set of expectations to live up to.

“Are there exercises you’re supposed to—”

“No.” Nen looked out at the yard. “Well, probably.” The doctor had watched her, just as her mother did. So what if that attentiveness was her job? *If you will just do what we think you will do, what we are invested in the certainty of your doing, all of us can be relieved and proud and happy.* Their voices were a constant rumble in the background.

Margaret spoke slowly, almost as if she were talking to herself. “For me, it was one wet, gray spring. Nothing seemed to make sense and then everything did. Everything or nothing at all. I always had the feeling something had changed, that nothing was quite the same after, though I could never put my finger on what the change was. I was what—twenty-three, twenty-four?”

Nen waited, unsure how to respond. Margaret shifted in her seat. “Any plans today?” she asked.

“Not really.” Nen felt a lethargy, a weight; she could not be bothered with summoning or inventing a plan—for the day, for her life. She had just graduated. Some of her college classmates were relishing one last school-year summer, free to dawdle and oversleep, secure in fall plans for grad school. Others had lined up jobs or internships, the kind that didn’t care about the academic calendar and started the first of July or even earlier. Nen did neither. She no longer had a master plan. More to the point, she didn’t want one.

Margaret opened her mouth to say something else—Nen saw her thinking—then closed it and looked away. The garden should have been dewy, herbs furred with the night’s fragile damp, beaded spider webs strung stem to stem for those willing to look. Instead, everything burst crisp, already sharp in the first light, crackling. Margaret looked for inspiration in her garden, but that morning it was slow in coming. Nen watched her mother out of the corner of her eye. She was working *so* hard

at this. Nen almost asked a question of her own—to help or to prod, she wasn't sure—then thought better of it. She didn't know what to ask, anyway.

Margaret abandoned the search and went back to the news. “Look at this,” she said after a moment. She showed Nen a headline. *Local Woman Praised*.

“What does that even mean?” Nen had a prickling sense that this was going to get messy. She read quickly. Nen was the woman, praised (it seemed) for her preference for cougars over people in the woods.

“It means you have fans, though maybe not the kind you'd choose.” Margaret's tone was—goading? cautionary? Nudging. Protective but amused. They were back to talking about Nen.

Nen skimmed the article. Not long—two or three paragraphs, all about what others thought she said or did or thought, and what it meant. Not a word of her own. She had seen the local paper's annual editorial, urging the repeal of the ban on hunting cougars with dogs. She had been cited in support, as if she had asked for any such thing. As if she would. This article was different. Now it was almost as if she had sent the cougar out on the attack, sicced it on undesirables the article alluded to but never named. Each species in its place, God's in His heaven, all's right with the world.

The outdoor store and the garden center had sold NATIVE SPECIES stickers for years, a cooperative effort between the businesses. The stickers were a local fixture on station wagons and battered hatchbacks. Kids stuck them on notebooks. They were unobjectionable, innocuous, like *Save the Whales* or *I *heart* my dog*. After the cougar's visit, Nen started seeing more of them around town, and on a wider range of cars.

She had not sent the cougar back outdoors. The animal had gone in its own time—as if she could have stopped it. Of course, she knew there were people out there. She'd seen the signs at park entrances and hiking trails: *caution, cougars and bears; don't feed the raccoons*. Ranchers and hobby farmers and mini-mansion owners in the hills called their cattle or their pygmy goats in at night and worried

their children might be stalked or mauled. Others fretted about their own Ladies Fluff. But none of them—cats, hobbyists, toddlers—were locally native, either.

“They don’t know what they’re talking about, any of them,” Nen said.

“No?”

Nen ran her hands through her hair, pressed her fingertips hard against her scalp. “It wasn’t a matter of people vs. animals, native vs. non-native. The cougar was in the house, and I watched it and waited for it to leave.”

“That was brave,” Margaret said. “You were very patient.”

“Not really. It was . . . scary, but also amazing. I just tried to sit still.”

“So: brave.” Margaret smiled encouragement, maternal pride.

“I wanted to see what it did,” Nen said, trying to make her understand. She’d felt more curious than anything.

“And where else could it go but outside?”

“Bingo.”

There was more, of course. Swimming with the cougar. That’s what she imagined. Open water lake crossing, island to island. Straight out of some earnest nature film. Nen had imagined it so clearly, it was as if she were watching herself, herself and the cougar. Now, it was almost as if the race had really happened; remembering almost made her ready to dip her foot in the water again. She didn’t want to train, just paddle around. Feel the cool coating her skin. The lake was always cold enough that you wanted to keep moving.

Nen looked at her mother. “They’re still out there, aren’t they?”

“Who?”

“Your family.” Her mother had found something to do in her absence, someone to take care of.

“They’re not—”

“You’re still leaving food.”

“I don’t know how much sense it makes to continue. But if they have nothing to eat . . .” The summer was hot, as predicted. Smoke from a fire somewhere to the south was encroaching, looping plumes rising across the horizon like the feathers of a dangerous bird. In the woods now, it would be harder to keep food cold and more hazardous to cook.

“Are there children?” Nen asked.

“We think so.”

It wasn’t only Margaret who worried. Others had begun to leave out coolers of water, barrels and bottles. *For you or your dog*, the handwritten signs read, making no assumptions, but dog-walkers kept to early morning and dusk, out of the heat. They had water at home.

“They’re frightened,” Margaret said. “I don’t know how many people are living in the woods. A few families, I think. Dispersed, not all together. There’s at least one family out by the reservoir. In spring and fall, the mushroom hunters make it hard; they stake their claims and they’ll fight off anyone who tries to move in. Last year, someone was knifed.”

“I heard about that.” Nen waited. “Do you know their names?” She’d seen a woman one morning at the edge of the yard, skin the color of the summer-dry grass, eyes on the ground, trying to blend in.

Margaret looked down. “I think the less said, the better. They don’t want to be found.”

Nen sat forward. “You won’t tell me? You think I’d give them away?”

“Not on purpose. I just see how even little things a person says get twisted.” Margaret pointed to the article, couldn’t bring herself to read aloud.

Nen stared at her mother, surprised and hurt. “But what about drawing attention to their plight? Doesn’t keeping everything hidden make things worse?”

“There’s that. It’s not an obvious call.” Margaret picked up her glass to take another drink, but found it empty.

Nen tried to keep to the high ground. “How often do you refill the cooler?” she asked evenly.

“I check it every day.”

“And?”

“It’s usually been emptied. Sometimes a day passes. Now that it’s hotter, I’ve stopped putting out lunchmeat.” Nen read her mother’s fear and sorrow, deeper than she expected.

Margaret had tried to tell her something a moment ago, that wet spring she’d mentioned. Nen thought she should ask, but wasn’t sure she wanted to face the consequences of inviting her mother to open up. Her leg jiggled up and down, mostly of its own accord. She felt restless and accused and also pulled to help. “What did you mean, when you said everything changed?” she asked.

Margaret raised her head. “A memory, I guess. A sense that there was a before and an after.”

“After what?”

“I’m not sure.” She held Nen’s gaze a second too long, then shook her head. “I could never pinpoint it.”

“So why can’t things change for me?” Margaret’s admission flew in the face of her constant pushing that Nen keep on as before.

Margaret chose her words carefully, picking her way. “They can, of course they can. Only . . .” She paused. Afraid? Uncertain? Nen couldn’t tell. “Only they don’t seem to have changed *into* anything. There’s no replacement,” Margaret said in a rush, caution be damned.

“Maybe I don’t feel a gap,” Nen snapped. “Maybe there’s nothing to fill.”

“It seems so unlike you.” She was prodding after causes, trying to understand.

“No. This is what I’m doing, this is how I feel—so that makes it *like* me. By definition.”

“You had so many plans. After the internship, you had scheduled the—”

“Yeah. You had it all mapped out for me, and now you won’t let me change a single thing.”

“*I* mapped?”

Nen’s voice rose again. “Were they ever even really *my* plans? Where did they even come from?”

Her leg jiggled faster, out of control.

“Well, you started to swim after—”

“Can you hear yourself? That’s my point. It was supposed to be good for me. It *was* good for me.”

“So maybe if you—” Margaret reached out, began to pat the air beside her.

Nen stood up, overturning her chair. “Maybe if you leave me the fuck alone, I can make up my own mind for once!”

Margaret flinched as if struck. Which only made Nen angrier—did she take the hollow clatter of the aluminum chair as a physical threat? “What?” Nen demanded, though Margaret hadn’t spoken.

“Nothing. I . . .” It was clear she was not exactly afraid *of* Nen, more afraid *for* her; still, afraid of what she might do.

“Fuck.” Nen sat on the edge of the chair she’d toppled. So what if the thing was likely to break. The lounge chairs were older than Nen, painstakingly re-webbed more than once. The last time Margaret had gone to the hardware store, she’d found the webbing was now a special order.

Margaret didn’t object—not aloud—but Nen felt the frightened disappointment rising off her mother like toxic steam and wanted to smash something, wanted to get far, far away before the poison touched her, infecting her, clogging her pores. She stood back up, crossed to the other side of the deck, but she didn’t go inside.

Margaret waited. Waited longer. The sun was above the ridge now.

Nen gave the cooler a little kick, just nudging it, really, and heard her mother’s sharp intake of breath. For a second, she was ready to kick the cooler again, kick it right off the porch, but the

cooler wasn't the problem, and she didn't really want to scare her mother. She felt mean and affectionate in equal measure. The meanness was exhilarating—she understood the playground bully—but so was the affection, the chance that she could lay her head on her mother's lap and her mother would stop nagging about stupid plans that didn't matter, had never really mattered, and just stroke her hair and watch the sun rise a little further and let the day take whatever shape it would. The power to choose, to purr or to snarl, was potent in itself.

Lady Fluff emerged then from under the deck, shook herself and settled her fur. Nen bent to pick her up, buried her face in the cat's neck. "Were you out hunting all night?" she crooned.

"She came out when I did," Margaret said behind Nen. "I think she slept on my bed."

Nen knew she was expected to do more than wait for the cougar brouhaha to blow over. Call the water initiative, update her resumé, find a way to canvas or organize or restore. *Heal thyself* and all that. It just seemed so much trouble. She had always been handy, a tinkerer, a sketcher. Had been methodical, goal-oriented. She could return the reporters' calls, or make that sketch for a poster she'd been considering, or . . . She wanted to draw the cougar, wasn't sure she could do it justice.

"What if I made some muffins?" Nen suggested, catching her mother off guard. "For the cooler people." It was something she could offer with a clear end in sight. She saw Margaret's eyes brighten—Nen used to bake all the time—and thought she had made a mistake, given her mother some kind of false hope, hinting at regained initiative, but she didn't take it back.

"I think we're out of eggs," Margaret said. "Maybe baking powder."

"Do you need me to go to the store?"

"When you have time."

Margaret was holding her empty glass like a life buoy. "Do you want me to fill that?" Nen asked, too abruptly.

"What?"

Nen waved a hand at the glass. “Can I get you more water?”

“Oh. Yes, please.”

She took her time, made sure the water was cool. When she returned to the deck, her mother hadn’t moved. Nen could almost slide the glass into her still-poised hands.

“Thank you,” Margaret whispered. She stared into the glass. The surface stilled. “It’s sort of mesmerizing. *To see the world in a glass of water . . .*”

“I don’t recognize that.”

“Should be grain of sand,” Margaret said. “Blake. It’s a long poem—I don’t remember it all. But it starts, *To see the world in a grain of sand*. It’s one your father liked.”

“Can you see yourself?” Nen asked gently.

Her mother leaned forward. “I suppose I can.” She took a sip, disturbing the temporary mirror. “Dolores,” she said.

It took Nen a second to pick up the thread. “Really?”

Margaret nodded.

The knock startled both of them. They looked at each other, uncertain what they’d heard, but it came again, loud and heavy through the house. “I’ll go,” Nen said.

On the doorstep stood a young woman in a hip-length cardigan and low boots, her hair pulled back in a simple headband like all the pictures of Alice in Wonderland. “Good morning!” She held up the badge that hung around her neck without holding it still long enough for Nen to get a good look. “Missy Carleton, Valley News. Are you Nen Renner?”

Shielded behind the screen door, Nen nodded.

“Do you have a few minutes to chat?”

Nen hesitated, but stepped outside. The reporter was friendly enough, probably the same age as Nen or a year or two older. No one she recognized, so likely new in town. She kept calling her Nan.

She asked questions as if she already knew the answers, then was disappointed when Nen answered wrong. *Nan*, presumably, would have said the right thing. A one-woman show, the reporter had brought a handheld camera to record the conversation. When Nen saw the footage later, the images were grainy, uneven. She looked at her own face and saw a hostage, a hurricane survivor—disoriented, pleading, inaccurate. Far too early in the morning to face the world; she had been caught unprepared. At least she wasn't wearing a bathrobe, had answered the door in a t-shirt and shorts.

The interview made things worse. Even Nen had to admit, she sounded like an airy-fairy fool who wanted to caper about with the wild things, all living in peace, and didn't understand some animals had claws. She had confirmed the view of the paper's editorial board, of those flaunting their NATIVE SPECIES stickers, of all those who thought she'd done the right thing, but attributed the wrong motives—and refused to understand how little she had actively done. Nen heard herself say, "protecting wildlife comes first," and knew she should never have opened the door. The cat was out of the bag, as her mother liked to say. Nen's *too little, too late* met their *too much, too soon*.

"Come down to the shop today if you have time," her mother said later. She was on her way out the door, a jumble of tote bags, heavy purse, sack lunch. "You've barely left the house since your fall—since you broke your arm." She corrected herself quickly, but Nen caught the word, stored it away and thought about it: *Before my fall*. "You can look at the readings schedule. Lost Elizabethan Days is coming up."

"Yeah, maybe." Nen bit her lip. Spoke again as her mother was leaving, when she wouldn't have time to reply. "It was like a whole other town, you know? Not all mapped out. I recognized it, but it wasn't the same. Like I could be someone else. It wasn't all planned, I hadn't already made all the choices I'd ever have a chance to make: choose a sport, choose a cause, choose a career. Choose a protein; whole wheat or rye? Want mustard on that? Pick up your life's dream at the deli counter."

Margaret stopped in the doorway, put her bags down. “I’m not sure I understand.”

“I’m not sure I do. I was just thinking about the reflection in that puddle. Before I fell. I mean, I didn’t fall, I stepped. I remember that.”

“You stepped . . .” Margaret echoed, or prompted.

“Right.” Nen forced a laugh. She didn’t remember more, and she didn’t want to go into it—she had said what she wanted to say, for now. “Go on,” she urged her mother. “I’m okay.”

Margaret lingered another moment but left at last, reminding Nen to call if she needed her, inviting her again to come down to the shop.

Nen did go, surprising herself, though she was waylaid before she made it inside. They’d set up a table, an old man in a navy-blue ball cap and a woman Nen thought must be his wife—same pouchy jowls, same wheeze when she spoke, a t-shirt stenciled with wildflowers. Another, younger woman hovered in the background, maybe watching, ready to help. Nen thought she looked like the reporter who’d ambushed her before breakfast, but then, half the women she’d known in college looked like that reporter, more or less. Maybe Nen did, too.

“Sticker?” the older woman asked cheerfully.

“I don’t have a car.” There was no literature on the table. Just the stickers, as if self-explanatory.

“Environment is everything,” the man said.

“Right.” Nen waited for him to go on, but he didn’t explain.

“It’s so important to foster native species,” the older woman said.

“Plants or animals?” Nen asked recklessly.

“Both, right? Insects. Right back to the Garden of Eden.”

“Dad!”

Nen looked at them. His daughter, not his wife? The younger woman snorted. “Sure, give me a sticker,” Nen said.

She turned quickly, almost bumping into the younger woman's outstretched arm. She had come out from behind the table; now her face was familiar. Nen stopped. "Hey, Lacey. It's been a while."

"Yeah. How are you?"

On second look, Lacey didn't resemble the reporter at all: shorter, stockier, with a braid that hung past her waist and muscular arms and shoulders as if she'd been lifting weights. That must be Lacey's grandfather, her mother behind the table. Nen didn't remember them, though they might have met. She didn't stay to talk, didn't go into the shop. There were questions she didn't want to answer, or ask.

The bookshop wasn't far from where she'd fallen, protected by a striped shade awning on the south side of the street. The only reflection today was the shimmer of heat off a car windshield. No standing water on the pavement to catch the sky. Nen inhaled. She felt it again—an echo, or not even that; a trace, a flicker: a degree of constraint, along with a chance to throw it off and step forward. Reinvent, be something else. Other than what? She was no longer sure. The feeling was so fleeting, it was hardly real.

She woke in a sweat, a dream she'd never had before. The girl with the stuffed lion was there but now she was out in the woods. It was dark, so dark the shadowed trunks might have been burnt. It was night, Nen told herself, over and over. Night, not charcoal trees, not carbon. No fire. Night. And a cat in the background; she could feel it watching, ready to pounce. Fear was a mass filling her mouth. Fear as present as the girl, and she needed to find its source.

She sat up fast, winded with the quick lean forward—and who gets winded, sitting up in bed? But it was like that, blast and boom, swift *holy fuck!* She was upright and awake in the same instant, chest tight, and the clear sense she had done something necessary, or failed to do something, but didn't know what.

Her nightshirt, crisp and cool when she slipped it over her head, now stuck to her skin, crumpled and damp. Skin was such an imperfect barrier, always something sticking to it—leather, cotton, sugar—a connection to the world as much as a buffer, an organ both inside and outside. She remembered the feel of her leg against vinyl, a time when she actually went up to the ancient pickup at Lacey's where kids used to hang out. It was an awkward party, a friendship bruised, but most of all a sense she had something better to do. Time was passing, unmarked, unused.

She was suffocating under a misery that belonged to wakefulness, forced to weather it alone. A discomfort more suited to daylight. No one to tell. And still holding, after that dream, a sense of forward motion arrested—had she been running away? She was panting. Had the child been with her? And wasn't that what you were *not* supposed to do, faced with a cougar in the wild? Hadn't she been saying that, over and over, to any and all?

Hyper-alert, stalled, unable either to go forward or to stand down, step aside, reenter her everyday life. Which was not available, because it was not yet day, and she was sweaty slick as if from a downpour, from running, from a dip in the pool, water dripping off her hair and into her eyes but not salty enough, her sweat wasn't salty enough, her blood was thinning and her saliva thickening and she was dreaming again and she still couldn't breathe.

And then at last she was truly awake, and it was daylight—barely. She thought it must be time to do something after all. She remembered the old truck Lacey's family had up on the hill, thought she must have dreamt it, too. She needed someone to talk to, someone other than that idiot reporter who could barely remember her name.

Nen had hurried away with the sticker, found it later crumpled in a pocket. Now she wanted to find them again, the NATIVE SPECIES people. Find Lacey, ask her a few questions. It needed her, how she saw the stickers everywhere. What were they really advocating? What was she supposed to

have done? What *had* she done? People looked at her differently, said things about big cats or wildlife or native habitat in her hearing. Stray words, cottonwood fluff, but they caught in her hair. It may have been ego, crazy self-importance, but it all felt connected. Even if it was only that now she was noticing what had been there all along, nothing felt the same.

So she looked for Lacey, wandering more or less aimlessly. She didn't want to call—she needed to see her in person. She'd find her eventually. Bentondale was small even for its type. There was another Benton farther north; the state or the post office had made the smaller town add "dale" to its name back in the fifties, to keep the two straight.

"Long time," Lacey said when Nen finally ran into her, then smiled. It hadn't been long at all.

"Is that old truck still up on your hill?" Nen asked. She remembered her dream, and the one time she'd been up there on an afternoon, a day she skipped school.

Lacey laughed. "Must be. Why?"

"I was just remembering it," Nen said. "After I saw you, I guess."

"My brother's class never hung out up there, they were all about cars that actually ran. Might be hard to find it under the blackberries." Lacey had thinned out and filled out since high school, grown into herself.

"We could take a six-pack, have a beer now that we're legal," Nen said.

"Why not? Of course, I don't know who's up there."

"What do you mean?"

"My mother says she's seen lights, but no one wants to go up after dark. And if some homeless person's found a place to sleep, maybe it doesn't matter, right? Maybe it's okay."

All the kids hung out around the old truck, or it seemed that way. Beers in the junkyard behind their parents' backs. It was up at the top of a field, an old truck even before they were born but in

pretty good shape, red paint flaking and faded but the body intact. Theirs was a dry climate—no winter salt on the roads to jumpstart the rust—and the truck hadn't been on any road in years.

Heavy, curved hood, side panels wide enough to stand on, running boards like skis. Horizontal grille bars sagged and drooping. It was where the wild crowd hung out, but they weren't that wild—beer, some cigarettes, some sex. Nen hadn't gone up there more than a couple of times, didn't fit in—her life was all swimming and studying. She'd been better friends with Lacey before high school.

They called it the junkyard as a joke—*this town's so small, it doesn't even have a dump*—but it was a gold, grassy field, with the kind of informal trash heap that showed up in the untilled angles of rural properties, an old truck or two, a wringer washer, machinery that should have been antique. No one got around to hauling it away before it rusted out, solid metal flaking into iron oxide dust. The spot was higher than Nen remembered, a longer hike in the afternoon heat. It seemed unlikely kids would have worked so hard to secure a hideout that could be duplicated elsewhere for less hassle. She looked down the slope they'd just climbed, then asked aloud, “Did kids really walk all this way?”

“Not usually.” Lacey pointed across the upper edge of the property toward a new metal gate. “We used to come in from the Akers' place. Park on their road. They sold a few years ago.”

Nen nodded, not remembering at all. To the right of the field, rising up the slope, was all trees. Nen didn't know how far Lacey's family's property extended.

“The buyer had an idea to subdivide,” Lacey went on. “Something went wrong. There's a few half paved mini-streets if you go in, little lost curbs in the middle of nowhere. Kinda sad, really.”

“Not to mention wasteful.”

“That, too.” Lacey cracked a beer, handed it to Nen, opened another for herself. Nen took a long swallow. Not as cold as it should be, foaming up after its jostle in the pack.

The truck was abandoned, for the moment. They found a sleeping bag, neatly tied, and another sprawled and tattered on the ground. No blackberry vines. A satchel they preferred not to open, and

a delicate pyramid of canned food stacked in the truck bed, close against one side and mostly out of sight. A scattering of mouse droppings dotted the cans. Pulled out of the cab to serve as sofa, the front seat tilted drunkenly beside a shallow fire pit.

“See what I mean?” Lacey asked.

“Not really.” Nen kicked at the grass.

“We don’t know who’s up here. Who’s anywhere?”

“So that’s what the sticker’s about?”

“No. Not really.” Lacey gave the bench seat a thump, seemed satisfied when no critters emerged, and sat down. “I don’t know,” she said. “I really don’t. My grandfather saw that story about the cougar and he kinda went nuts. I told my mom I’d hang around when they were tabling, you know?”

“Sure.” It was a beautiful day, now that the breeze and the beer were cooling her off. The sky was clear, pale blue; for once, no smoke anywhere. “I never noticed you could see the reservoir from up here,” Nen said.

“Because you were *in* the water, not looking for it.” Lacey had brought binoculars and she pulled them out now. “Red-tailed hawk,” she said, pointing them skyward, almost directly over their heads.

Nen squinted after her. “You can tell from this far away?”

“There’s a way they fly. And a cry when they’re hunting.” They watched the hawk together, circling, coasting, its orbit widening until it became a straight line, away from them. Lacey put the binoculars down, took a breath. “So, you’re a lion tamer now.”

“Or it tamed me,” Nen said, refusing the bait.

“One with nature?” Lacey’s smile was open, curious.

Nen smiled in return, waved at Lacey’s binoculars. “More like wildlife spotting. What would you call it?”

“Honestly? A little spooky.”

Nen sighed. “I didn’t use crystals, or whatever they said on the news.”

Lacey laughed. “I didn’t think that sounded like you.”

“Thanks for that, anyway.”

“You were always the go-getter.”

“Ha!” Nen almost said more, then let it lie. She and Lacey had run in overlapping circles, but they were never buddies. “Maybe I already go-got,” Nen said softly. Then she asked, “Did you ever hear about a cougar swimming in the lake?”

Lacey turned sharply. “Really?”

Nen leaned against the side of the truck. “I’m asking. Like, do you know if it ever happened?”

“Oh.” Lacey thought, then shook her head. “I don’t think so.”

“That would be something to see.”

“Sure would.” Lacey opened two more beers. “You graduated, didn’t you?” she asked. Her voice was guarded.

“Uh huh. You?”

“I took a year off when my grandma was sick. She died at New Year’s.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Thanks.” Lacey fiddled with the binoculars’ strap, bumping the case quietly against her chest. “I guess I could have gone back spring semester,” she said.

“Well, school can—”

“Wait. Yeah. But I’d like to finish. I don’t know if I really need it now, but otherwise it’s kinda pointless to have gone at all.”

They fell quiet. Nen looked at the sky, wondering if the hawk might return. Lacey’s low chuckle brought her back. “What’s funny?” Nen asked.

“Not funny, so much. But you’re the only person I’ve talked to lately who hasn’t asked about my plans. Asked what they are, asked if they’re practical.”

Nen laughed. “Should I?”

“God, no.” Lacey paused. “Seriously, it is so restful.”

“I know what you mean.” It was like finding a trusty hammock, spending time with someone who’d known her back when, yet didn’t ask too many questions. Even the superficiality of their past connection was a bond—no unfinished business.

“You remember building the homecoming float, freshman year?” Nen asked. “Anyone from the class could go to the build party.”

“I remember tucking tissue paper into a chicken wire frame,” Lacey said. “I only went once.”

“I don’t remember what the float was of, or how the design was decided, who was in charge of making sure it got built if the volunteers slacked off. It just popped into my head.”

“Memory lane. Do you know why they’re called floats?”

“Not a clue.”

“Be funny to try to float them. Take them out on the reservoir like paper boats.”

“Except for the trailers.” Nen put the beer can on the ground and stomped it flat, then flung it frisbee-style as hard as she could toward the woods. It fell short. Of course. “Not my event.”

“Discus fail,” Lacey echoed. “You never did track, did you? Just swimming.”

“Yeah, I just swam.” Nen found she couldn’t remember if Lacey had a high school sport. It felt like a long time ago.

“You’ll pick that can up, right?”

Nen turned, apology on her lips, but Lacey’s grin was wicked. “Sure thing,” Nen said. “Keep the junkyard tidy.”

“Two beers left,” Lacey said. “Want another?”

“I think two’s my limit.” Nen already felt a little drunk.

“Pity to carry them back down. If we leave them in the truck, we’ll have something for next time. Or whoever that sleeping bag belongs to can have a treat.”

Lady Fluff was the only member of the family untouched by the big cat’s visit. Nen knew her mother hoped the encounter would nudge her into action. She came home from the shop with pointed comments about customers looking for books on cats, wild and domestic. Nen saw the cougar in dreams, saw it in the early mist at the edge of the yard. Tried to convince herself she saw it in town, crossing the park behind the old bandstand, but knew she was making it up. She saw—or thought she saw—the little girl again, just off the back deck at dusk, stuffed lion dangling from her hand. What else could that shadow be? But there were a thousand answers to that question: a bear, a t-shirt, a blanket scrap, a hat. Her brother Douglas couldn’t believe he’d missed the cougar, grumbled over the phone that he always missed everything, though he was soon enough on to other concerns. Douglas followed his own flag. He asked about swimming. Asked if he could help.

Nen tried to explain to her brother, and he laughed (predictably, comfortingly) and said, “You used to bleed to-do lists, maybe it’s good you’re listless for a change.”

The pun was stupid, but it did make Nen laugh. Even so, Douglas apologized quickly. “It’s okay to regroup,” he said, and then, “that sounds lame, but I don’t know what to say.”

“That’s just it,” Nen said. “It does feel okay. I feel muffled, but also okay with it. But Mom’s climbing the walls. She told you to call, didn’t she?”

Douglas waited a beat. “She mentioned some concerns.”

“I’m not sad. I think I’m supposed to be. I’m not sure what about. But people keep asking.”

“Isn’t that a symptom sometimes? Denial of problems as a symptom of those very problems? Or a symptom of something?”

“Not you, too.” He had called to diagnose her.

“No, no, no, not me, too. But that’s what Mom might be worried about.”

“Did Mom ever say anything to you about—God, what did she call it? A lost spring. A point where everything changed.”

“Doesn’t ring any bells.”

“Maybe it wasn’t anything. You know how parents are always sure they’ve gone through whatever it is you’re going through. They always know just how you feel.”

“Yeah, I hear that,” Douglas agreed, his voice mild. “What *are* you going through?”

“I’m not *going through* anything! I’m just here. I said I don’t want to swim anymore and Mom completely flipped out. But it’s up to me, right?”

“Sorry, sorry. I didn’t mean anything.” Nen could almost see him backing away, placating hands held up in self-protection.

“Yeah, okay, sorry.” Nen thought of the afternoon up on the hill, Lacey’s relief at not being badgered. So far, that broken-down, rodent-infested truck was the one refuge she’d found.

“How’s the cat?” Douglas asked.

“The big cat?”

“No, my cat. Lady Fluff.”

“She’s fine. Unruffled, regal. Ruling the roost.”

“I need a cat.”

“You can’t take her back now,” Nen warned.

“Did the cougar ever come back?”

“No. I guess I’m a little sad about that. It would be cool to see it again. But it wouldn’t be safe, so close to so many people.”

“They don’t roar, you know,” Douglas told her. “So the cougar’s not really one of the big cats—the great cats.”

“Says who?”

“The reference books.”

“Thank you, Mr. Librarian.”

Douglas had the grace to laugh, but Nen was tired of being misconstrued. Tired of being a reference subject. Once she told people, the cougar sighting was no longer hers alone, a private visitation. Her fault for telling them; people had opinions. So the story went on without her, like the truck up at Lacey’s or her mother’s shop—occupied by transients and rubberneckers, busybodies and scholars and cranks. It seemed a stupid reason to get off the couch—holler at the naysayers that she did *so* know what she was doing—but maybe it was better than nothing. Only, doing nothing seemed just fine: worth doing for its own sake.

The day of the launch, Zinfeld headquarters resembled a work zone, the entrance secured behind a rope hung with strips of white and green rag. Nen first thought the rags were streamers, ready for the public debut of the redesigned Zinfer; close up, the thing looked more like a grass skirt. No podium was set up. Instead, the hazard tape cordoned off the protesters gathering behind her. It felt early—the air held the secret quiet cool of six a.m.—but the day was well underway.

Before entering the building, Nen paused to observe the picketers. Forty or fifty people—not a mob by any stretch, but enough to make noise. Half the women wore bras or girdles over their clothes. A few of the men wore boxers over their jeans. Many held signs.

The chanting grew louder. *Check your foundations! Check your support!* There seemed to be two groups, divided by the slimmest channel of empty space. One set of signs highlighted decayed infrastructure and official lies; another pointed to the plight of the sweepers, long hours in those silly uniforms, always at the beck and call of the hover trailer. *What's on Tap? All Work and No Pay. New Zinfer, New Lies.* The signs waved up and down, in and out of focus, pistons into the air. Nen remembered Lucy saying a sweeper had been blinded by an uncontrolled spray, and Cole's dismissive, *Those Zinf-ladies aren't all camera-ready.* She touched her own face. It was no longer tender, and the blotched and yellowing bruise was faded, but she didn't feel entirely camera-ready herself.

Nen had leapt into redesigning the sweeper out of concern for the women who operated and carried them, but also as a challenge. She had been doodling, amusing herself, trying to solve the puzzle; had been thrilled to see her drawing made concrete and three-dimensional. She didn't ask if there was something else she should be working on. She wasn't thinking about foundations. She was thinking about fittings. Pipe fittings, strap fittings, hyper-condensed water fitting into a tube and then into a tank on the trailer.

She was proud of her work. Still, Lucy's observations about families displaced by the evaporation fields, and the fact that people had begun to question whether the sweeping should happen at all, had gotten under her skin. Nen waited for the security guard to reach the furthest point in his orbit, then hurried into the building rather than show her ID and expose herself to the crowd. No one seemed to notice. The old hotel's revolving door had been retained, its brass cladding polished, the glass spotless. Nen took the smaller door beside it, unwilling to wait for the slow revolutions, the sense of circling in a windowed cage.

At the back of the lobby, Nen paused at the door to the basement. She'd never been down there, though she had wondered what was in the basement ever since Lucy made such a point about the pool. Nen couldn't have said why the pool was important to her, but she needed to see it. She placed her hand on the door pull, then felt herself observed and looked over her shoulder. The young man at reception (Bobby? Billy? Nen could never remember his name) met her eye. Nen took the elevator, as usual.

It didn't matter how early she arrived, Cole was always there ahead of her. Lucy, too, today. Cole sat at his desk, starched shirt neat as ever. Lucy occupied her customary window ledge. Nen hung her jacket beside the door, found a peg for her hat.

"What's with the caution rope outside?" she asked. "Or is it really to keep back the protesters?"

Cole looked up. "There were only five or ten people when I got here. Wouldn't take a rope."

"I saw at least forty or fifty," Nen said.

"Really?" Lucy sounded pleased.

"There was a fire alarm this morning," Cole said. "The alarm was tripped before I came in."

"Like a false alarm?" Nen asked.

"Evidently. You don't see any fire." He squeezed the computing console's number sphere, passing it from hand to hand.

“Was there an all-clear?”

“There was,” Lucy said. Of course, as building engineer, she would have been informed.

“So what’s the rope for?” Nen sat down. If the others could take it all calmly, so could she.

“I think it’s a bonus,” Lucy said. “Put up the barrier after the alarm, keep back the riffraff at no extra charge.”

Cole shifted an orange envelope from one side of his desk to the other, signaling that he had work to do. But then he fidgeted with a thin stack of folders, adjusting their perfectly aligned edges, and Nen thought he must be worried, too.

“There was nothing set up. No podium or anything,” Nen said.

Lucy raised her fizztea bottle in mock salute. “You expected a viewing platform? Like a parade?”

“How else will people be able to see?” Full platform, women in straw hats, uniformed officials, trumpets blaring—Nen imagined it all. Then the main event, a squad of sweepers wielding the prototype—easily, gracefully, the job almost doing itself. Granted, there was nowhere for the parade to go—just a dead end into the maw of the building—but she placed herself on that platform, front and center, and enjoyed the image all the same.

“It’s more of an unveiling,” Lucy reminded her, interrupting Nen’s reverie. “Not a test run.”

“So, is it still going to happen?” Nen wished she didn’t sound like an eager kid.

“The brass won’t want their pageant scuttled,” Cole said. “I heard they invited dignitaries—your Mrs. Zinfeld included.”

“She’s not *mine*,” Nen objected. Still, she felt a rising, insufficient pride; she’d been pleased when Mrs. Zinfeld mentioned the invitation.

“Your sponsor,” Cole said. He might have said more, but a speaker mounted near the ceiling crackled, prelude to the rich, cultured voice that delivered general announcements as needed.

Cherished staff, in light of this morning's unforeseen events, we regretfully postpone the public presentation of the Zinfeld Precipitation Moisture Sweeper II. Out of an abundance of caution, we will confirm there has been no malfunction or other cause for concern before rescheduling for a later date.

Cole shook his head. "Guess I was wrong."

"Nothing about protesters," Nen said. "Or are they among the 'unforeseen events'? And how come the bras over their shirts?"

"*Foundation* garments," Lucy said. "That's what my gran called them. All that structural lingerie. Like corsets—solid undergirding."

"Your gran wore a corset?" Cole asked.

"Undergirding girdles," Nen said, understanding at last. *Check your foundations!* "Bras, too, right?"

"They're protesting their bras?"

"They're protesting *with* their bras," Lucy said.

Nen had to smile. "Messes up the uniform look, doesn't it?"

Lucy chuckled. "It does."

"Management won't like the ingratitude," Cole said. "PR was all over it, *proactive provision of a lighter, more efficient pack*. When we're trying to make their lives easier, they're right at our throats."

Nen thought of Martina's surprise when she'd asked how much the sweeper weighed. "Why should they be grateful? Why isn't it a matter of course to give them what they need?"

Cole shrugged. "I didn't say I agreed." He turned to Lucy. "How do you know so much about them?" he demanded, at the same time that Nen asked, "Have people done this before?"

"It's not the first time foundation questions have come up." Lucy laced her fingers together, stretched her arms forward to crack the knuckles. Cole winced. "It's the whole idea of hiding, as if water sweeping would protect us from rising seas and years of neglect and half measures. The fact this whole riverfront was a big civic craft project and now it's falling apart."

“Sea levels are back to historic norms,” Cole said. “Not *rising* per se.”

“There’s more foundation damage than would be caused by old age or a building not adequately maintained,” Lucy said.

“So?” Nen prodded.

“So it’s like pulling teeth, trying to get information. Someone needs to *do* something. ‘Focus on the building,’ management tells me. As if the building weren’t built *on* something. The archive inventory’s lousy, but there has to be some kind of background on the landfill process. How stable—how filled—it really is.”

“I’d tread carefully,” Cole warned. He stood, but remained at his desk, leaning forward on his fists.

Lucy didn’t blink. Raising one arm, she mimed careful air steps with her first two fingers, never dropping his gaze. “Tiptoeing. . .”

Nen got up, needing to move, couldn’t think what to say and sat down.

“Maybe I should be out there with a picket sign,” Lucy said, still looking at Cole.

“You’d have to change your clothes.”

Lucy made a move to unbutton her blouse. Nen thought if Cole looked down any faster, he’d have banged his head on his computing console. Before Nen could ask another question, the lights went out. Full dark for a beat, then they flickered back on. Down and then up. Three times.

“What in clap was that?” Cole’s eyes were frightened. He began to gather papers off his desk as if he’d already made a plan, what he’d grab in a fire.

“I think that was supposed to get our attention,” Nen said. “Like some kind of signal.” She turned to Lucy. “What you said about water in the basement. You said it wasn’t just rumors—” She wasn’t able to finish the thought before the building lurched, a block tower kicked but not kicked over. As if the ground had subsided, as if the rug had been jerked out from under it by an enormous

hand. Abrupt, unsteady, they all lurched with it. A pen dropped off Cole's desk and rolled toward the window. His files slid to the floor. Then the room was still. Nothing swaying, ceiling intact. The floor wasn't visibly slanted. The building and the people in it regained their footing.

"Clapping hell!" Cole looked around. "*That* didn't feel like a signal."

"It seems the cherished headquarters of Zinfeld Industries is unsteady on its feet," Lucy said, leaving the window. Nen noticed she didn't look too worried.

"Was that an earthquake?" Nen's heart was pounding. Her legs felt tense and then slack as the adrenaline first surged and then began to bleed away.

"We don't get quakes," Cole said flatly. He stared at the papers at his feet as if he'd lost the thread.

"That you know of," Lucy said. "I need to check the basement."

"I'll go with you," Nen said quickly. "Maybe I can help."

Lucy looked doubtful, but she didn't say no.

"If that was an earthquake—which we don't get—we need to go outside, not down in the basement," Cole said. His hands trembled as he scrabbled around on his desk.

"There are documents in that archive room we could never get back," Lucy said. "Somewhere, there has to be some description of the landfill process. And maybe it matters who sold what piece of land—or fill—to whom?"

The lights went out again.

"I'll go with you," Nen repeated. Lucy's certainty was reassuring. Maybe she simply hid her fear better than Cole, but Nen believed her.

"We'll take the stairs," Lucy said.

The stairwell was empty. Emergency lighting on the landings, daylight from high, square windows; the stairwell touched an exterior wall. No noise from the elevator shafts, no footsteps

above or below. There should be people on the stairs, shouts and sirens and panicked office workers and sweeper-builders trying to flee. Nen began to wonder if they had imagined the whole thing. A group hallucination, brought on by tension in anticipation of their big unveiling or fear of what the protesters would uncover or—she cut herself off rather than continue the list.

Five flights down. At the bottom, the stairs gave onto a corridor. Two simple doors to the left; a wide, arched doorway to the right. A cart piled with folding chairs blocked one door. Awnings against rain or sun, for wet years or dry, were rolled and stacked like logs beside the chairs. “River’s that way,” Lucy said, pointing to the archway. “And the pool. This whole floor was the spa—weight room, sauna; tranquil music, sweet mint tea.”

Nen started toward the archway. The place had been fancy. Plaster swags and ribbons topped the walls. Cornices that should have been rigid, horizontal as the ground itself, sagged unevenly.

“Archives first,” Lucy instructed.

They stepped over chunks of plaster, blunted and gray enough that it seemed unlikely they’d fallen that morning. Still, they’d felt something. “Are you sure it wasn’t an earthquake?” Nen asked.

“Cole’s right, we don’t get those. Or, we haven’t in the past. It was the building.”

“Meaning the building we’re in.” Nen squared her shoulders, as if her own posture could secure her surroundings. The calming effect of Lucy’s expertise was starting to wear off.

“I need to have a look around. But listen—” Lucy raised a hand for silence.

“Listen to what?”

Lucy put a finger to her lips. “Hear how still it is. These walls aren’t going anywhere. Not yet.”

Nen was skeptical. “You can hear that?”

“I know my building.” Lucy pressed her ear against the wall, as if pressing her ear to a person’s chest to hear a heartbeat. Nen didn’t follow her example, but Lucy seemed satisfied with what she heard, or didn’t hear. She pulled open the first door on the left.

The archive room smelled of old paper and rust. The walls were tiled. A smaller room off the end was crammed with boxes. Metal cabinets rose like narrow, hulking stumps. A heavy library table filled the middle of the room. Chips and holes in the floor tiles suggested spots where the spa's benches or changing stalls had been removed. Nen wondered when they'd been detached. Lucy gestured toward a bank of shallow drawers. "That's where the old sweeper designs are kept."

Two of the cabinets were tipped over on their faces. Others remained upright, drawers gaping, ready to dislodge and topple. Files looked as if they'd been shoved back any which way. Anxiety prickled the back of Nen's neck. She listened again. No heavy breathing from the shadows. Still, she wished she had something in her hands—something solid.

"Is anything missing?" Nen asked.

"How would I know?" Lucy snapped. "We just got down here."

"You can guess."

"Sorry." Lucy drew a deep breath. "I've barely been in here. That's what I've been saying."

"But you're the building engineer," Nen objected.

"Precisely." Lucy let that sink in. "Per Della Zinfeld, and I quote, engineering must seek solutions forward, not grow distracted with the scraps of the past."

"What does that mean?"

Lucy scoffed. "Your guess meets mine."

Light seeping in from the hall produced a gray twilight near the door but didn't reach the darker corners. Two lamps overhead, mounted to the ceiling—no movement there. Nen found a wall switch. They needed to see, though if there was anyone down there, they'd give themselves away.

Nen flipped on the light and the bulb closest to the door exploded. A round globe, too fancy for a storage room, shiny clear and *ka-boom!* quick flash of light and falling glass. The table wasn't directly under the lamp. The glass hit the tile and shattered into a million pieces.

“Holy clap!” Lucy looked around, kicked the glass aside and started on the filing cabinets.

The light from the remaining bulb was better than nothing. Nen’s first impulse was neatness: straighten, make right. She looked for a broom, couldn’t find one. She picked up papers, set them back down. Not thinking clearly—should she have been worried about evidence? What would count as a clue? It all looked like a jumble. Nen riffled at random.

Lucy flipped through a few files, muttering, then began to make stacks on the table. She seemed to be looking for something specific—or a lot of things, because her piles were growing, though she didn’t seem to have found what she wanted.

“What are you looking for?” Nen asked.

“Anything, really. No one knows for certain what’s down here, document-wise.”

Nen thought of the list she had found in her pocket, long since committed to memory. She’d never shown it to Lucy. “D-E-Q-N-W?” she hazarded, enunciating each letter.

Lucy looked at her blankly. “What?”

Nen shook her head quickly. “Never mind.”

Lucy looked at her a moment longer, then returned to her task. “I have blueprints,” Lucy said. “But no landfill plans, like I said upstairs, no record of the last ten-year inspection—and what happens if the water rises again? When I finally got the nod to come down here, that whole cabinet”—she waved a hand—“was empty. Maybe it always was, but . . .”

“Seems pretty fishy,” Nen agreed.

Lucy cocked her head. “Fish—” she began.

“Suspicious,” Nen cut in. “Did you take anything? When you were in here before?”

“Della Zinfeld’s assistant came with me. To facilitate my location of any outstanding requests.”

“How convenient.”

“Mmm. I saw a couple things I wanted, thought it might be safer to leave everything in place. Like not pulling your treasure out of the tomb, so graverobbers won’t know to swoop in themselves.”

“Apropos, since we’re about to be buried alive.”

Lucy exhaled hard. “You offered to come down here.”

It was true, Nen had wanted to join Lucy. Now that she was in the basement, it felt more ominous than she’d expected. “You said the building’s stable.”

“I think it is. For the time being.” Lucy said that, but she’d been piling up files with more speed than attention. Now her eyes flickered back toward the open drawers.

“I just don’t want to think about tombs,” Nen said. “I like to be out in the open.”

“So let’s get on with it.” Lucy took a shopping bag from her pocket. She stuffed in as many folders as she could, then slung the bag over her shoulder. She shoved another file far back in the drawer before closing it. “I can’t carry everything. And probably still safer not to have everything in one place.” She started for the door. Glass crunched underfoot.

Nen had almost forgotten Lucy’s initial bait, the old sweeper designs. A thick sheaf of plans had been delivered to her desk before she finalized her changes; Lucy’s had been the only invitation to examine the stored records for herself. Now she was about to leave empty-handed, and she didn’t know much more than when they’d come down the stairs. She stirred at a pile of papers on the floor. Seeing what looked like a plan or maybe a map, Nen picked it up. She blew on it, trying to get off any glass that might have stuck. It looked old and faded, like a map handed out by the highway authority or a city government. She was about to set it on top of the cabinet, but instead she spread it on the table for a better look.

“Hey, isn’t this our river?” Nen pointed.

Lucy retraced her steps to look over Nen's shoulder. "And you are here," she agreed, stabbing a spot near the edge with her index finger. Her voice warmed with satisfaction as she ran her nail along a blue-green strip flecked with feathery tufts.

Leaning closer, Nen located the map's tiny legend. "*Marsh grass*," she read. "Like the estuary?" She had heard something about estuary restoration, but this was different.

"Look on the back," Lucy said.

Nen turned the map over. Here was a blow-up of the downtown blocks, annotated in the margins in faded green ink. Nen looked for a date. If the map was accurate, the whole downtown had been built on what was once marsh—swampy and subject to tidal incursion, even if it usually didn't fluctuate much so far inland. The landfill was more far-reaching and more recent than commonly understood.

Lucy looked up and then back at the map. "I've been looking for this," she said. "It was supposed to be lost."

Nen almost laughed. "We found the treasure map? You're kidding, right?" For a second, Nen wondered if Lucy hadn't planted it, at least placed the map for easy finding. She'd been trying to get Nen down in the basement, talking up the pool; now the building lurch had called her bluff. Was she hoping to get some traction out of Nen-the-newbie's presence as witness? But witness to what?

"Well, someone else was looking, too," Lucy pointed out, as if that explained anything.

"Do you think they'll come back?" Nen looked around, anxious again.

"Probably not this morning. Looks like they left in a hurry. Maybe they tripped that alarm, maybe someone tripped it for them. Whoever it was, they weren't very good at it, or didn't know what they were looking for."

"Or they just wanted to disrupt everything," Nen suggested.

"To postpone your design launch?"

“No. I mean, not only that. To distract everyone—from the protests, from asking questions, from improving the sweeper.”

Lucy considered. “That gets them—whoever it might be—precisely what?”

“Maybe time,” Nen said slowly. She felt it coming back to her, as if she’d thought the question through, or one like it, at some point in the past. “Delay just to delay. Zinfeld Industries gets all worried about intruders and security and is anything missing. People stop paying attention to the protesters because they have other things on their minds. Eventually the problem goes away, at least for long enough that any protesters, or you with that messed-up infrastructure report, have to start over from scratch, making connections.”

Lucy was nodding. “So they don’t need to break or even steal anything. The old, *Hey, look over there!* approach to sabotage.”

“Got it in one.” Nen ran a finger across the map. “On the other hand, what happens if they find this? Found this? Whoever *they* are. I mean, what could they do?”

“Not much. It doesn’t prove anything, like about who knew what, when. It’s not a bomb. But it backs up a lot of claims.”

Nen looked at the map again, wishing she saw as much as Lucy did. “Such as?”

Lucy tilted her head. “What the river used to look like. How recent our precious riverbank really is. There’s this, too,” she added. She pulled out another yellowed document and placed it on the table—a chart relating to the evaporation fields. Nen tried to make sense of it. There was the map, with its spidery green notes bleeding off the edges—and who had made those notes?—and now what looked like an assemblage of plots, numbered rectangles without a corresponding key. It was hard to see how they fit together, the riverfront land reclaimed and the far-away flooding of marginal farmland with swept water compressed and transported. She thought about landfill. Where did they get the dirt? How long did it take? And why had it seemed so lucrative, why take the risk?

Obvious, she answered herself—it was a land grab, one that rendered the “they’re not making any more” cliché untrue. Palms were crossed and skids were greased and soon there was a real riverbank to stand on. Some lucky fool got to holler, *all you can see is mine*.

She had more questions than answers when Lucy gathered up the papers, folding the map carefully before adding it to her bag. Still empty-handed, Nen felt lost. She paused again to listen. Did she hear creaking, the slurp and pull of water in or out of the tiny spaces between grains of sand or bits of clay? She heard a dull ticking, the hollow click of a slow drain settling. Like a building settling—or preparing to topple. “Can we see the pool?” she asked.

Lucy looked at her, exasperation rising. “Really?”

Nen nodded. It felt important.

Lucy sighed. “Come on, then.”

The pool was empty, as Lucy had said it would be, lined with chipped but lovely tiles. A spiderwebbing of cracks laced the concrete. Frosted, ground-level windows let in ample light. The far edge, parallel to the outside wall, was marked by a muted shine of damp, a trough that showed how the building tilted toward the river.

“That’s not good,” Nen said. “Where’s the water coming from?”

Lucy stepped closer to the pool. Nen moved to follow, then sat down hard, as if she had walked into a wall. She patted the air, probing for some transparent barrier; felt elastic at her temples, her vision fogged and blurry. Her eyes burned, her nostrils throbbled. Raising a hand to pull what must be leaky goggles off her face, she found only skin, her cheek cool to the touch. She rubbed her eyes, knew they would be red if she looked in a mirror. Her body felt wet, as if sliding through water. Her shoulders strained. She patted her body—fully clothed, dry. Nen squeezed her eyes shut as tight as she could, blinked hard. She shook her head, angry in her confusion.

“What is it?” Nen could almost feel Lucy trying not to roll her eyes; all that histrionic shaking after the bloody nose, now this. Still, her voice was kind.

“That smell. No, my eyes. The—” Nen couldn’t find the word.

“Are you all right?” Lucy looked concerned, but her tone made Nen feel she ought to apologize.

“I’m fine.” She couldn’t stop blinking. There was something under her lids, pebbles or gravel, marbles—something solid, lumpy, hard to dislodge.

Lucy wrinkled her nose. “I don’t smell much. Pool chemicals? They must have used something. It’s been a long time.”

The pool had gone unused for years, yet the scent of chlorine lingered—that might be it. Grasping at the explanation, Nen nodded, too quickly, and felt a sharp pain in her temples.

Lucy shook her head. “You must be more sensitive than I am.”

Nen stood up, eyes stinging, throat and lungs aching with the scent Lucy told her wasn’t even there. “So what do you think is up with this pool?” She tried to mimic Lucy’s no-nonsense tone.

Lucy hesitated, seemed about to reach for Nen, then set her bag of files on the floor. “Let’s find out,” she said, too brightly. She sat down on the ledge, dangling her feet for a moment before dropping into the pool. Her steps echoed in the empty tank as she approached the wet line. Lucy squatted, toes at the edge of the standing water. “I probably shouldn’t do this,” she said, dipping in a finger. She sniffed it, sniffed again. “Smells nobby enough.” She touched the finger to her lips, then spat to rid herself of whatever she’d tasted. “Way too salty.”

“Salty? That’s not what I’m getting.” Nen’s eyes smarted; she blinked hard to clear them.

“It’s not a séance,” Lucy snapped. “We’re not reading the aura of the derelict pool.”

“I mean,” Nen said carefully, “it’s not salt in my eyes.”

Lucy looked over her shoulder. “Sorry. Again. A skim tense.”

“Yeah, me too.” Nen wiped her eyes, tried to focus on the pool. “The salt could be seawater, but couldn’t it also be linked to those evaporation fields?”

“Oh?” Lucy straightened up.

“Runoff, seepage. You never thought of that?”

“No. How did you? How do you know this?” Lucy stared at Nen, hands on her hips.

“I don’t *know* anything. I’m just considering the data, looking ahead.” Nen was newly uneasy, unbalanced by the way Lucy looked at her—suspicious, calculating. Her expression wasn’t hostile, but it wasn’t warm.

“You look ahead so much,” Lucy said. “Not that that’s bad, necessarily. But you see too much. It doesn’t make sense.”

“I just sometimes have a different approach.”

“Right . . .” Lucy drew out the word.

“And the salt made me think—oh!” Nen clapped her hands together, Lucy’s distrust momentarily forgotten. “Salt concentrations in parts per million! Did anyone ever keep track?”

“In parts per million in what? In the tap water?”

“Or the river,” Nen supplied. “In runoff, if it rains.”

“Water levels have been fluctuating. There’ve been some high tides,” Lucy allowed. Her voice echoed in the empty room.

Nen lowered her voice. “Concentrating all the swept water could have drawn in contaminants. Maybe the whole water table’s affected. That’s the problem with keeping people out of the water.”

“How so?”

“People don’t have much chance to notice how clean it is. They’re not swimming at the beach or getting a few drops on their tongues when they splash each other, when the dog shakes itself dry.”

“If it’s unsafe, they shouldn’t be in it—you can’t use people as test strips.”

“Of course not. I only meant, it would go unnoticed longer.”

“I’ve been focused on the building,” Lucy said. “The architecture—structural damage, repair, all that. More or less trying to keep to my brief.”

“Understandable. But they’re connected. If the water becomes corrosive—”

“All bets are off. I get that.” Lucy looked back at the water in the pool.

“Don’t taste it again, but you might want to get that analyzed,” Nen said.

Lucy snorted. “You think?” More seriously, she added, “No one can say water in a pool that’s supposed to be empty is outside my purview. But maybe test first, announce later. Too bad I don’t have anything to take a sample in.”

Nen patted her pockets, though she knew they were empty. “Sorry, can’t help.”

“It’ll keep.” Lucy levered herself up with her arms to sit on the edge nearest the door. Nen crossed the room, stood on the narrow lip between the wall and the pool rim. She felt dizzy, as if it were deeper than the kiddie depth spelled out in blue tiles between her feet. She reached out a hand to steady herself against the wall, palm flat. She felt for cracks, pushed with the flat of her hand because it looked or felt as if the walls were tilting, closing in.

When she drew her hand away, she saw her handprint left behind—fingers splayed, a cave painting. *Nen was here*. She touched it again, full palm, then just a finger. Cool, smooth, faintly damp—or maybe that was what she wanted to feel, thought she should feel. It didn’t feel dusty, and yet the print remained, surface smooth but splayed hand visible. Her hand tingled. She remembered the feeling in her legs the day Martina found her on the street. It was almost the same feeling.

“Lu—” Nen began, then realized Lucy was watching, had seen it, too.

Lucy jerked her head toward the door. “We need to get out of here,” she said. Her voice was so calm, Nen went cold. Her eyes smarted. “Come on,” Lucy hissed.

Nen couldn’t stop staring at that handprint. She needed to hurry outside, yet she wanted to stay.

The building lurched. This time it was a stumble, the tower stiff in the ankles, as if it were taking a step toward the river and slipped on the bank. As if the tower were the wooden leg of a giant who had tripped on the stairs. They had overstayed their welcome.

They ran into the corridor, tripping over plaster and scattered bits. Lucy clutched her bag of files, paused for a last glance toward the archive room before plunging up the stairs into darkness. Nen followed. Their footsteps rang loud against the unsettled quiet.

At the top of the flight, the landing door stuck. Lucy leaned on the crash bar, pushed again, harder. Swore. She put her shoulder to it, motioned for Nen to join her. It took both of them to budge it, full weight against the door. When it gave way at last, they all but fell into the lobby, grateful the vigilant receptionist was no longer at his post to interrupt their path to the exit.

Emerging into sunlight, Nen and Lucy stumbled into the hazard tape like sprinters at the finish line. The protest was in full swing. The chants were loud now, but the front of the building was intact, protesters unfazed by the shudder Lucy and Nen had just experienced. The two groups of picketers, still distinct, had begun to merge. Their chants alternated, voices joining the call regardless of the message on their signs. Nen and Lucy looked at each other. No one outside seemed to have noticed anything amiss. They certainly weren't backing away from a tower they feared was about to fall. Again Nen wondered what had really happened, how much she had imagined, or imagined with Lucy in tandem. A few of the office staff were milling around, more rubberneckers than evacuees. Maybe it was the effect of the earlier false alarm—the building that cried wolf. It all felt like a drill.

Except it didn't. The picketers were closer to the building than before, and there were more of them. The crowd had doubled, at least, since Nen arrived for work. Now there were easily a couple of hundred people marching, hollering, staring. Lucy moved a few feet away for a better view of the tower behind her. Nen followed; together, they studied the building. Solid as ever, from the look of it, but Nen thought the line where the tower met the sky was just a notch off plumb.

“No demo today, I guess,” Lucy said wryly. “No unveiling.” She was still carrying the bag.

“What are you planning to do with those?” Nen asked, wishing she had the framed design she’d left abandoned on her desk.

Lucy took in her surroundings, the protesters and their chants, then looked down at the heavy bag in her arms. She seemed almost surprised she was still holding it. She loosened her grip, as if to suggest the files weren’t all that important. Nen recognized the decoy move and nodded, understanding herself to be complicit in a secret she didn’t fully grasp.

“I need to put these somewhere,” Lucy said. “I can’t lug this bag around without drawing attention.”

“Not even with all these people? Who’d even notice?” The air was cool enough to keep people moving. Wide-brimmed hats bumped and jostled; elbows linked. Some had brought snacks, and the scent of orange peel mingled with the stronger scents of marker ink and sweat. A short man with curly red hair and a drum under one arm set the chant cadences. Nen saw no children, and the mood wasn’t threatening, but it was a crowd, its control possibly fragile. Lucy shook her head sharply and slipped back inside. When she reemerged a few minutes later, her hands were empty.

“The map’s in my pocket,” Lucy whispered, then slashed a cutthroat finger across her neck before Nen could ask more questions. Nen shuffled a foot in frustration. This wasn’t the time, she could see that, but what if Lucy never explained? Nen had redesigned the Zinfer. Lucy had listened to her about the salt water. Yet Nen remained the odd one out. She was the only one to have felt the burning in her eyes; that was real, she hadn’t imagined it. She was the one who left handprints. Lucy had been as startled as Nen by the handprint—alarmed, intrigued, but also impatient. Or had that been a coincidence, finally time to get out of the building?

Nen was relieved to recognize Martina among the lacy girdles and rattling signs. The intensity of the feeling surprised her, a warm pressure in her chest. Martina’s face was unmistakable—the half-

smile of recognition, the quick nod. Out of uniform, she wasn't carrying a sign. She wasn't wearing a bra on top of her shirt, either. Nen raised a hand in greeting, started to call out, then saw Martina's eyes widen and turned away. She scanned the crowd. "Is Cole out here, or did he stay in the office?" she asked Lucy.

"Right beside you." Cole materialized out of nowhere. He, too, looked over the crowd, then up at the building. "No visible damage. Find anything interesting?"

"We need a real inspection. Yesterday," Lucy said.

"As you said yesterday." Cole's voice was mild; he was more than ready to believe any danger—no doubt exaggerated—had passed.

Wanting to say something about the salty water, Nen waited for Lucy to respond. Before she could open her mouth, Lucy had wriggled out of her bra—never removing her shirt—and re-hooked it over her blouse. She took a step forward. Cole stared down at his shoes.

"Wait," Nen said, unhooking her own bra. She saw Mrs. Zinfeld walking toward them only after she was tangled halfway through a graceless remove-and-resurface operation. Nen struggled to resettle her clothes as Mrs. Zinfeld came closer. Lucy started to melt backward into the thicket of signs. Nen felt their connection slipping and wanted to call after her, tell her she could keep a secret, but Mrs. Zinfeld was speaking.

"Not quite the celebration I expected," Mrs. Zinfeld said. She made no comment on Nen's outfit or anyone else's. "Della called, said I shouldn't come down. Postponement, disarray—her explanation was garbled."

"The lights went out, the building shook—you have no idea," Nen babbled, a child safe at home base. She'd been glad to see Martina, but Mrs. Zinfeld's presence turned everything loose—the fear she'd been holding at bay, the excitement at what Lucy might have found, her frustration and hurt at not being trusted with the answers, if Lucy had any.

Nen paused for breath. Beside her, Cole moved into the opening. “Good morning, Mrs. Zinfeld.”

“Good morning, Mr. Rey,” Mrs. Zinfeld said amiably. “You’re looking well.”

Cole stood a little straighter. “Thank you. As are you.” He shook Mrs. Zinfeld’s hand, said how pleased he was about the new design, what a shame they had to postpone, what a pleasure to work with Nen, how unusual to have protesters. Noncommittal, professional, ingratiating.

“The building shook?” Mrs. Zinfeld asked, addressing first Cole and then Nen. “Della mentioned no such episode. Perhaps we can consult security.”

Nen tried to say it all again, more slowly. “We were up in the office and the lights went out. Three times—on-off, on-off, on-off. Then the building shook. Cole said we never get earthquakes, but there’s not a lot of other explanation. Unless the building’s weak or damaged.”

“And did you find any damage?” Cole asked.

Nen wasn’t ready to admit to everyone that she and Lucy had been in the basement. She told herself it was because she didn’t want to admit to doing something so stupid—any fool knew you should try to get outside, out from under the roof. More importantly, she didn’t want to describe what she had seen. She pushed aside the thought that Mrs. Zinfeld must know more than she let on.

“We didn’t go all the way down,” Nen said, wondering if her handprint was still there. “Lucy wasn’t sure it was safe after all.” She didn’t think Cole believed her, but he didn’t push. Cole straightened his jacket collar unnecessarily, squared his shoulders. From the set of his jaw, Nen thought he might be a little hurt. He wanted to shine for Mrs. Zinfeld, but he also wanted to know what Nen and Lucy had found.

“A lot going on today,” Cole said. He held up a cloth lunch sack. “Frank from security never got a break. If you’ll excuse me, I’ll go give him this. Don’t want him to starve.”

“Of course not,” Mrs. Zinfeld agreed. “Poor man.”

Nen watched Cole walk away, wondering when he'd had time to buy that lunch.

Lucy had vanished. Looking for her, Nen saw Martina near the loudest group of protesters, arms at her sides but chin up, lips moving. She must be chanting along with them. Martina caught Nen's eye, glanced from her to Mrs. Zinfeld, then clamped her mouth shut. What if that earlier glance had been only stray eye contact, and Nen really was just another scrap of blue fabric clogging the sweeper tube in Martina's memory?

"I need to speak to someone," Nen told Mrs. Zinfeld. "Will you be all right?" Mrs. Zinfeld's hunch didn't seem to hamper her, though Nen thought a cane might help her stand straighter.

Mrs. Zinfeld's hazel eyes flashed. Her hair was unruffled under her brown felt hat. "Certainly, dear. This was my company once."

Nen pushed into the crowd. Martina seemed to be on her own, not with anyone in particular. It wasn't an angry crowd, yet the playful signs and visible undergarments—lacy, elaborate, patterned with flowers and polka dots, bought shiny new for the occasion—overlay a darker tone, like a dog that lets out a growl even while thumping its tail. Nen ducked and shimmied and slid, trying to blend in. As the crowd moved, Martina seemed to draw farther away, then reappear closer at hand; it was like following a twig bobbing on water, but Nen reached her at last.

Martina hadn't looked surprised to see her before, but now she asked, "Why are you here?"

"We were supposed to launch the new sweeper. I designed it." It wasn't the presentation she'd imagined, but she'd been looking forward to this day. She wanted Martina to know.

"I wondered if that might be you, when I heard they had somebody new working on it. You kept asking how heavy it was," Martina said.

Nen was flattered that Martina had guessed. "So that made you think—"

"I just wondered." Martina shifted her weight. "You were the first person to ask."

"I don't want to get you in trouble. I should have been more careful, calling out," Nen said.

“It’s nobby.” Martina sounded impatient. It wasn’t her job to make Nen feel better.

“I’m sorry.” So many things Nen wanted to say, and all she came up with was *sorry*.

Martina looked at the ground, then up at Nen. “I don’t like all this protesting. Something will go wrong before I can save enough to get home. My daughter’s about to turn three.”

Nen suddenly felt much younger than Martina. Unencumbered, out of her league. She wanted to know the child’s name, but thought it might be rude to ask. Instead she said, “She must be glad to see you at the end of the day.” Which, as soon as the words were out of her mouth, Nen realized was yet more condescending muck, as if she had tried to pat Martina’s head and wasn’t it sweet that she had a little girl and what was she planning for her birthday and did she wear bows in her hair?

“She doesn’t live here.” Martina’s face darkened, then she turned the tables. “What about you? Where do you live?”

“I’ve been staying in Mrs. Zinfeld’s garage apartment.”

Martina’s eyebrows went up. “Really?”

“It was the first place I found.”

Martina took a step away.

“You don’t have a sign,” Nen said, stalling.

“I’m just looking around,” Martina said. She did look, both ways, ready to cross the stream of bodies that moved in slow, concentric semicircles back and forth across the shadow of the Zinfeld tower. And in that motion—look around, look again—she was gone. The crowd closed ranks, a giant, collective organism recoiling from a touch. Nen sighed, defeated, yet glad she’d tried. She made her way back to Mrs. Zinfeld. The older woman was none the worse for wear, observing the event as if taking notes she might review later. As Nen approached, Mrs. Zinfeld indicated a large sign lettered in green and red. “Why specifically would the foundation be damaged?” she asked.

“Lucy says it’s lack of maintenance.”

“And Lucy is . . . ?”

“Building engineer? I’m not sure of her exact title. She was just here—”

Mrs. Zinfeld—usually so decorous in conversation—interrupted. “Of course. Ms. Miles. I didn’t recognize her at first. I recall when she was promoted. Chief Engineer, Building Sustainment.”

“Sustainment?”

“Sustainability meets maintenance, or maybe sustenance—one word, more or less.”

“Names are important, is that it?” Nen was feeling her oats—another phrase that popped into her head unbidden; weirdly irrelevant yet somehow familiar.

Mrs. Zinfeld didn’t seem to have registered Nen’s prickliness. She was nodding. “Della stopped by last week, upset by wild accusations she says are flying. Mismanagement, obstruction, false pretenses.” She looked hard at Nen. “Might you know where those originated?”

“No,” Nen said, truthfully, wondering where the famous Della might be this fine morning.

“Would you credit the claims?”

Nen considered. She didn’t want to answer too quickly. She didn’t have all the information. But something was off in the basement, and there was something in the files Lucy had pilfered. She heard the sweepers behind her—*Check your Support! New Zinfer, New Lies!* She owed them something, if her new Zinfer was just another lie. “I think there’s probably some truth to the claims,” Nen said.

Mrs. Zinfeld clicked her tongue. “Well, they did get our attention,” she said with a wave at the protesters. “It’s possible we’ve been both too careful, and not careful enough.”

“How do you mean?”

“The company could have done better. Should have, at a minimum, been a skim more forthcoming about what we knew, and when.” Mrs. Zinfeld hadn’t been ready to rock the boat, but now, Nen saw, she felt it rocking beneath her. “The Zinfeld Industries name has not always been used for good. Not entirely *my* name—but no one’s called me anything else in a great many years.”

“Maybe you could change that,” Nen suggested, feeling bold.

Mrs. Zinfeld’s eyebrows rose. “My name?”

“What it’s used for.”

Nen braced for her reply; Mrs. Zinfeld only clicked her tongue. It began to sound like a metronome, as if she were marking time. Counting down.

“Lucy says the building needs a much more thorough inspection,” Nen said finally.

“That must be considered,” Mrs. Zinfeld allowed. “I’ll speak to Della.”

Nen wished Lucy were there. She had felt closer to her in the basement, for a while at least, but now she was nowhere to be seen. Something had happened inside. Nen knew Cole had felt it, too, but it had passed quickly. It would be easy to carry on as before, assume everything was fine. Mrs. Zinfeld had pricked up her ears, though. When she said, *they did get our attention*, Nen thought she’d meant more than simply the spectacle of the crowd.

Why had she been so determined to see that pool? Because it seemed forbidden and secret. Because the notion of swimming mattered to her, even if she didn’t know why. Because offering to go downstairs might endear her to Lucy. Certain she knew how to swim, Nen had thought the pool might speak to her in some way. Which it had, though not in a way she understood. Was it that chlorine burn in her eyes that was the message, or the salty water in the pool itself? Nen’s suggestion of measurement had surprised Lucy; perhaps that was enough to make her presence worthwhile.

Nen felt a renewed sting in her eyes and rubbed at them with the back of her hand. She didn’t belong here. She knew that, but she had nowhere else to go, no other place she belonged. Whatever it was she didn’t remember, it wasn’t coming back. Nen knew she had been alive before this moment, before now, before Martina kicked her on the pavement and then helped her up. She must have been. But there were no details, no *this and then this and then this*.

Nen had worried about the Zinfeld building, but it was the West Building that fell, collapsing in a rush on a Saturday afternoon. People were in the street—crisp sunshine and blue, blue sky. No protesters, no fuss. The sidewalks were full but the building, mercifully, was nearly empty.

The West Building had been the first large addition as the land was drained and filled, the swamp stabilized. Long ago, there had been apartments in the upper floors. By the time the original purchasers were ready to move on—dead, perhaps, or into care—the fashionable addresses had moved inland. When the collapse came, the offices were empty, the upper floor apartments, newly under renovation, unoccupied.

The West Building stood where the riverbank bowed out, behind and slightly lower than the more imposing Zinfeld tower beside it. Nen was in the café when the building fell. A woman near the window shouted, “Clapping hell!” and then the floor shook. Nen thought, this must be that earthquake that can’t happen here. People left their tables, rushed to the window, then out the front door. Nen joined the crowd hurrying toward the building like a shoal of fish pulled toward the current. *None of them can swim*, Nen thought irrelevantly. Jick had made her a cup of ginger tea; only once she was in the street did she realize she still held the mug in her hand. The handle felt slick and heavy as she stumbled in the jostling crowd. Hot liquid sloshed onto her arm and she dropped the cup, heard it break against the pavement but didn’t stop to pick up the shards.

She kept moving forward until she was blocked by the backs of people in front of her, all of them covering at the crush of sound. The noise was both huge and small, the all-encompassing roar of a locomotive and yet, discrete within that roar, singular tones, cellular units, as if she were hearing each brick individually fall to the ground. Nen backed up, but here the shoal of watchers eddied, some pulling away, others surging forward in panicked fascination. Her feet tangled with the ankles of a woman behind her, her arm flashed out, flailing for balance. Her eyes were riveted toward the

source of that sound as she fought to right herself without stumbling into someone else. When it came—the building’s fall—it was almost instantaneous, like one of those deaths doctors assure the bereaved must have been painless, though any sudden death had to hurt for someone.

Nen coughed. The smell of brick dust was not so much a scent as an abrasive rasp in her nasal passages. The air itself had become rough. A wave, a billow of dust rose, coming toward her. Her eyes watered. When she touched her face, her hand came away gritty. All around her were startled, red-faced people, powdered with brick dust and dirt. The wind hadn’t been strong; now it stilled. Birds rose in a cloud of their own. She’d had no idea the trees along the river held so many birds, rising now in a mixed flock, large and small, a murder of convenience—grackles, robins, sparrows, not just crows.

She did not see it fall, only the aftermath. She was too far up the street. The crowd gathered in witness, a long, near-silent pause as if for a collective intake of breath, time for understanding to dawn and then the screams, sirens, flashing lights.

Ambulances and fire trucks arrived. Uniformed squads of firefighters and police moved to herd onlookers into line. Nen was irritated enough at being pushed away to dig in her heels; irritated enough to work herself to the front, to snake and weave, shoulders parallel to the oncoming or retreating crowd—make yourself narrow, a fish in the current, slip around the bigger shoal, eddy and rush. “What happened?” she said aloud, to no one, to everyone. And then louder, more forcefully, “What the hell happened? How did that building fall, one minute to the next?”

Which brought the microphone to her face and the question, redirected. “What happened?” the reporter was asking. “What did you see?”

“Heard,” Nen corrected. “I heard what everybody heard. But a building doesn’t topple for no reason. The ground gave way, or the foundation was faulty. Or it was pushed—explosives or something. It probably should never have been built there in the first place.”

“And you are?” the reporter prompted.

“N—” she began, before a flash of caution made her stop. “Someone who lives here,” she said.

“Are you suggesting corners were cut?”

“A lot of people are talking about the riverbank, ground stability.” Nen wasn’t about to tell the interviewer everything she knew. She leaned around him, trying for a better angle. Whatever was happening, she was missing it.

“Many thanks for your time,” the reporter said, taking the hint.

Nen stared at the row of buildings, imagined the ruined tower back in place, remembering how it had looked that first day in the puddle. That day she knew was “first” in some important sense, without knowing why. The earliest stable recollection she had was that day with Martina. It was the first day she could remember, and she remembered every detail, every breath and scent.

The West Building had been built before the Zinfeld headquarters, with its creamy exterior that caught the afternoon sun. Standing between them, the New Tower—it never had another name—was outwardly undamaged. Gray concrete bound with green glass and steel, a later addition to the skyline, it was a deliberate contrast to the other two. Up-to-date in its moment, practical and prickly, the show-offy architecture controversial and much talked about and then disregarded. By now it was comfortably permanent; no one could remember the skyline any other way. A park had been developed, a walkway between the towers and the river, space for bicyclists and parents with strollers.

Three tall buildings, then a few blocks of lower light industrial structures. North Benton had its bits of grandeur, but the grand vision never spread. The West Building was the first heavy construction on the riverbank; its weight and history became an explanation, when work in the remaining towers went on as before. An older building, more likely of shoddy or faulty design—progress inevitably improves on the past.

The collapse came a month before Fishtide. A security guard was found near the entrance, surprised at his post by the falling lintel, unable to flee. The bodies of two custodians who had been working on an upper floor were uncovered days later. It was a big enough disaster to bring official reaction. It wasn't hushed up—it would be difficult to deny the evidence of a fallen building, brush away three lives lost—but the holiday and its preparations occupied public attention, a clear reassertion of the order of things. Some thought all the buildings along the riverfront should be evacuated. But that would be expensive, premature, not yet warranted given the proven facts “at our command.” No one was satisfied with the response, not the anxious public, not the water-sweepers—their hoses clogged with brick dust—not the authorities who clearly wished the whole mess would go away. Official reaction became official silence, masking the public's fury and fear.

At first, the remains of the building—a mound of crumbly, red brick rubble—sat quiet, enclosed in a protective circle of fear and respect. Then people began to come with handcarts and wagons. No sense letting good bricks go to waste. Many had shattered, but many more survived intact. It was a bizarre picking clean of the skeleton. Everything was taken that someone might find a use for, any furniture that survived was removed. Yet it was mainly the bricks that seemed to pull the string of salvagers. It should have taken months, and yet the site was scoured bare in a matter of days. Nen imagined brick-pickers bussed in from out of town, brick-picking excursions, organized tours. There must have been thousands of them—people and bricks. Finally only a tangle of wires, twisted metal, and broken window glass was left behind, none of it easily reused.

The West Building had been built when bricks were fashionable and relatively cheap. “Now those old-style bricks are expensive,” Jick told Nen. “I'm not sure there's any difference to what they make now. But people think anything old is fancy. Too good to throw away.”

“If they were really valuable, someone would sell them. Not let people cart them away.”

“It's a hoarding impulse—they're free, reusable, antique; they must be good for something.”

“People think they’re getting away with something, when they’re providing free labor. Who saves all that money?”

Jick shrugged. “The usual bigrags. But people must see some value in them, or they wouldn’t gather them up. And it is hard to find old-style bricks, for anyone who does have an old structure in need of repair.”

“The site clearing was so fast,” Nen said.

Jick lifted his chin in agreement. “Every day I’d walk by, the mound was shorter. Like ants at a picnic.”

Nen grimaced. There was something unkind in the image. “I don’t think—”

“No, of course not,” Jick cut her off. “There must be great need, if they were working like that.”

“I guess so.” Nen rubbed at her left arm. It was oddly sore, as if she’d been hauling bricks herself. Deeper, more muscular than the pull and tingle she’d felt when she leaned her hand on the wall in the Zinfeld basement, more of a throb.

“All nobby?” Jick asked, seeing her move.

“I think so. I was—” She stopped, shook her head. “It’s gone now.” Bricks. She imagined garden sheds filled to bursting with dusty red stacks. What were people going to build?

“Foundations!” Nen exclaimed. “They don’t use brick in foundations, do they? Or did they?”

Jick thought it over. “I don’t know. I like some of these old-style things, but I’m not a builder,” he said, then laughed at himself. “Not that I wasn’t tempted. There’s something about bricks—you always think you can find a use for them somewhere.”

“It seems like there should be more records,” Nen said, dissatisfied. Maybe one of the documents in Lucy’s sack of files described the West Building’s construction—how it was built, not just by whom.

“Used to be a brickworks outside of town,” Jick told her, as if he knew what she meant. “They didn’t want the kilns too close—too polluting.”

“Polluting how?”

“Firing takes fuel. You have to burn something.”

“Right.” She’d never seen a brickworks, not even a photo, but she could imagine massive ovens, a glow of flames in the dusk. Would there be conveyor belts, or was it all done by hand? Troops of artisans, stirring up dust. “Don’t bricks take a lot of water?”

“They must. Wouldn’t molding bricks require pretty wet clay?”

“So water contamination could be a problem, too.” Only that would be muddy water, stirred sediment. Not the salt Lucy tasted in the pool. Nen remembered something else. “Firing the bricks is what makes them waterproof,” she said. How did she know that? It was something about fire beating back water, water putting out fire . . . another memory that wasn’t really, somewhere between illusion and recollection and wishful thinking. “Once they’re fired, are they fireproof?” Nen wondered aloud.

“I think you can burn them. In the firing process,” Jick said.

“Like bread baked too long?”

Jick laughed. “Exactly. Time I got back to the kitchen. It’s where my mind goes, any road. Let me make you something to eat.”

Lost and Found

Nen had always been a saver. Mementos, certificates, favorite sweaters, insufficiently-appreciated gifts she wasn't able to discard. T-shirts, race ribbons, note pads assembled out of single-sided photocopies—by now she must have a lifetime supply, more scratch paper than she could ever use. It was time to winnow the clutter and excess. People might not think of swimming as equipment-intensive—not like fencing or bicycling—but she had a dozen suits, some worn and stretched, others still with store tags, not to mention a sleek cold-water wetsuit, neon-bright floaters for visibility on lake swims, rigid blue flippers, yellow-tinted masks. She stood in the middle of her room, up to her ankles in last season's must-have gear.

“Time to get rid of some of this,” she said to her mother. “Sell it or give it away.”

“There's no rush,” Margaret said, hesitating in the doorway. “You can put things in the basement, or out in the garage. There's plenty of room.”

There was not. The basement was full. Margaret didn't keep knickknacks, and the baby clothes (most of them) had gone to families in need, but there were photo albums, letters, postcards she couldn't part with. There was Margaret's dollhouse, boxes of miniature furniture she had not managed to pass on, having waited too long for her children to be old enough, careful enough, to offer them her most beloved treasures; the moment had passed, there was no reason to have saved them after all—saved for whom, for what possible future need?—and yet she saved them still. She had a weakness for silver plate, along with a dread of polishing that kept the elegant tea service stored away from use. Nen knew her mother had kept most of her father's things—Remy's wool shirts preserved against moths, cufflinks and dress shoes Margaret hoped Douglas might wear. The laundry room was guarded by ramparts—boxes of books, alphabetized and stored for the ages.

Nen held up an orphan flipper, Exhibit A. “Didn't you tell me last week I should clear out some of the junk I wasn't using?”

“Be careful what you wish for,” Margaret said and sighed.

“Is that directed at you or at me?” Maybe it had been an elaborate dodge, her mother hoping to goad her into self-protective salvage.

“Are you favoring that arm?” Margaret asked, ignoring Nen’s jibe.

“I don’t think so. It feels okay.”

Margaret shook her head. “Make a first pass, hang on to the best of it in case . . .”

“In case what, Mom?” *Make her say it*, Nen thought.

“In case your interest in swimming revives.” There was a bleak note in her mother’s voice that hurt Nen, too, but she pushed past it.

“I kept a suit, Mom,” Nen said, pointing at the small pile of saved items on her bed. She kept the Zephyrus Sweete racing goggles. “And there’s more where that came from, if I change my mind. There’s always the mall. There’s resale. It’s not an art collection.”

Margaret winced, as if recognizing her own words. She had more than once suggested not every experimental acquisition needed to be retained. The childhood art, yes; the microwave swimsuit dryer, the workout-to-washer gear pouch, maybe not.

Nen knew she was parroting her mother’s lines, years of encouragement to sort out the clothes that no longer fit, recycle the magazines—without even checking for cartoons or travel articles she might want to save. It felt both cruel and liberating, acting as her mother had wanted her to act, now that her mother seemed to have changed her mind.

It took a day and a half, but she cleared the stuff out. There were stacks and folders she hadn’t sorted through in years—pictures of classmates who had moved away, an autograph book from seventh-grade summer camp. Encouraging notes from her middle school teachers, notes that on second reading were snotty, two-faced and sly. *Most improved disposition*—really? Nen kept that one at first, appreciating the affirmation; then she reread it and was furious. That was the year her father

died. Maybe they could have noticed she was suffering, rather than hector her to smile? She tore it into tiny bits, surprised at how angry she felt, all these years later; she tore those pieces again, sprinkled the bits over the trash bag as if completing the reversal of a curse. She tried to recall if those teachers had even known about her father—the accident happened early in the summer, long before the new school year started—then decided she didn't care.

Much of the jumble was trash—all those homemade notepads, construction paper collages and ancient report cards, tattered notebooks, training regimens, mileage charts, dog-eared and outdated pollution reports to buttress her activist plans. Some of it was worth giving away—swimsuits, flippers, a mask that had never fit right, nearly unused. She could try to sell some of the items, but didn't want to bother. She had waited long enough—two months of lazing around—for the assembled belongings to awaken the feelings they had once provoked. Their time was up.

Nen recycled what she could, trashed what seemed unsalvageable, and left a box at the charity drop. It was an ordinary cardboard box, but a good one, itself a kind of family heirloom—not precious, but familiar. It had been with them for years, reused over and over. Later, Nen thought she should have been more judicious—not with the contents, but with her choice of box. She hadn't given it much thought as she was tossing, consolidating—the one that first came up empty and looked sturdy enough to cart around became the donables box.

Nen pulled in behind the charity trailer and got out of the station wagon. Usually an attendant sat on a folding chair just inside the trailer's raised overhead door, warm weather or cold. Today, the attendant must have had the day off. The trailer was parked in a gravel lot beside the elementary school. Locked. Assuming it would open soon, and thinking no one was likely to steal her stuff—besides, what did she care?—Nen placed her box on the ground, pushing it a ways under the trailer body and ignoring the sign warning people not to do so. Another sign cautioned that taking items from the site was theft and would be addressed accordingly. Nen brushed invisible dust and ancient

obligations off her hands—clap, clap, clap—and went on her way, never suspecting her mother was right behind her, or close enough.

Just her luck: her mother, on her way to work, recognized the box.

The charity drop was on Margaret's bicycle route. It was a glorious day, not too hot, not too windy. Only a fool would do anything but ride. Margaret had begun cycling, first in the mornings for exercise, then more and more on her errands around town, or to and from work. "High time I became a bicycle commuter," she said to Nen. "We all should." Saving gas money didn't hurt. Nen suspected her mother of trying to set an example, prod her to exercise without saying the words.

Margaret recognized the box immediately. Filled first with peaches (so the cardboard sides proclaimed), it had been acquired in an early move, filled with books and then toys, then paper jumble. "At least we were spared the spectacle of me trying to balance that box on my bike," she said later. "That would have been something to see, but Officer Overdone never let me get that far."

As Margaret told it, she had paused to look, was contemplating the box—what was it doing there? hadn't they kept important mementos in that box, might they not still?—when the patrol car skidded in with a squeal of tires and a siren blast. (Nen thought her mother might be embellishing, but given what followed, the officer's arrival was surely dramatic.) As the arresting officer described the incident, Margaret was caught in the act, hands in the cookie jar of discarded belongings, wrist-deep in the carton in question. Touching but not lifting the box. Loitering with intent.

Margaret insisted her daughter had left the box by mistake; its contents were never properly abandoned. But Officer Goldstone was a rookie cop, eager to make an arrest, be evenhanded, not pull in the usual suspects. They gave him a hard time at the station, but it was too late for Margaret, the wheels were in motion. He drove her in the back of his squad car. He asked a lot of nosy questions. No, Margaret told Nen later when she asked, he didn't turn on the siren for the drive. No handcuffs. At the time, it was a little disappointing.

“Are you going to fingerprint me?” Margaret asked. By then the officer had been advised by his superiors. It was his first solo patrol, and look what happened.

“We’ll let you off with a warning, but we’re calling your daughter, out of concern.”

“I’ll call her myself. I get one phone call, right?”

Nen couldn’t believe it. She didn’t even understand her mother, the first two times she said where she was calling from, made her repeat it yet again. “You got arrested for what?”

She was astounded, shocked, but when she paused for a second, compassion pushed its way in. Her mother must be mortified, possibly frightened. “Do I need to bail you out?” Nen asked. And then she was afraid, too. She had no idea where she would come up with that kind of money—or how much might be required. As she drove to the station, Nen still didn’t understand just what it was Margaret had done.

“I told him you left the box by mistake,” Margaret said when Nen arrived to pick her up. On the phone, Margaret hadn’t mentioned being let go with a caution. “There’s hundreds of dollars of swim equipment in there,” she added, not helping her case.

Nen had not been to the police station since a third-grade field trip. She endured the amused and sympathetic looks of people she didn’t quite know, their faces nonetheless familiar. It wasn’t *that* small a town. The police station was tiled—linoleum floor, ceramic squares halfway up the walls—all in an institutional gray, tidy and spare, a little shabby. Unthreatening—nothing about it said law and order. It might have been any number of municipal offices, and perhaps it had been once, then repurposed. The chairs in the waiting area looked new, a bright green and a soft blue Nen recognized as more up-to-date than the rest of the room’s palette. There were only three of them; they might have been surplus from somewhere else. Fluorescent lights hummed. Posters on the wall offered tips on home security and warned of cougar sightings in the hills.

“Will you look at that,” Margaret said, pointing at the cougar poster.

The woman behind the desk looked up, looked at Nen. “Aren’t you—”

“No.” Nen swallowed, composed herself. “I’m here to pick up my mom.”

“Of course. Mrs. Renner.”

“Watkins-Renner,” Margaret corrected. “Ms.”

“Of course, of course. So sorry.”

Nen looked around, weighing whether to risk any more questions. A hasty retreat might be the better part of valor, before someone decided to lock her mother up after all. But Margaret had struck up a conversation with a young man standing in a corner of the room. His foot twitched with anxiety; he chewed on a thumbnail. Nen didn’t ask what he was in for.

“If this seems out of character, you maybe want to have her evaluated,” the arresting officer whispered.

“Yeah, okay,” Nen agreed, not understanding.

“It started that way with my great-aunt Martha,” he elaborated. “Shoplifting a box of chocolates was the first sign.”

“Okay, thanks, I’ll follow up.” It seemed a safe response.

The receptionist took Nen aside as well. “This is how it sometimes begins, you know.”

“What begins?” Perhaps there was a script; Nen waited for the invocation of Aunt Martha.

“Well, you know . . . aging.”

“My mom’s not that old.”

“Erratic behavior, that’s all I mean. At any age. Just keep an eye on her, hon.”

Nen suppressed a smile. “Thank you. I will.”

It was sort of delicious, her mother as troublemaker. She didn’t for a second think Margaret was addled or ailing. She thought she couldn’t let go, assumed she’d get away with it or, like most people, probably, didn’t think lifting something from a charity drop—beside the official receptacle,

moreover, not within it—was stealing, especially since it had come from her own family. Sure, there were signs, but who even read them? It wasn't like she took merchandise out of the thrift store.

“Thank you,” Margaret said, once they were in the car, headed home. She let Nen drive, without discussion.

“Who else would you call? And where's your bike?”

“Still.”

Nen saw that her mother was crying and tried to contain her impatience. “They were worried, at the police station. That you were—”

“Losing my marbles? I heard them whispering in the corners.”

“So why'd you do it? What were you trying to hold onto?” Maybe it was unkind to ask that way, but she wanted to know, and what else was she going to ask?

If Margaret was mourning Nen's abandoned swimming career, she was taking it much too hard. Nen thought her mother couldn't bear to let the material things go when she clearly felt so much of the immaterial was also somehow gone. Nen tried to say something, acknowledge that she understood, but it broke down into another argument, unintended on both sides but maybe inevitable. Nen only dimly understood how changed her mother found her, and only dimly sympathized with her mother's feeling of loss. As anyone could only dimly sympathize with a parent's tearful affirmation that a child's growing up is bittersweet at best, that raising a child is a relentless experience of loss, one moment after the other, as the beloved two-year-old, three-year-old, ten-year-old, fifteen-year-old is irrevocably lost—and, cruelly, unmourned by the child herself, who just wants to get on with things, views each new birthday as a triumph.

Margaret spread her fingers on her thighs. She looked at the back of her hands, as if they might offer some kind of map. “Oh,” she said finally. “The box seemed . . . solid. Something we didn't want to lose.”

“It wasn’t lost,” Nen said impatiently. “I gave it away.”

“Yes. I understand that.”

“Wasn’t it your idea I clear out my room?”

“And wasn’t it my suggestion to store some things in the garage?” Margaret sighed heavily. “You say goodbye so many times, on the way to the adult. Sometimes it’s harder than others.”

Nen nodded. “Okay.” But then she couldn’t stop herself. “That was so embarrassing. I can’t believe you did that!”

“I didn’t do anything. I picked up something I thought was mine. I tried to keep you from throwing away something you might have meant to keep. How do you think I feel?”

“I have no idea,” Nen snapped, then felt mean. It was a cheap shot.

Margaret sighed again. “So much well-meaning advice. I thought we’d never get out of there.”

Looking sideways, Nen met her mother’s eyes. Unspoken was the acknowledgment that Margaret had given Nen quite a bit of well-meaning, yet unwanted, advice of her own lately. “What if you’d really been arrested?” Nen chided.

Margaret cracked a smile. “I could have gone to jail.”

Nen giggled. “Actually, it was a little funny. Me bailing you out. Isn’t it supposed to be the other way around?”

“You were never a wild child,” Margaret said.

“No. Straight and narrow all the way. Not even a protest arrest. Just swim medals.” And then she understood. That was what her mother was missing, couldn’t believe was over and done. Nen felt the depth of that loss only faintly, was squinting into the blurring puddle as the wind picked up. However her mother explained it, it still looked like overreacting. “It’s my stuff,” Nen said. “My old stuff. My junk, my clutter. Why can’t you let it go?”

At that, her mother was troublingly quiet.

“Well?” All these weeks, months, Nen had been willing to watch things drag out, to try to avoid discussion, to duck her mother’s questions. Today she pushed.

“It made me sad,” Margaret said at last, looking out the car window and blinking fast fast fast. “I do need my bike,” she added after a moment. “Can we pick it up?”

“Sure,” Nen said, turning the car toward the charity drop. She thought of the alliteration game they used to play on car trips, opened her mouth to begin (*arrest, antipathy, alligator, atrophy, atrocious, accusation*), bit her tongue before she made things worse. Then she had a thought. “You know, if you left it there, it will look like another donation. I’m not stealing your bike back. They won’t let you go with a warning twice in one day.”

They went anyway, just to check. The bike was long gone, stolen by other thieves. Naturally. It remained one of Bentondale’s few claims to fame: still leading the nation in bike thefts per capita. The local paper ran a weekly tally, bikes lost year-to-date.

Eager to restrain the dangerous Margaret, Officer Goldstone hadn’t given too much attention to the box itself. He had not secured the purloined property in question. Another rookie mistake. “We are not touching that box,” Nen said when her mother put a hand on the door handle as if to get out of the car. Margaret leaned back in her seat. She didn’t say anything the rest of the drive home.

Nen had been wrong-footing all week, first unable to find fruit, then making fun of Jick's Leftover Pie and casually mentioning holiday plans at work. Fishtide preparations had been long underway, closets and attics cleared, larders emptied so they could be restocked. The airwaves filled with pious, self-congratulatory jingles. *We gather in celebration—Gather with us! We'll tide you over. Fancy Farmers Feast not Famine! Fishin' abundance, freedom from want. King of the table, king of the tides.*

The Wednesday before Fishtide Eve was a day for fasting, juice only. Oranges sold out immediately; Nen was left with a choice of tart, shriveled grapefruit or juice from cans. Mrs. Zinfeld had invited her to the dinner after Nen helped her with the Fishtide clear-out, but Nen was still struggling to put it all together. Cole, sensitive to his position in the Zinfeld hierarchy, had been jealous when he heard Mrs. Zinfeld had invited her, which only added to the tension caused by building repairs and ongoing protests. He almost sneered when she mentioned it—"Ooh, fancy!"—and made a face as if something smelled bad. He was snappish the rest of the day.

She'd pieced much of the holiday together from advertisements and offhand remarks, and then she'd asked Jick. Even after she started at Zinfeld Industries, months ago now, Nen had kept the habit of stopping by the café and doing the chalkboards while she had a cup of tea and chatted with Jick between customers. Eventually, he invited her back to the kitchen. It was the closest she had to a home base. It wasn't just that he had chosen not to humiliate her when he had the chance. Jick had given her work when she couldn't pay for lunch. He had seemed genuinely interested, had wished her well. He watched her with a spark of curiosity, but didn't pry. He took her questions.

She was early today, arriving before the café opened for lunch, and she was lucky Jick was in the dining room when she tapped on the window. He wouldn't have heard her from the back. He pulled the door open and jerked his head toward the kitchen. "Come on in," he said. "You catch me in the thick of things. I might put you to work."

“What are you making?”

“Leftover Pie.”

“Does that mean made out of leftovers, or pie that will be leftovers?”

Jick drew his brows together, as if unsure whether the question was serious. “My pie is delicious. There will be no leftovers.”

Nen laughed and followed him to the kitchen.

“Made out of,” Jick continued. “It’s basically a way to use up eggs.” He began chopping greens. There was a plate of shredded chicken on the counter, some dubious-looking cheese, milk ready to curdle. “The idea is to clean out the larder, nothing perishable held over. What doesn’t get used elsewhere can go into the breadfish mold. Some people buy stuff to put in it, make it just how they want, but I try to be honest. I use things up.”

“I’m sure it’s delectable,” Nen said diplomatically. She pulled out the stool Jick kept in the corner and sat down. Jick wore his customary striped apron, the kitchen its customary ordered chaos, turned up a notch or two—dough on the pastry boards and half a dozen bowls and plates spread around him on the counter, this and that pulled out of the fridge. Nen smelled lemon, always a good sign. She loved Jick’s ginger lemon tea.

Jick smiled at her. “Update the boards for me—make Leftover Pie sound fresh and amazing—and I’ll give you a slice when it comes out of the oven. You can judge for yourself.” Historically, he told her, Fishtide followed the last full moon of the year, but the holiday had eventually been fixed as the last Friday in December. People observed a juice fast on the Wednesday prior, and the housecleaning happened two weeks before that. Symbolic participation was important—even a person who might have weekly cleaners come in would take a stab at their own Fishtide clear-out, assembling a box of clutter to discard.

“Mrs. Zinfeld invited me, but she also made me feel like an idiot.” Nen paused. She felt disloyal, criticizing behind her back. Mrs. Zinfeld treated Nen like an educated foreigner: smart enough, but not well informed, as if she had a competent yet strangely insufficient grasp of the language. “Not an idiot,” Nen amended. “But she’s at a different level than . . .” She bit her lip. Than what? She had no comparison. “More than I ever was,” she finished.

Jick nodded. “An older lady like Mrs. Zinfeld, a bigrag like her, probably pulls out all the stops.”

“She said dressy.”

“There you go. Pass me the black pepper, will you?”

Nen found the wooden peppermill on the shelf. “What about you?” Nen had never asked. It wasn’t that she hadn’t wondered—she had—but she hadn’t wanted to intrude. She regretted that now. Jick was patient, seldom judgmental, but he managed to project openness without revealing much about himself.

“What about me?”

“Do you pull out all the stops?”

Jick shook his head. “Just the usual.” Which told her exactly nothing. Jick’s hair had grown, but was still cropped close. His long fingers were dusty with pastry flour.

“My family never fasted,” Nen told Jick, a bald-faced lie (she had no idea if her family had fasted or not), but one that felt true enough; fasting was certainly foreign to her own inclinations. What was the benefit? Suffering just to suffer, a whole city—a whole country, assuming North Benton’s traditions reflected national norms—gritting their teeth in stolid determination?

“It’s a partial fast. I think most people eat a cracker or two. It’s not like anyone’s checking. But I’ll be closed. People don’t come in, and serving food wouldn’t be worth the flak. It may not be a religious practice, but there’s no point taking on the bad press of going against it.” He sniffed the

bowl of cheese, decided it was safe, and crumbled it into his batter. “I hate the sham frugality,” Jick went on, stirring vigorously. “I’m surprised they don’t sell pre-fab clear-out jumble baskets.”

Nen laughed. “You mean some old clothes or chipped dishes to throw away? I could use one of those—my apartment’s practically empty. I mean, it’s fully furnished—overflowing—but everything belongs to Mrs. Zinfeld.” Nen picked up a dishtowel and began to fold it, smoothing the fabric into a smaller and smaller square.

Jick tasted the filling, nodding to himself in private approval. “Maybe she’ll share her jumble,” he said solemnly, but then he cracked a smile.

“Very funny.”

“Fish or mold?” Jick asked abruptly. He picked up a ball of dough resting on the pastry board. Nen looked at him blankly.

“At Mrs. Zinfeld’s.” He stretched the dough carefully, laid it over the pie plate. “Some people do fish, some do the fishmold.” *Mold*—the name suggested spoiled leftovers more than culinary art. Nen stifled a laugh, but Jick’s face was grim. “I bet she does both,” he said after a moment.

“I guess I’ll find out. Why Fishtide, anyway?”

Jick paused in his dough trimming, one hand full of scraps. “Your family never—”

Nen cut him off. “No.”

“It marks the Fishtide Miracle. Long time ago—a hundred years, two hundred? Maybe longer.”

Fishtide, he told her, was the biggest of the king tides, a tide before memory, beyond possibility. (A king tide, Nen had already learned, was an unusually high spring tide—meaning a tide right after a new or a full moon, when there was the greatest difference between high and low water.) Two or three years of drought—one of the very first Warning Droughts, though that was clear only in hindsight—had been broken by heavy rain early enough in the season that harvests were good. Better than good, they were record-breaking. Then came the tide.

Fish were left stranded on shore and people hurried to gather them. The miracle was that the tide receded only after daybreak, hours later than it should have; while it left many large fish high and dry, daylight allowed people time to harvest them. It was a feast of salvaged abundance. Part of the celebration was the sense of expenditure and plenty within a culture that had become frugal, concerned with enforcing and requiring frugality in others.

“It was a long time ago,” Jick said. “The holiday’s been through a few different versions. Or the celebration has evolved.” Traditionally, there had been a giant fish, a great corvina—the biggest the host could afford—along with dishes to represent earth (mycoccine, root vegetables) and air (poultry). Social climbers had notoriously overspent, even gone into debt for the banquet. Then came the near collapse of most important fisheries. For decades, people had to make do with a replica, a fish formed with whatever they could manage. Gelatin, bread cut into intricate scales—people ran with it. Even after fisheries substantially recovered, fish remained expensive; many families stuck with the replicas, preparing a fish-shaped casserole of stale bread and mycoccine.

“My family . . .” Jick trailed off.

“What?” Nen felt a soft envy, an upwelling of that old hollow feeling, and wished she could remember something of her own. She couldn’t remember anyone, but she felt certain she hadn’t always been alone; felt a kind of curtain or backstop, though it was vague and undefined.

“My grans used to farm out by the evaporation fields. Fishtide was a stretch. I got pretty good at making fish scales out of dry bread and gelatin,” Jick said.

The idea of a giant fish built out of bread struck Nen as funny, but Jick wasn’t smiling at the memory. “Comes in handy now, I bet,” Nen said.

Jick rubbed at his jaw, smudging his face with flour. “Rankles me sometimes, how people make the fishmold from scratch. You can find recipes—bake a certain bread, sauté the mushrooms, two cups of cheese, have fresh herbs to hand. It’s all a big party. No reverence.”

Nen remembered the picture she had seen at Mrs. Zinfeld's, when she'd helped with the sorting, two young women wading at the salt lake. "Do you go home for Fishtide? Do you visit?"

"No one to visit. My grans finally sold up. It's all under water by now, or else salt pan. No one wanted to go back to look. Hold this." He handed Nen a metal tray. "Keep it level. Both hands." When the tray was stable, he set the pie plates on it and turned to open the oven, then took the tray from her. "So where are you from? Where did you grow up?"

"A small town," Nen answered. "We moved a lot. It's fuzzy." Which was true and not true. It was certainly fuzzy, and not for lack of trying. She must have come from somewhere. She'd become practiced at keeping her doubts to herself, pretending she recalled things when her mind's eye offered not even a blank screen where memories failed to project. It wasn't only other people's impatience that confounded her. It was her own ignorance, memories she couldn't even invent, because there was nothing to make them out of. Nen had made a kind of peace with uncertainty, but holiday preparations brought it crashing back. She'd gone over the scrap of paper with its handwritten list again and again. She bought a basket of raspberries, thinking the fruit might jar something loose; they were delicious, but there was no flash of insight. The void she'd felt the first night at Mrs. Zinfeld's, that sharp-edged hollow, as if she were the outer container for a damaged vase—that was all she had for a Fishtide clear-out. She'd felt the empty, chipped glass that night and ever since, skirting the edges, peering over the rim as if it were a well. She could never see the bottom, so she never made a wish. That's what she wanted to toss out before Fishtide, what she needed to get rid of, but she could hardly say that aloud. Or maybe she could. Maybe Jick would understand, be able to help. Or maybe it would be the thing that would push him away.

Mrs. Zinfeld hadn't asked Nen to help with the clear-out. Not ahead of time. Stepping into thin winter sunshine, Nen had met her backing out her front door, tugging a heavy sack with both hands. "Trying to get a skim ahead," Mrs. Zinfeld explained.

“Let me,” Nen had insisted, reaching for the bag. And then, before she could stop herself, “What’s in here, rocks?”

“A lot accumulates in a year.”

“I guess I don’t have much,” Nen said. She’d heard all the jokes, *sweep it out with the tide*, aging parents who kept every scrap, exes tossing out treasures without provocation.

Mrs. Zinfeld smiled. “Of course you don’t. You just moved in.” She swung the bag toward Nen with too much force, almost carrying herself headfirst onto the concrete, then overcorrected, in time to save her forehead but without enough control to keep from sitting down hard. The bag didn’t split—sturdy canvas meant to be emptied again and again.

“Sit for a minute,” Nen said, laying a hand on Mrs. Zinfeld’s shoulder as the older woman struggled to stand. “Just breathe, take inventory.”

“I know what’s in the bag,” Mrs. Zinfeld sputtered.

“I meant of yourself. Nothing broken?”

Mrs. Zinfeld pursed her lips in disapproval. By now, Nen recognized the expression for a delaying tactic. She waited. “Right,” Mrs. Zinfeld said. “All present and accounted for.”

“Good.” Nen helped her up. Mrs. Zinfeld leaned on the porch railing, catching her breath. “Still okay?” Nen asked.

“Sore.”

“Let’s get you inside.”

“The clear-out.” Mrs. Zinfeld waved at the sack, squat and accusatory on the ground below them. Nen felt as if it were watching her, knew that was crazy but it didn’t change the feeling.

“Where does it go?”

“Down to the corner.” Mrs. Zinfeld was panting, her face a faintly purple shade of gray. She took another breath—Nen saw the effort it cost. “There’s more to follow. I want it there in time for

Friday's extra pickup. I felt due for a more thoroughgoing sweep this year. Maybe it was the sight of our headquarters swarmed with protesters."

"Let me take it," Nen said. "Then I'll help you finish up."

The bag was much too heavy to imagine Mrs. Zinfeld lugging it to the collection point at the end of the block. Nen was surprised she'd gotten as far as the porch. She was tempted to look inside, came as close as setting it down in front of the bin, but she looked over her shoulder and there was Mrs. Zinfeld, watching. Nen gave her a wave and heave-ho, she upended the bag, tipping out the contents unexamined. What was she hoping to find? Just anything. Some kind of surprise.

The giant bin was emptied into a silent electric truck every two weeks. Now it was overflowing and smelly, even with the extra pickups. For as obsessed with reuse as everyone seemed, they found more than enough to throw away.

"You'll come for Fishtide Eve, won't you?" Mrs. Zinfeld said as soon as Nen was back within earshot. Her color was better. She had waited on the doorstep, as if she hadn't trusted Nen to lug the heavy bag all the way to the drop-off.

"Yes, thank you. Still catching your breath?"

"All nobby," Mrs. Zinfeld said, her voice steadier.

"Is your daughter coming for the holiday? I'd love to meet her."

The steel shutter of Mrs. Zinfeld's face slammed shut. "She'll go to her husband's family. I gather his family is more relaxed. *Laid back* is the way Mara put it. Everyone on a fainting couch, I suppose. No sense of occasion." It was as if Nen had wheedled the words out of her, but she had only waited.

Nen tried to think of something tactful, but came up blank, nothing better than a bland, "Yeah, special occasions . . ." that she left hanging somewhere shy of a question.

Mrs. Zinfeld grunted. "Mara—the name means bitter. It suits her."

“You couldn’t know that when you named her,” Nen objected. Mrs. Zinfeld was the one who sounded bitter. Nen felt she should defend Mara, some vague solidarity of the younger generation, but for all Nen knew, she had parents of her own she was neglecting. Or maybe she was an orphan.

She felt things *now*. She felt hopeful and proud of her redesigned sweeper. Felt uneasy and promiseful and secretive and alert after that day in the basement. She felt, always, as if something were about to happen. But she also felt lonely in her little apartment. She didn’t miss anyone specifically. You can’t miss what you never had, she’d heard someone say, but obviously you could be sad about never having had it, whatever it was. She’d been around this circle a few times, but it never got any better, never changed.

“No, I suppose not.” Mrs. Zinfeld paused, half smiled. “Even better would have been a name that meant *I told you so*.”

“Cassandra?” Nen wondered if her own name meant anything. It was the one firm thing she knew about herself, but she didn’t know who had chosen it for her, or why.

Mrs. Zinfeld considered. “Possibly.” She waved for Nen to follow her into the house, stopped inside the door. “I looked your name up,” she said, as if reading Nen’s thoughts. “Apparently, it means deep hope or ancient waters.”

“I didn’t know that.” Nen was talking to Mrs. Zinfeld’s back.

“That’s what the name book told me. I came across it when I was cleaning. I don’t remember buying it, but that happens with books. It’s sort of a trap, once you start looking up names.”

“Huh. Well, I don’t know how applicable any of that is, but hope sounds good.” Hope might well be something deep—solid, murky, too far to see the bottom; ocean blue, midnight blue.

Mrs. Zinfeld stepped into the living room, allowing Nen to follow. The house was neat as always, crowded now with half-sorted boxes. Mostly pictures by the look of it.

“We always do dressy,” Mrs. Zinfeld said. She glanced at Nen’s feet. The weather was getting cold—Nen had replaced her sandals with shoes. Her nails, no longer polished, were hidden. “Mara never liked dressing up. And she never wanted anything to do with the family business. Sticky-tape technology, she calls it. She’s an engineer, like her father, but she’s interested in preponderant solar, in what she terms real change.” Mrs. Zinfeld sighed. “She was among the first to poke holes.”

“Poke holes?” Nen knew she sounded like a foolish echo. She took the seat opposite the sofa, a too-soft armchair she feared might swallow her up. Nen felt she had become a kind of replacement, though not a wholly satisfactory one, given her blank ignorance of the past. But the blank slate likely had a certain appeal.

“She’d have been out with those protesters, mark my words,” Mrs. Zinfeld said. She sat down on the sofa, not bothering to shift the papers she had stacked so neatly. They tilted against her, slick paper sliding and slipping. It seemed uncharacteristic in the controlled, authoritative Mrs. Zinfeld, careless in a way Nen wasn’t used to seeing. Maybe she was more upset than she looked.

Nen wasn’t sure how she could help. A modest enough house from the outside, Mrs. Zinfeld’s home belied her wealth. Nen knew she held onto things out of affection or frugality, not because she couldn’t afford to buy replacements. Mrs. Zinfeld had done most of the sorting before Nen got there, but she paused on some of the pictures, moved one or two from one pile to another.

She held one photo out for Nen to see. Nen leaned forward, fighting for traction against the chair, which seemed to get softer by the minute. Shadowy brown but sharply focused, the photo showed two young women in short dresses—loose skirt over puffy pants—up to their ankles in water. Ocean, lake? It wasn’t clear. Nen looked at the photo carefully, turned it over; nothing inscribed on the back. “Where did people swim, back when they did?” Nen asked.

“They’re not swimming,” Mrs. Zinfeld said.

“They look like they might,” Nen said.

“In those dresses?”

“Who are they?” Nen tried instead.

Mrs. Zinfeld held the photo up to the light. “The one on the left is my grand-gran. That’s at the salt lake. It’s all evaporation fields out there now. Too salty for swimming, even if they wanted to. I guess maybe it always was.”

“What was the land before evaporation fields?”

“Wasteland, mostly, ancient seas—though people lived there, lived nearby. There were some farms.”

“Maybe it would have been better to leave the wilderness wild, the uninhabitable uninhabited.”

“Possibly.” Mrs. Zinfeld stared at the photo a long time before she set it aside.

Over the course of the afternoon, Nen took two more loads to the drop. It was easy enough for her to dump the stuff—they weren’t her memories. She left Mrs. Zinfeld sitting on her sofa, holding a handful of photographs.

“We’ll gather at seven,” Mrs. Zinfeld said as Nen left. “On Fishtide Eve.” Mara Zinfeld might live far away and go to her husband’s family, but elegant, well-connected Eleanor Zinfeld was never going to spend a holiday all by herself, just the cats and her own sad breadfish mold.

Dressy didn't describe anything in Nen's wardrobe. She needed to find something to wear. When Lucy pointed her to her favorite shop, New and Vintage, *We Cater to Class*, Nen almost asked her to go along, for company. But Lucy intimidated her—even after the day in the basement, the lurch and the handprint. Shared secrets were themselves a divide: the unspoken became unspeakable. Nen wasn't sure what Lucy had seen, and she wasn't sure Lucy wouldn't get huffy about the holiday the way Cole had. With the holiday approaching, she went on her own.

The dress shop clerk was more bored than classy, chewing on the end of a pencil and working a crossword. She looked amused when Nen twirled out of the changing room in a floor-length poof that made her look like a landlocked mermaid. The three-way mirror only made it worse, a three-headed mermaid losing her balance as she minced along, hobbled by satin scales and turquoise netting. The clerk took pity on her, jutting her chin in an inverted nod toward the opposite rack, where the sheen of midnight blue velvet exerted its own gravitational pull. Nen tried on the velvet sheath, the color of the sky at night, and bought it, not minding the price. Later, at Mrs. Zinfeld's when the fish came out, served with fanfare and the paper crown of the king tide king salmon, she thought of that first mermaid dress and wondered if she shouldn't have bought it instead, to keep to the ocean theme. But it wasn't a costume party. That was one of her difficulties—she had trouble knowing what to take seriously. She remembered Jick's lament about the lack of reverence and was glad she'd chosen the velvet.

Mrs. Zinfeld wore a black lace dress, mid-calf, and sparkly bangles Nen had never seen, her hair shellacked into a helmet of matronly decorum. It was a small house for entertaining, but Mrs. Zinfeld was a practiced host, introducing guests to one another as they came in, offering a word or two to help them mingle, an invitation to try the pickled mycoccine (Nen chewed hard and got it down). Nen was determined to keep track of at least a few of the names: neighbors Ben and Nancy

Weymouth, and their children, Bradley and Alice; Mrs. Zinfeld's old friend Aria Moss. Aria was tall, with silver hair past her waist in three heavy braids. There was a tiny woman in bright red wool whose name Nen never caught, and a couple she thought she might have seen at Jick's, a man she vaguely recognized from Zinfeld headquarters.

Heads turned when Mrs. Zinfeld introduced Merlin Wicket—*yes, that Merlin Wicket, the croquet champion*. The old man (not *that* old) dipped his head, acknowledged his early success, admitted that, indeed, he had changed his name. “I was born Walden,” he told Nen. “I changed my name before I turned pro.” Nen smiled and nodded as if that meant anything to her. She didn't follow croquet, but evidently Mrs. Zinfeld's other guests did. Wicket had spent the last several decades as an executive at Zinfeld Industries. That was what interested Nen. She had heard of Merlin Wicket, not always in the most complimentary terms. (“Not so much old guard as prehistoric,” Lucy had said.)

“Nen's been working on the sweeper redesign,” Mrs. Zinfeld said, bringing the two of them together before turning to greet another guest.

“Then we have you to thank for a good deal,” Wicket said generously. He had a quick, spry way of moving. Impish might have applied when he was younger, but his suit aimed for distinguished—Wicket was the only man present to have gone so far as black tie, complemented by pristine white shoes (croquet shoes, Nen learned later) and breezy silk scarf.

“I guess we're still waiting to see how well it works,” Nen said. She smiled modestly, acknowledged his praise. The protest slogan nagged at her. *Check your foundations!* She wanted to ask Merlin Wicket about that, ask how he planned to respond, if he planned to respond at all.

“You must have been present the day of the . . . incident,” Wicket said.

“So many incidents,” Nen agreed. “Blackouts, picketers. Earthquakes.”

“We don't get earthquakes,” the senior director corrected. Again, Nen wondered if that lurch she had felt so clearly—and knew that Cole and Lucy, at the very least, had felt as well—had been a

joint hallucination, a shared mirage (impossible), even an engineered bolt to move them toward action.

“Well,” Nen said, taking a chance, “there’s a lot to see at Zinfeld. The headquarters building’s history is so much richer than I could have imagined. So—well, layered, I guess is the way to put it.”

“Indeed.” Wicket’s bearing grew a shade more formal. “And what about this rich history, as you call it, has so impressed you?”

“The whole geography of North Benton, really,” Nen said, falling back on cheerful, innocent, starry-eyed. “How the riverbank was gradually developed, how the city built up slowly—”

“Inexorably,” he finished for her, somewhat to her annoyance, but it seemed best to hear what he might have to say. “Inexorably,” he repeated. “That is how the founders framed it. Like destiny. Baby steps, more baby steps. Onward and upward. Care with vision, always.”

“Exactly,” Nen said, utterly frustrated, no idea where to take this empty path of nonsense he had lobbed her. She decided not to give up so easily. “Have you seen the old maps, then?”

“Of course.” He looked at her more closely, suspicion rising. “Don’t tell me you’re one of those reclamation skeptics.”

“I don’t think so,” Nen said, half truthfully. “I’m still learning. Curious, really.”

“Of course,” he said again, just a hint of avuncular indulgence to encourage her to move on.

Nen said, “I heard this weird rumor—you’ve probably heard it, too—that there was a break-in at headquarters.”

Wicket raised his eyebrows. “Oh?”

“That same day. The day of the incidents. No one seemed to know who they were or what they took, something about blueprints, or maybe it was tide charts.”

It was a shot in the dark, and it missed, or else Merlin Wicket was much more adept at this type of game than she was. It stood to reason. He had turf to defend, years of practice. Nen was

dabbling, except that when the building lurched with her in it, the whole thing became personal. She had been in the basement, had left a handprint, had helped Lucy stuff her bag with contraband files. She had breathed in the stinging poison, even though only she could smell it, as if it were the memory of something that had never happened.

Merlin Wicket's smile left his eyes, but not his lips. "Rumors can be dangerous things," he said.

"So you don't think it's true?"

"That there was a break-in, under cover of the protesters' provocation?"

"Or maybe it was to distract from the protest?"

Wicket's demeanor grew colder yet. "I don't think I follow."

"It all seemed too convenient. So much happened at once." Nen was feeling her way.

"Are you a reader of detective fiction, Ms. Renner?"

"No." Nen was surprised. She couldn't remember the last time she'd read a novel. Of any sort.

Wicket was smooth. His smile looked genuine when he said, "Alas. I thought I'd found a kindred spirit. I find I often look for explanations where there are none to be had, plots that come out neatly, a guiding hand more powerful than accident or chance. I'm often disappointed." He looked crestfallen. Nen almost patted his arm. *I don't trust you*, she thought.

"Are you monopolizing our Nen?" Mrs. Zinfeld asked then, appearing beside them.

"I wondered about the headquarters building," Nen said.

"Built before our time. Of course, we made substantial renovations. Reorganization of work spaces, that sort of thing." Had Mrs. Zinfeld been listening? Wicket was nodding. Mrs. Zinfeld had been in charge once, but she wasn't anymore. "A good deal has transpired since I was active at the company," she added. Active when you want to be, Nen nearly said, but she was beholden, her job and her home, and she liked Mrs. Zinfeld. She had seen her frightened on the front steps the day she slipped, had seen the way she cradled her cats in her arms (Nen worried the animals were too heavy

for her to lift safely, except for the small one), and the sorrow in her eyes when she found the photographs of her daughter at school.

“A lot of water under the bridge,” Nen said. The phrase popped into her mind as the obvious response; it fell into the conversation with a thud. Heads swiveled. Catching on for once, Nen tried to make light with a soft shrug and mild chuckle, “Time passes, things change.” And wasn’t she the old, wise wonder? Nen kicked herself—water flowing under the bridge unencumbered, unclaimed; that was a failing, not a given. But the deflection worked, attention moved on. As usual, the gaffe was bigger in Nen’s mind than in anyone else’s.

Mrs. Zinfeld touched Nen’s elbow. “You must meet Aria,” she said. Wicket bowed and slipped out of Nen’s reach. Nen let Mrs. Zinfeld introduce her friend.

Aria Moss had recently returned from a year in the rainforest. She was writing a treatise on birds and birdwatchers—“I am as interested in the watchers as the watched”—and had come back to North Benton to settle down at last.

“At eighty-two?” Mrs. Zinfeld asked, eyes twinkling. “So young?”

Aria laughed. “Yes, at eighty-two. Unless I get restless.” She wore a glittering floor-length green dress, like a snakeskin. Not too form-fitting, but it moved with her. Standing beside her, Nen realized Aria wasn’t as tall as she had first thought. Something about the dress elongated her. And maybe it wasn’t snakelike so much as mossy, bright moss blooming underwater, like her name.

“Aria’s like a sister to me,” Mrs. Zinfeld said with a chuckle.

“We go all the way back,” Aria agreed.

Back to what? Nen wanted to ask. But now she knew how old Mrs. Zinfeld was.

“I’d like to have an old friend like that,” Nen said wistfully.

“You have to grow old first, dear,” Mrs. Zinfeld laughed, but Aria looked at Nen more closely, met her eyes with a nod.

“Have you been getting salty drinking water out of the kitchen tap?” Nancy Weymouth was saying to the person next to her as Nen approached. Nen had a glass of wine in one hand, plate in another, and was looking for a place to set something down.

“No,” the other woman said. “That seems worrying.”

“Doesn’t it? Maybe it’s old pipes, I don’t know.” Seeing Nen, Nancy stepped to one side, leaving her room to reach a small table.

“Is there a pattern? Does it happen often?” Nen asked, as if she’d been part of the conversation all along.

The woman in the red dress laughed. “Aren’t you the scientist! Wasn’t salt seepage part of that big sweeper protest?”

“It was,” Nen said. It wasn’t her protest—she had nothing to protect.

“My cousin Meredith was a water-sweeper,” Nancy said, changing course.

“Was she?” Red dress asked politely.

“She had to quit because of the baby.”

Nen tried to recall what Martina had said about her family. She had mentioned a child, possibly entrusting a hapless stranger with a secret. Maybe she had seen her own need to be recognized mirrored in Nen’s confusion.

“She was disappointed she never got to try the new sweeper,” Nancy said, then turned to Nen. “You’re the one taking care of the cats.”

“Lucky!” Alice Weymouth stood behind her mother, the youngest person in the room, in a soft yellow dress that looked a size too big and shiny black shoes.

“I live in the garage apartment,” Nen explained.

“Bradley loved feeding the cats,” Nancy said. “But we feel Alice is over-scheduled. She needs time to practice if she’s going to excel.”

Nen nodded. It seemed vaguely familiar—practice, schedule, excel—but she couldn’t put her finger on why and didn’t really care. She wanted to know about the saltwater in the taps. She remembered the picture Mrs. Zinfeld had found. Too salty to swim, too salty to farm. Maybe too salty to stay put? Cole and Lucy had talked about women moving in search of jobs.

The most outgoing of the cats wove between their ankles then, a black, pouncing energy ball. “So cute!” Alice cooed.

“That’s Fizz,” Nen said, allowing herself to be sidetracked.

Alice was impressed. “Ohh! How do you tell them apart?”

“It’s the other two that look alike.” Nen looked around the room. “They’re probably hiding.” It was too late—for now—to drag the conversation back to water problems, but maybe she could make an ally of Alice. “What do you practice?” she asked. “When you have time.”

“Track,” Alice said. “Hurdles and discus.”

Nen looked at her again. Something about being near the girl made it hard to stand still. Long legged, sturdy torso—a lanky powerhouse. She’d likely heard the words far too often.

“Alice plays the clarinet,” her mother supplied. “Surely you’ve heard her when the windows are open.”

Nen had heard no such thing, but this did not seem the moment to say so. “I probably have,” she said, waving her hand the way a conductor might, if she had lost her place in the score.

“Shall we move to the table?” Mrs. Zinfeld made her way around the room, stopping at one group and then another. The guests gathered in her wake, lining up to take their places for the meal.

“That is a beautiful dress,” Nancy said to Nen as they started toward the dining room.

“Like the sky at midnight,” Merlin Wicket agreed, sliding into line beside her. Where did he come from? Nen thought, and wondered how much of the previous conversation he had heard.

“All you need is a sprinkling of stars,” Aria said. Nen smoothed her dress, feeling self-conscious; the warm brush of velvet under her hands was a comfort.

The table was laid formally, a family’s worth of heirlooms on a linen cloth that had obviously taken time to press. That would explain the square black coasters at each place, though the glasses were set beside them. Water pitchers stood on the sideboard for after the meal. Thick, stubby beeswax candles set in shallow silver cups lit the room, scenting the air with honey. Tiny white lights were strung high on the walls.

The room should have been too small for the number of guests, but they sat close together and the effect was more of warmth than of crowding. Mrs. Zinfeld made welcoming remarks, then turned to the sideboard behind her and passed a shallow basket that clinked with the sound of thin dishes knocking together. Each guest took something from the basket; when it came to Nen (she’d been trying to look discreetly over the edge) she reached in and found chalk, cool and dusty to the touch. She looked to the guests on either side of her. Most people took two pieces of chalk. Some took one. So many colors—Nen took three, then laid them beside her plate and waited.

A ritual blessing recited in concert, another speech. Formulaic murmurings—out with the old, in with the new.

All kind blessings to those who abide.
 Care and abundance, abhorrence of waste
 As the tides relent and the waters subside.
 If stranded, may we be harvested for good,
 If sheltered, may we breathe anew.
 Let the retreating tide wash clear our vanities and boasts,
 Let the shore be clean to start afresh.

They raised their glasses. “A rich Fishtide to you and yours!” Toasts moved around the table to the left, each guest tapping the glass of the person beside her, then nodding to the table at large.

Merlin Wicket, seated at the foot of the table, picked up his coaster and began to color it in, edge to edge, with green. The other guests followed. Nen picked up her coaster as well, the coaster she now understood was a slate, and began to draw a flower. Jick had not explained about the slates—maybe he assumed she knew.

The table fell quiet, then quieter—first the pause in conversation as people worked on their slates, the soft *schrick* of chalk marking stone, then the quiet falling away of the chalk scratching, as one by one they completed their task. Then only Nen was drawing. She looked up, saw Aria looking at her slate. The slate was tiny, but Nen had drawn a miniature jungle, leaves and vines and blossoms. Most of the slates around the table were simple sheets of color, green or blue or pale orange over the flat black stone. Nen flushed. She had overstepped again.

“How lovely,” Aria said. It was clear no one else wanted to say anything. It seemed in questionable taste to notice another’s slate, and yet Nen’s was so unusual, so far outside the norm, someone had to speak.

The neighbors’ daughter—Alice—had been carefully schooled; she was the one to say, flipping her braid off her shoulder, “I thought it was bad manners to look at other people’s slates. It’s supposed to be private, what you write.”

“Hush,” her father said quickly. “Not now.”

Aria recognized Nen’s discomfort and leaned closer. She didn’t ask why Nen didn’t know, only whispered, “People used to write down the bad, whatever they wanted to leave behind, but they kept trying to hide it—shame, embarrassment. People even tried to write in code. Now most people just color in the square, or maybe add a word or two, a heart or a flower or a teardrop.”

A second basket passed, with tiny squares of flannel—obviously reclaimed from old shirts or sheets. Each guest took one. Mrs. Zinfeld glanced at her wristwatch. “I am so grateful you are all here,” she said. “Grateful to share this moment, to wipe the slate, but also to remember. May the

coming year be a full one, for each of you.” As she finished, everyone raised the cloths and wiped their slates clean, swiftly but meticulously. Easy come, easy go. Nen wiped off her jungle, though it made her a little sad. Alice, she noticed, erased her own slate in one fast swipe.

And then it was midnight. The ancient grandfather clock in Mrs. Zinfeld’s hallway began to chime, and beyond that, bells all over town, bells Nen had never noticed, in towers she didn’t think were even real. The bells had a tinny note, like a broadcast recording.

“Care and abundance,” Mrs. Zinfeld said, raising her glass.

“Care and abundance,” the others chorused, raising their glasses in turn.

“Present company and absent friends,” Merlin Wicket added, drawing a laugh. It didn’t seem funny to Nen, but maybe it was something not usually said.

Mrs. Zinfeld wasn’t laughing, either. Nen thought she was blinking hard, but all she said was, “Let’s eat!”

Under the table, Nen slid her foot forward and felt a soft weight followed by a meow. The whole household was ready for fish.

“Would you help me serve?” Mrs. Zinfeld asked Wicket.

“You’re dressed for it,” said the man Nen half recognized from the Zinfeld offices.

“Croquet is my game, not badminton.” Wicket spoke with an edge to his voice, but he held the platter as Mrs. Zinfeld placed a portion on each guest’s plate.

“I have never seen such a fish,” Nancy Weymouth breathed.

“We’ve never had both,” Bradley said.

“I never had either,” Nen said, taking a risk.

“This is your first Fishtide?” Alice’s disbelief was absolute. Nen fumbled for words.

Mrs. Zinfeld came to her rescue. “Nen’s family didn’t celebrate,” she said, in a tone that brooked no opposition.

Dishes passed. The fishmold Jick had told her about, and the king salmon with its paper crown. One of each, the giant fish and the replica. More mycoccine, now chopped with onions and sweet sausage as filling for a braided loaf. Pickled beets and broccoli. Nen's plate filled.

The salmon was delicious, rich but not oily. The braided loaf was tasty enough, aside from the never-chewable mycoccine. No one else seemed to have trouble, but Nen was sure a rubber tire would be more yielding. The fishmold was awful—though if it wasn't intended to resemble a fish other than visually, it was fine. The tiny bread scales were impressively detailed, slicked gray and silver. The thing even had a face, and what struck Nen as a wistful smile. The eye was a giant caper, but the dish was bland as cold oatmeal and the color of dishwater.

"Nancy helped with the fishmold," Mrs. Zinfeld said before Nen could embarrass herself with a reaction. The Weymouths did not usually eat quite so fancy. They were neighbors, just down the block, but of more modest means than Mrs. Zinfeld. Nancy had not sought out one of the gourmet recipes Jick grumbled about. She had used something up.

"Mmm," Nen murmured. Not quite soggy, definitely damp.

With the exception of Nancy's fishmold, the flavors of each dish were complex and layered. Platters passed for second portions, plates were emptied. Conversation rose and fell and finally subsided to sighs of contented admiration. No one could eat another bite. Unless. Aria looked to Mrs. Zinfeld. "Yes?"

"Please." Mrs. Zinfeld turned to the table. "Aria returned from her travels just in time," she said. "No one puffs sparkle-custard like Aria."

The lights dipped. The younger members of the party twitched with anticipation. Aria slipped from her chair as Merlin Wicket lit a set of sputtering candles. Not trick candles, these were tiny sparklers shooting stars from their fuses. Nen wondered if they might not explode. But then she noticed people were chanting. Even the most distinguished among them, softly but distinctly: *cake!*

cake! cake! The candles burnt out their sparkle fanfare and began to glow solid yellow flames above their wicks, and in that warm winter glow, Aria emerged from the kitchen, bearing aloft a platter gleaming gold, a rising tower of cream puffs dipped in burnt caramel and misted with spun sugar fourteen inches around and easily twice as high, with more than a slight resemblance to the cherished Zinfeld office tower. Here the foundation was a mound of crystalized fruit.

Mrs. Zinfeld served. The structure looked daunting—Nen wondered how she would cut the cake—but it was more a matter of disassembling than slicing. Mrs. Zinfeld used a silver pie-server to pry a few puffs off the top layer, then spooned up some of the extra cream. Once she'd begun, the work went quickly, two or three puffs to a plate.

It was extraordinary—light pastry, sweet cream, the crunch of burnt sugar, a tartness to the candied fruit. The musty, rubbery aftertaste of the mycoccine was driven from her mind.

“Go on, have seconds,” Mrs. Zinfeld urged. “It won't be as good tomorrow.”

“Abundance never is,” Aria purred.

After dinner, dessert, they returned to the living room for thimble-sized cups of thick, syrupy coffee even the children drank. Nen felt vaguely that there ought to be presents. Party favors, hard proof of attendance. She looked around, wondering who would be the first to say goodbye, but then Ben Weymouth's face twisted. Tossing back the last of his coffee, he swallowed hard. It was obvious he was trying to restrain himself, but then he blurted it out: “Isn't it a skim ironic how we're all here celebrating a retreating tide, the mercy of that tide pulling back—the seas relented, forever and ever amen—and meanwhile half the buildings on Edgewater are about to topple over?”

Nen's mouth dropped open. No one talked like that. Even the picketers had seemed more restrained. Instinctively, she turned to see Wicket's reaction. Merlin Wicket drew himself up, but said nothing. Mrs. Zinfeld looked faintly pleased. Nen wondered how she could goose things along. She had promised Lucy she would try to learn what she could.

“One has already toppled,” Aria Moss said. Heads turned. “Surely this is not news?” She spread her hands, palms open in disbelief.

It was not news, but the collapse of the West Building, in the same riverfront row as Zinfeld Industries, was the kind of catastrophe acknowledged only in whispers—no children within earshot, no sensitive souls.

Not news, but proof-positive Zinfeld Industries was in jeopardy as well. A crew had been brought in, seismic experts and architects who found the degree of tilt acceptable. Lucy was provided with proper blueprints. “The building’s safe,” Lucy allowed. “For now. But those walls are too wet. It’s time to move house.” Repairs were underway, daily monitoring. Protesters followed the repairs, the whine of the crane and clang of the scaffolding harmonizing with their chants. *Check your foundations! Check your support! All Work and No Pay.*

“There was no tide involved in the West Building tragedy,” Merlin Wicket said sternly.

“Who even cares? There’s no bank to the river, not really. Not anymore,” Ben said.

“Are you talking about the estuary, where they’re doing that restoration? Further downstream?” Nen asked. She’d heard about a project south of town, an attempt to restore an ecosystem damaged by years of landfill and farming.

“Right here in town,” Ben said.

“What do you mean?” Alice asked her father.

“It’s all just landfill,” he told her, more quietly.

“That was two hundred years ago,” Red Dress objected. “The Founders.”

“Why’s that not—” Alice started.

“That’s hardly news either,” Wicket cut her off.

“Don’t talk to my—”

“None of it’s news—because no one says anything, no one admits to anything,” Nen said.

“And what might they admit to?” Mrs. Zinfeld asked, her tone wary.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Ben counted off a tally on his fingers, “skimping on maintenance, misuse of funds, misleading the public . . .” He turned to Nen. “You were there, weren’t you? I saw you interviewed.” Nen nodded. She didn’t like to think about it—hadn’t let herself think about it, not much, but Ben was insisting. She tried to remember what she had said before it could be thrown back in her face, evidence for or against.

Wicket spoke before Nen could answer. “I understand your sweeper project is nearly wrapped up,” he said. She wondered then if it might not be time to quit, look for a job elsewhere, now that the redesign was completed. After all, she hadn’t been there long. It wasn’t her life’s work.

“Someone’s going to profit,” Ben said. “If not on the building still standing, on the insurance against its destruction. You know there’s insurance. Has to be.”

“Of course there is. That’s simply responsible practice.” Mrs. Zinfeld smiled, ever the hostess.

“But who’s responsible?” Ben pressed.

“Dad . . .” Alice hissed, clearly embarrassed.

“Perhaps we should all make for high ground,” Mrs. Zinfeld said mildly.

“Is there high ground?” Nen wondered. Mrs. Zinfeld herself was fond of saying North Benton and its surrounds were flatter than a griddlecake. The slope of the riverbank park was too low to count—too limited, too human scale—and in any event, it was a deliberate construction.

“The bigrags will find some,” Ben said.

Nancy stood, placing herself between her husband and Merlin Wicket. “This has been such a lovely holiday. Thank you,” she said to Mrs. Zinfeld, then turned toward the other guests. “A rich Fishtide to one and all.” Others followed, murmured thanks, shaking hands, gathering coats and wraps. Merlin Wicket was among the first to leave.

Watering Hole

“I’m thinking about putting in another pond,” Margaret said, “a small one. I found a used liner—tiny, barely a goldfish bowl. Well, obviously, bigger than that. But small. It makes the yard more hospitable, having water.”

“For people?” Nen asked. The two sat under the shade awning they had strung the week before, a great green sail of canvas stretched between the wall of the house and a pole sunk into the ground, just off the deck. The project had marked a kind of truce, making something together.

“Not for people. It wouldn’t be clean to drink.”

“Right.” That was obvious. Still, something about the idea of another pond—a bigger pond—felt familiar. A hint hovered at the edge of awareness—not their garden pond; something public.

“The place would feel cooler,” Margaret went on.

“Umm. More lush.”

“An oasis,” Margaret warmed to her topic. “A respite.”

Nen looked around the yard. Hating to mow, her mother had replaced grass with gravel or drought-tolerant groundcovers. Beds of herbs were edged with chipped plates set upright like a scalloped fence, drifts of perennials punctuated by bright ceramic pots (chipped kitchen bowls or teapots rescued from the trash). No color scheme—orange daylilies, blue catmint, the sagey-white of fuzzy lamb’s ears, a purple billow of Russian sage. “Where would it go?” Nen asked.

Margaret pointed. “To the left of the birdbath. Will you help?”

“Dig? I guess so. Can we have koi?” A pond seemed to cry out for fish.

“Do you know what those cost?”

“Are they expensive?” She’d never given it a thought.

“The fancy ones are.”

“I don’t need fancy. But there must be some that are basically big goldfish. Bargain koi.”

“Let’s look into it.” Margaret leaned forward, quick to take up any hint of enthusiasm from Nen, as if eager to overwrite her initial reluctance. “Do cougars eat koi?”

“Only the costly, gourmet ones.” Nen half expected her mother to go inside for a notepad, start a to-do list. “I don’t know about cougars,” she added more evenly. “Herons eat koi.”

The NATIVE SPECIES stickers were still for sale. Nen was still the cougar tamer. Even her mother thought so. It infuriated her, the reduction of anything unexplained to the cheesiest possible fake spirituality. She’d had enough of other people’s unwillingness or incapacity to entertain a connection she couldn’t fully articulate. She’d seen a reference to Bentondale in a travel review: *More than wildcats and lion whisperers*. Nen had not sent the animal mental messages or maps. She was not its friend. Yet they were both present—aware—together. Each occupied their own space, yet those spaces overlapped. There was a layering, a coexistence. The incident did not need to be explained away. It was real. Then it was over.

She had tried speaking up in that stupid interview. Had tried to hint at some kind of oneness with nature, humans taking their place among the creatures in the world, maybe a rung or two lower than they’d seen themselves, but she had only managed to show herself as one more flaky eco-freak. She’d called the Fish and Wildlife office for advice, only to have her judgment questioned yet again.

“You know, bobcats or coyotes, even the family dog, will often be mistaken for a cougar,” the man on the phone had told her.

“I don’t have a dog. And it was in my living room. I had a good view,” Nen had snapped. The cougar wasn’t her *cause*—it was an accident, a chance encounter. But it mattered to her. Still.

Nen noticed now that Margaret wasn’t reading the news. She wasn’t reading anything, hands clasped around her usual water glass. The better to keep an eye on me, Nen thought, then worried her mother couldn’t track as many details as she once had. The thought that her mother might be

aging hadn't crossed her mind before that day at the police station—*thanks, Officer!* Now Nen was on high alert, but trying to hide it. “No news?” she asked.

“Is good news,” Margaret finished, then seemed to grasp the worry behind Nen's question. “So much of the news is bad, corruption and wildfires and shootings. I needed a break.” Her voice was clogged; she cleared her throat with a low cough.

Nen waved at the cooler. “You're doing your bit,” she said. She sipped her tea, grimaced.

“Too much ginger? Is that the new one?”

Nen nodded. “It's not bad. But don't buy it again.” She set the tea down.

“It makes me sad that you don't even want to remember swimming,” Margaret said. She leaned back in her chair, but Nen saw how carefully she held herself. Too much depended on Nen's reply.

Nen took a breath. “I remember it. I don't want to do it.”

“But it seems like you're almost sorry you did it at all.” Margaret bit her lip. “Did something go wrong?” she asked cautiously, voice brittle.

“No.” Did she have to comfort her mother about this, too? Nen wasn't sure what her mother had in mind, didn't want to ask. “Can we talk about something else?”

“Of course. I was just remembering. It was just a thought.” Margaret set her glass down on the deck, pulled the elastic out of her hair and retwisted the bun.

Nen shook her head. “Melinda called. We can have our box back.”

Margaret turned. “She called you?”

“I answered the phone. She wasn't calling me specifically.”

The charity attendant was a friend of Margaret's. She had set the box aside when she heard what had happened. “In case it was important,” she had told Nen. “People do drop off the wrong box by mistake.” It was common, but it was also a way people started to show they were old, both able and unable to give things up, move on, get up, get rid. “I'm just as glad you picked up,” Melinda had

added. “Instead of your mother.” Nen didn’t tell Margaret that part. She didn’t want her mother to feel bad; she also didn’t want to prolong her own embarrassment by rehashing it all.

“So, Melinda heard,” Margaret said, waving her arm in a general way to suggest *the whole story*.

“Yeah. I mean, it was her place, right? The cops were there.”

“True.” Margaret’s forehead tensed; she pointed her toes, rotated her ankles, adjusted the lounge chair a notch, reining herself in. “Thank you for running interference,” Margaret said. “Even if that wasn’t really your plan.”

Nen looked at her, startled. Had her mother just asked for help? “Are you okay?”

“Someone else saw me,” Margaret admitted. “Before the cop showed up.”

“Shit, I knew this was a small town . . .” Nen trailed off.

“Concerned,” Margaret said. “Community.”

“Yeah, maybe. Watching out, or watching over?”

Margaret sighed. “Some of both, I suppose.”

“Who was it?”

“Your friend’s mother. Grandmother?” She gestured vaguely, conjuring a name. “The Native Species girl.”

It was Nen’s turn to object. “You mean Lacey? She’s not—”

“I’m not criticizing. I just recognized her, from the stickers table. So I told her it was for my costume—that I was looking for items for Lost Elizabethan Days.”

Nen laughed in spite of herself. “That can’t have helped.”

Margaret smiled. “Probably not. But better she think it was an artistic need than . . .” she paused. “Than lack of money,” she finished, an easy out.

“If people see you dressed up outside the shop, they’ll start calling again,” Nen warned. All those knowing looks at the police station, the concern in Melinda’s voice. She didn’t want to go through it.

“We’ve been doing Lost Elizabethan Days for years,” Margaret said. “It’s a local tradition.”

“I guess so.” Nen picked up her tea, took another swallow before she remembered how sharp it was. “How’d you pick the date, anyway?”

“Queen Elizabeth was born September 7—Elizabeth the First, obviously—and Anne Hathaway, Shakespeare’s wife—”

“I know who Anne Hathaway—”

“Anne Hathaway died on August 6th. It’s a season.”

“But why not only birthdays?”

“*Lost Elizabethans*.” Margaret brightened, her smile mischievous. “Did Melinda offer you the box, or only the contents?”

Nen looked at her mother sideways. “I assumed she meant the contents. Do you want the box?”

“No. That’s silly. And they were your things to give away.”

Her mother sounded so sad, Nen wanted to somehow make it better. “I loved swimming,” she said softly, as if that would help.

“But you don’t anymore.”

“No.”

“What about lifesaving? If you don’t want to swim yourself, you could—”

“No.” Once, Nen had felt busy and determined; now she had no forward momentum. She could live with that. Day followed on day—time did not require her personal ambition to edge it forward. That this didn’t bother Nen bothered her mother extremely.

“All that lifeguard training. All those hours.” Margaret’s expression made it clear she regretted her words as soon as she’d spoken, but Nen wasn’t inclined to let her off the hook.

“The skills will be there if I need them. Supposedly, it’s like riding a bicycle.” A cliché Nen regretted in her turn—bicycle wasn’t the most tactful allusion—but again, it was too late.

“Just thank Melinda,” Margaret said shortly. “Or I will.”

Her mother’s ferocious attention was draining, her attempts to veil the intensity of her concern feeble at best. Yet while Nen fought off her mother’s worried questions, ducked or evaded as much as she could, she, too, had gone back over every possible moment. She remembered the reflected buildings, and that something was off about them. Recalled, just barely, a sense of temptation or release. A *why not?* launch of caution into the wind.

It wasn’t intransigence. She simply couldn’t move forward as it once seemed obvious she would. Patience, surrender, incomprehension, fatigue—it was not any word she could think of. An emptiness, a blank wall. She tried to explain. “I feel like a part of me is missing.”

“How do you mean?”

Nen saw the effort it cost her mother not to pounce on the crumb. She searched for better words; there weren’t any. “Just something missing. The part of me that wanted to do certain things isn’t there.”

Her mother’s brows drew together. “You’re still here, but you’re not the same. Don’t get me wrong—I am glad you’re here. Relieved, overjoyed, all of it.” She reached out, patted the air without quite touching Nen. “I’m sorry.”

“The weird thing is, I don’t really miss her. The old me. I’m fine.”

“But where did she go?”

“What?” Nen stared at her mother. Was that a real question? Were the warnings about her mother’s slipping faculties on point after all?

Margaret backtracked nimbly as ever. “Figure of speech,” she said.

“Right,” Nen said, happy enough to leave it alone. “But I’m here.”

“And I’m grateful you’re here,” her mother said, unwilling to be embarrassed into silence. “So, so grateful. I’m pinching myself, I could just whoop with happiness. And I still want to cry.”

Nen threw up her hands rather than answer. Margaret looked at her, tilted her head, seemed to decide it was now or never. “What was it you saw that day? You said something about a puddle, but I’m not sure I understood.”

“It was just a puddle, with a reflection—a reflection that made it look deep, with tall buildings. There was this wedding-cake tower, and thin white clouds, and the sky looked cold, like fall.”

Margaret’s head snapped up, her eyes narrowed. “Fall?”

“Fall the season.”

“And it wasn’t the same sky, what you saw in that reflection? Not the same sky as—as here, as the sky over your head?”

“I didn’t say that.” Nen thought a moment. “But no. It wasn’t the same. Does it matter?”

Margaret frowned. It seemed important to her, the difference of sky. But her voice was uncertain when she said, with a small shrug, “I don’t know. Seems like it might.”

Nen considered. “I don’t know about different,” she said. “I feel like it was really clear—sharp, like a photograph. The image was right there. But it already feels like a long time ago. Maybe I’m not remembering right.”

Margaret sat up straighter. “Did you bump your head?”

Nen rolled her eyes. This never went well. “I didn’t fall, Mom. I stepped.”

“But you were lying on the pavement. You were down on the ground.”

“And?”

“You were in the hospital. You were unconscious.” She spoke slowly, as if Nen might not understand.

“And they checked for everything under the sun. You said so yourself. Test after test, and came up with nothing. No sign of concussion, if that’s what you’re thinking.” She tapped her temple with an index finger.

“I’m your mother. I have to fear the worst.”

“Oh my god.” Nen flopped back in her chair and looked at the sky.

Her mother was not dissuaded. She kept the same even tone, not too sharp, nothing provoking.

“Whatever happened to land you in that hospital bed, my gut did not unclench for days. It still hasn’t unclenched. I feel like I’m always braced for danger.”

“Waiting for the other shoe to fall,” Nen supplied, trying to lighten the tone.

“Yes. And there’s a damn centipede upstairs—there will be no end of shoes.” Margaret stood up and began pulling dead leaves off the geranium planted in one of the pots that lined the deck.

Nen wasn’t sure what her mother was thinking; she felt the reach and connection, thought her mother understood something—something Nen didn’t fully understand, something Margaret couldn’t explain. Overbearing, by turns ham-fisted and kid-gloved, but she was trying to help. Nen shifted her weight, arranged and rearranged the words in her head and realized it had been too long since she had spoken; the silence had stretched from companionable to awkward. To say anything aloud now would be odd—any of what she was thinking.

“What if they don’t come?” Nen spoke to her mother’s back. “Your cooler people.”

“They’re not my *cooler*—”

“I have to call them something. The hungry people who take the food you leave in the cooler on the deck—”

“I get it. If they don’t come . . . I don’t know. I guess I worry.” Margaret turned back toward the plants. “So, what’s *your* bit?”

“Bit?”

“A minute ago, you said I was doing my bit. What about you? Are you going to look for a job?”

“Are you going to start charging me rent?”

Margaret looked hurt. “No! I only—”

“—think I should be doing something productive. Using my education.”

Margaret had no retort for that. She stood there a moment, crumpling dried leaves in her hand, then collected herself. Her expectations weren't unreasonable. “I do,” she said. “You've been home since June. It's August. You've had a break.”

“*I fell,*” Nen said, as if she hadn't been insisting ever since that the whole incident was no big deal.

“I know,” her mother said, losing patience. “And now it's time to get up.”

Nen looked to the yard for rescue. Where was the cougar when she needed it? “So what did you mean about that one wet spring?” she asked.

Margaret looked up sharply, then away.

“You said nothing made sense and then everything did,” Nen pressed.

Margaret rocked slowly forward and back. Looking for words, avoiding the question? Nen wasn't sure. “It's hard to explain,” Margaret said finally.

“And?” If her mother could press and pry, so could Nen.

“And. And. God, I don't know.” Margaret took another breath, then spoke quickly, as if she'd been saving up; as if saying it fast would keep her from changing her mind, would make the unbelievable sound true. “It was like waking up from some kind of dream, a long, long dream that I didn't remember but I also knew was real. I had been about to do something, something important. And I always felt somehow as if I'd had a choice, as if maybe I shouldn't have come back.”

“So, what, like you're sorry you—”

“No, no, that's . . . too specific. And this was years ago.” Margaret looked at her daughter, face open and pleading. She wanted to be believed—she wasn't crazy; she wasn't sure what she was trying to say, either. Nen caught all that, and made herself give her mother space. Margaret bowed her head, covered her face with her hands. When she lifted her face again, she looked more

confident. “I had a tangible sense that I had been elsewhere, had been about to do something, had given something up—or had to give something up? I wasn’t sure if I’d had a choice or not, or what it even was.”

“A road not taken,” Nen suggested, a lift of humor creeping into her voice.

“Yes,” Margaret said seriously. “And ever since, I’ve felt as if, without ever knowing it or knowing how it happens, we are always making choices. Every minute of the day. And so some possibilities slip out of reach, out of our grasp.” She shook her head. “That’s not even it. The more I say, the less sense it makes. I felt like I was back to my old self. Life went on as before, everything was good; and still, it felt like that return to my old self—if I’d even been away—was at the expense of some other achievement. Some degree of loss on this side reflected some degree of opportunity on the other. It was like another world, like I’d been somewhere else.”

“And you think I’m letting possibilities slip out of reach. In this world.”

“It’s not a criticism. It’s just what happens.” Margaret smiled ruefully. “Okay, yes, sometimes it’s hard to accept a change of plan. Or accept—accept that there’s no reason, no explanation.”

Nen absorbed her mother’s frustration with her newly stagnant daughter; and then she thought, was her sadness and nostalgia disappointment? Was Nen no longer good enough? Nen wasn’t sure herself, which naturally backed her into a defensive crouch. “Sorry,” Nen mumbled, though she wasn’t sure, exactly, sorry for what. “I know you were hoping for more.”

“No,” Margaret said flatly, as if tired of belaboring the point. “I wasn’t. I just want, for you, the particular happiness of having something that matters to you.” Another sigh. Convincing herself, if she couldn’t convince Nen.

“I think I understand. Sort of.” Nen thought again about the feeling she’d had of letting go, a spark of escape; she had no sense of the return Margaret had tried so hard to describe.

Margaret turned toward the house. She looked relieved to have said as much as she had; Nen thought it must have gone better than she had feared. “We should go in. If we wait outside, I’m afraid they won’t come.” Glancing at Nen, she drew a new smile. “My cooler people,” she added.

Inside, they still wanted confirmation that Margaret’s efforts were working. Nen knew her mother had given her an out—she could have gone upstairs, taken a shower, picked up a book—but she wanted to see for herself what happened. She lingered at the window, screened behind the sheer curtain, her mother beside her.

“It feels like I’m waiting in a duck blind,” Nen said. Margaret laid a hand on her shoulder. Nen willed herself not to flinch away. “I thought you talked to them. What did you say her name was?”

Margaret waited a beat. “Dolores. We did talk. But I think . . .”

“How did she know to come here?” Nen asked.

“We spoke at the foodbank. I told her I’d see her the next week and she said she couldn’t go there anymore, they were going to find her.”

“Who were?”

“She didn’t say.”

“You didn’t ask?” *Of course, we can feed them today*, Nen wanted to say, *but we’re not teaching them to fish*. But even as she was about to speak, she recognized it as unfair, and held her tongue. Her mother did not need Nen’s inspirational cliché fountain to show her the way.

“I asked if I could bring her food, and she asked if she could come to me,” Margaret said. “She’s a lovely person.”

“I’ll make those muffins,” Nen said, a little too loud. “I know I said I’d do it before. Everyone needs to eat something homemade. I can shop, too.” Nen started to turn from the window, then leaned closer to the glass. “What’s that on the ground?” She hadn’t seen it when they were outside. From where she’d been sitting, the cooler had masked it.

Margaret leaned with her. “What? Where?”

Nen slid open the screen and stepped out. The toy lay in the grass, just off the deck. Nen picked it up, felt its weight—not heavy, but dense. She remembered the girl in the hospital, her tight braids and the dark green visor, the lion in her arms, her almost scratchy voice.

The lion was worn, its mane matted and thinned by affection. It had been lying on its side, but Nen was sure it could sit upright. The legs moved as if jointed; the torso gave but didn’t squash under pressure—not like those antique teddy bears stuffed to the gills with sawdust or straw. Not quite damp, yet it was night-cooled, rested. It had not just now fallen from a hot little hand.

Nen took the lion inside, held it up for her mother to see. “That looks like—” Margaret began.

“The one the girl at the hospital had,” Nen finished. She sat the lion on the counter.

Margaret picked up the toy, turned it over admiringly. “That’s a well-loved lion.”

“Is it the same family?”

Margaret shook her head. “I don’t know. I suppose it must be. Dolores mentioned children, but I tried not to ask too many questions. I didn’t want to scare her away.”

“The big cat’s back,” Nen said, stroking the toy. She tried to say it lightly, but her voice caught. Margaret turned to her. “When the cougar came, I thought of Dad, moving a deer,” Nen continued, before her mother could ask. “That he was like a cougar.”

“But it wasn’t to eat the deer.” Margaret sounded perplexed, confounded by the illogic of Nen’s association. “He wasn’t a hunter.”

“I know it doesn’t make sense. But I thought it.”

Nen heard again the whispers in the hallway, her mother and the doctors and nurses and maybe perfect strangers, passersby; or maybe the sibilant murmur had little to do with her. The rustle of privacy drapes around the bed, in their shuttered movement, let in sound and shadow—a walling

out that was as much a closing in. *Just until she's out of the woods*, they'd said, the doctor or her mother or one of those strangers.

She was sheltered, cloistered in the drapery forest of her cubicle, no woods in sight, but Nen had heard the voices, the clear, clear words, and then the girl had appeared with her lion, and then she had been called away, to the bed on the other side of the blue canvas wall. How long ago was that? Two months, close to three. Now Nen had another big cat in her home. Even if it was a toy, it felt like another visitation. What had she been trying to do that afternoon, before she wound up in the hospital? Had she fallen, as her mother implied?

"We need to get it back to the girl," Nen said. She didn't want the family to have to knock, if she kept it inside; didn't want to leave it out for squirrels to chew on, either. "I could put it in the cooler, with a note. Something like, if you know who this belongs to, please return . . ."

"We could wash it. Doesn't seem all that sanitary, putting it in with the food."

"Food's wrapped," Nen pointed out. "Besides, it might not smell right. Kids care about smells."

"True."

"I said I'd shop," Nen said. "But watch for them. Like, if they come."

"As if I were going to do anything else."

Nen went upstairs to change. When she came back down, her mother handed her a piece of paper. "Since you're going to the store, let me give you the list I have running."

"Sure." Nen turned the paper over. It looked like a sheet from one of her scratch pads. She scanned the fragment of text on the back. Not yet typeset—a draft. "Did you save this?"

Margaret nodded. "Seemed a shame to—"

"Throw it away. I know. That's why I always made those little pads." Nen picked out a few words where the lines had been cut off. *reduction and mitigation . . . lower-gradient headwater . . . organic matter, incoming pollutants*. Nothing jumped out.

Jewel in the Palm

The shopping took hours. Nen was careful, choosing this, choosing that, choosing again. Sandwich loaf or rolls? Lemon or lime in the sparkling water? Tuna or deviled ham? She was reaching for a second can of tuna when she heard Lacey's voice behind her.

"Hey."

It was a relief to be saved from her deliberations. Still, Nen was surprised at how glad she was to see Lacey. They hadn't been all that close in high school, but now Nen nearly hugged her. "Hi!"

"Domestic duty?"

Nen looked at the rolls—too many kinds—in her cart. "I told my mom I'd help out."

"Looks like you're planning quite the picnic."

"I guess so." Nen wasn't sure she wanted to explain about the cooler on the deck. "I told her I'd shop," she said helplessly. Why hadn't she put the flatbread on top of the chocolate crunch cereal? Nen knew she should have outgrown it by now.

"I love that stuff," Lacey said, eyeing the chocolate crunch.

"Really?"

Lacey nodded toward her own cart, where Nen saw two more boxes of the treat. "I heard your mom got arrested for lifting a box from the charity drop," Lacey said, not unkindly.

"Our box," Nen said quickly.

"You don't have to justify anything to me." Lacey jiggled her cart into closer alignment with Nen's. "My mom's trying to get the old grave on our woodlot declared historic, sacred ground."

"I heard about that," Nen said. "I thought it was more a—I don't know, a political thing?"

"I don't know if I'd call it political. There was a hearing." Lacey jiggled her cart again, an exclamation point. "Not really a hearing, but the city council discussed if they should approve. If they had any jurisdiction. They're just getting started." Lacey sounded tired.

Nen nodded in sympathy. “Yeah.” What else could she say? “Why’s it supposed to be sacred?”

“Because it’s a graveyard. An old one.” Lacey drummed her fingers on the cart. “I don’t know if you can make a case for a *graveyard* with only one grave. But it is a way to try to protect the trees.”

Nen thought of her father’s grave, which wasn’t a grave, either. They had scattered his ashes above Polk Lake, where they used to hike, but then the whole area had burned, three years ago now. They hadn’t been back. “But it’s not ancient, like first people or anything?” she asked.

“No. At least, the marker isn’t. Who knows what it used to be, way back when?”

“Some of us are here to shop,” came a voice at Nen’s shoulder. With their carts lined up in parallel, she and Lacey were blocking the aisle. Nen jostled her cart out of the way so the man could get by. He marched on with an ill grace.

“Frozen entrees in aisle nine,” Nen called after him. Lacey made a face at the man’s back.

“So are you working on the grave thing?” Nen asked.

“Not really. I want to work on the peaches. That’s my baby.”

“What peaches?”

“We have an orchard?”

Nen scanned her memory. “Umm . . .” They had just been up on the property. Had she walked right by an orchard, unseeing?

Lacey understood Nen’s worry. “You and I took the shortcut. We weren’t in the orchard.”

“Oh.” Nen exhaled. At least she wasn’t completely oblivious.

Lacey was still talking about her peach trees. “I’ve been looking into inter-planting new trees between the older ones, so the replacement orchard’s in place when this one starts to die.”

“Can I see?”

“Sure. It’s probably doomed—I don’t know how much longer we’ll even have enough cold in the winter for the trees to bloom.”

“What do you mean?”

“Peaches need a certain number of chilling hours. Otherwise they break dormancy. One bad spring storm, a late frost, and it’s all over. Plus they give less fruit if it’s too hot.”

“A Goldilocks crop,” Nen said flippantly.

“Who doesn’t want everything just right? Maybe with irrigation.”

“You don’t irrigate now?”

“Not yet.” Lacey waved at the cherries in Nen’s cart. “Where are those even from? Our cherry season’s long over.”

Nen poked at the plastic box, as if the offending package were to blame for finding its way into her cart. “I love cherries.”

“You should get your fruit from the farmers’ market. Way better.”

“I know.” Nen looked down at her list. Grocery shopping was already more of an undertaking than she’d bargained for. “It doesn’t matter where I shop,” she said, continuing the thought aloud.

“Why’s that?”

“The world is a garbage fire,” Nen said, louder than she meant to. “It’s already broken.”

“I thought you were doing something about it,” Lacey said. “That whole—”

“Water project? I guess I was. But—”

“It’s open tomorrow,” Lacey interrupted. “The market.”

“Thanks,” Nen said quickly. She didn’t want to push Lacey away. “Will you be there?”

Lacey shook her head. “Peaches aren’t ripe yet.”

Nen looked at her cart, the plastic-wrapped fruit, the sugary cereal, the whole-grain bread and free range eggs. “It’s all a crock,” she said. “The whole idea that any one of us with our puny little choices makes any kind of difference.” She felt so tired, so sad—like she was wearing a full-body lead suit she couldn’t unzip. She turned over the list again, stared at the truncated lines on the back.

Lacey waited. “And if nothing makes any difference . . . ?” she prodded.

Nen looked up. She took a deep breath, but all she breathed in was the stale, refrigerated smell of the store. “I guess there’s taking care of people?”

“So, take care,” Lacey said softly. Her smile took the edge off the admonition.

“Keep it moving, ladies!” Another impatient shopper, this one steering a cart piled high with cleaning products and pantry staples—jumbo packages of flour, sugar, bleach.

“Sorry!” Nen moved down the aisle to make room.

“I should get going,” Lacey said. “Come on up to the orchard sometime. You know the way to the property, even if you don’t remember the trees.”

“Thanks, I will.”

“Take care,” Lacey repeated, waving goodbye.

Nen stopped in the doorway, shopping bags weighing down both arms. Her mother leaned over the sink slurping a peach, her face shadowed by the cool, minty cast of the kitchen walls.

“That is the most delicious sound I have heard in forever,” Nen said.

“Want one? I found some early ones, at that farm stand below the reservoir.”

The peach Nen bit into was as succulent as her mother promised, sticky juice like nectar, as if peach bees had brewed honey under the faintly furred, sunrise-colored skin, firm and soft at once, palm sized, dense, just heavy enough. “How many did you buy?” Nen asked.

“Half a dozen. Her season’s just starting, and I didn’t have a way to carry very many.”

“Why were you out there?”

“A guy in the shop was talking about the reservoir. Something about contamination—of irrigation water? From irrigation water? With the expansion.” Margaret paused, leaving Nen time to fill in the blank.

Nen shrugged. “Maybe both.”

Margaret went on, “I know that was always your lookout. You said, so long as the reservoir was swimmable . . .” She didn’t say, *since you won’t go, I did*, but Nen heard her clearly enough.

“Right.” Nen took the last bite of peach, dropped the pit in the compost.

Margaret hesitated. “I took your bike. Since you had the car. I hope that’s okay.”

“Sure.” She’d almost forgotten her mother’s bicycle had been stolen.

Margaret didn’t let her think about the stolen bike for long. “Do you like the variety? The lady called them Early Improved Havens.”

“It’s delicious. How many varieties are there, even?” A question she should have asked Lacey.

“Dozens, I imagine.”

“Too bad you didn’t get more.”

“I’ll go back. And there’s the farmers’ market—that’s tomorrow, isn’t it? You could go there.”

“Yeah, Lacey says her peaches aren’t ready yet.”

Margaret cocked her head. “Lacey?”

“We went to high school together? Native species? You saw her at the—”

“Right, of course. Anyway, someone else might have peaches.”

Her mother was way too eager that she find more peaches, before the bloom wore off or the desire faded. It wasn’t as if Nen hadn’t been eating, yet her mother latched onto any little thing. Anything Nen seemed to like or notice or want, Margaret was all over it, praising, providing, hovering. Hoping. That was it. Nen could smell the hope on her like sweat. Hope with an undercurrent of panic. Nen still wasn’t sure what her mother was so afraid of.

“Thank you for shopping,” Margaret said. She reached across Nen to rinse the peach juice off her fingers before starting to put groceries away. Nen was probably jumping to her own outsized conclusions, when her mother just wanted to offer her fresh local fruit in season.

“That reminds me! Where’s that scratch pad? The one you made your list on?” A half sentence from the printed side of the shopping list had been dangling in the back of her mind. *riven research indicating management of the commonly . . .* Should that have been *driven*? The commonly what?

“On the counter by the fridge.”

Nen moved a bag of flour, pushed aside a bread pan, lifted a dishtowel out of the way to locate the notepad. She turned it over. The staple jabbed under her thumbnail when she tried to pick it open. She stuck her injured thumb in her mouth, tried with the other hand. It had obviously taken several tries with the stapler to get through the stack. Standard 8.5 by 11 paper, raggedly cut into quarters; the printout must have been thirty pages long, more with references, making for well over a hundred smaller sheets. She tried to remember if she’d made more than one pad, used one of them up. She was always farther ahead with scratch paper preparation than reuse. Douglas always laughed at her. “Better to *try* to reuse it,” she defended herself. “We might need it.” But he was right, there was a limit. She had recycled plenty of scratch paper herself, with added staples. Unused.

Margaret watched as Nen began laying the sheets out on the table, nodding encouragement as Nen started fitting pages together, like a jigsaw puzzle. Parts of two or three pages would be close together, then there would be a jump. She must have stacked a few sheets, cut them, then made another stack; whatever the scissors would manage. Nen reassembled several pages, matching cut edges and page numbers and the seeming logic of the sentences. Margaret opened her mouth as if to ask a question, then quietly chipped in, working in parallel on the other side of the table.

“Do you know how many sheets you used?” Nen asked.

Margaret shook her head. “It’s been there a while. Is this from the water authority? I don’t understand—why is it important?”

Nen unfolded the list she’d taken to the store. She had reconstructed twelve pages, plus several half pages. Today’s list joined one of those halves, but a panel was still missing, like a missing tooth.

“What is it?” Margaret asked again.

“I flipped over the list when I was at the store—you know how you do, like you might have forgotten something on the other side—and I sort of remembered. I think it’s a water contamination report, like an estimate. When you mentioned the reservoir, it made me think . . .”

Margaret waited for her to go on. Nen drummed her fingers on the table. “I’m not sure. Just . . . there’s something wrong with it.”

“Well, we’ve used a few sheets,” Margaret said reasonably.

“I mean something wrong in the report itself.” This had been important—more important than other printouts cut up for reuse. *Not salty enough* . . . if the numbers were changed, too low, and thus false . . . She could almost grasp it, like a knot, why this particular report had made her so angry. She could almost remember the page. She held herself as still as possible, once again in that viewing blind, a hand held out with crumbs, *let it come to you, don’t scare it away*.

Nen shook her head hard. “It doesn’t matter.” How could it? Yet she was sure it did. It wasn’t the published version—she’d seen that once, it could be accessed again. “I wonder if Douglas could help me,” she added, thinking aloud. “I know the report drew on government documents—published stuff—even if they used their own data, too. Maybe he could get me some figures. I just remember thinking about it, how something had changed from the draft to the public version, that it wasn’t what I expected.” The page was still incomplete.

Nen did ask for peaches at the farmers’ market. She felt disloyal, knowing Lacey’s weren’t yet ripe, and was almost glad to learn there were none to be had. The stand Margaret had found was a true outlier, earliest of the early fruit. The market was a small one, a dozen booths on a block of Third Street closed to traffic near the park. White shade canopies, hand-lettered signs, reusable bags, discounts on produce “cosmetically challenged” or slightly bruised. Nen wished she liked radishes

enough to buy some of the extraordinary red globes, big as a child's fist, displayed at the first booth she came to. Another booth specialized in "Vegetables Your Grandmother Knew," exotica like yardlong beans, kohlrabi, celeriac; long thin salsify tubers and weird, swirling Romanesco broccoli, more like a sea creature than a plant. Nen didn't need a challenge. She wanted something closer to home. "There's someone new with peaches, should be here soon," Nen was told when she asked. "Give it a week or two. New-old, really. New person, old orchard. Getting the farm back in shape."

"I might know her," Nen said.

The woman behind the stand smiled approvingly. "Try a raspberry." She held out a plate; buyers could sample without mashing their fingers into the common basket. "Trust me, you've never tasted one like it. Bramble-berry perfection, an heirloom from the ancients. Taste even better than they look." She kept talking as Nen selected one of the proffered berries, placed it on her tongue.

The raspberries were perfect—yes, they were rubies. Nen smiled at the vendor's jeweled language, so hackneyed it made her head spin, yet utterly sincere. The woman wore overalls, jet-black hair piled on her head in a tower of braids, fingers stubby and stained, nails broken and split but scrupulously clean. After all, she was handling food. "You'll think I'm crazy, but this fruit can change your life," the farmer said.

Nen bought a basket and carried it to a bench. She had intended to take the berries home to share. Raspberries were expensive, to keep them to herself was to sit on a dragon's hoard—and there she was, in the jewel business herself, thinking of dragons, and then she was eating those luscious, glowing, sweet-tart, redder-than-red orbs right there in the park. Velvet but don't touch, you'll burst the bubble; easily crushed, bruised against the roof of her mouth, juice on her lips like blood but no, no thorns from the bramble had made it into the basket. She had bitten her tongue, the inside of her cheek. Seeds caught in her teeth, that last harsh rasp inside the soft fruit. No, no again, that wasn't it. It wasn't seeds but something larger. Nen raised her hand to take the gravel

from her mouth, the sorting error, and no, yes, no— it *was* a jewel. A ruby or a garnet—who could tell the difference?—shone wet in the palm of her hand.

Who would believe it? She had found a gemstone in her fruit basket, after the farmer who sold her the fruit had been waxing lyrical at time of sale. It was hard as a rock—of course it was real. Or was the fruit enchanted? Should she take it back to the seller, no *finders, keepers* for her? Run all the way home, clutching her loot in her fist, afraid she might drop it?

She did drop it, because of course she tripped. Headlong over a curb she had stepped over effortlessly every day of her life from the age of five. Sprawled, fist loosened, splayed open in the attempt to break her fall, stone lost in the grass of the easement. But easily found—no more than a quarter of an hour, surely—because it was a ruby. It glowed from within.

Nen zipped the ruby into her coin purse for safekeeping and drove home, thinking about how she might announce this latest find. The tale was an offering, a consolation prize for her mother: here was a gem, a treat Nen could share. She wouldn't just blurt it out. *Hey Ma, look what I got at the market!* She thought of all the fairytales she knew; such announcements never went well. Hadn't Jack's mother thrown his magic beans out the window? She would not reveal her prize immediately, maybe not at all. But the story—that she could share.

“How was the market? I always find it a little expensive,” Margaret said as Nen came in. She followed her into the kitchen. The room was cool after the market's white canvas tents.

“I thought you told me to go there.” Nen set her fragile produce down gently so as not to bruise it. A wave of warm, fresh green, lightly sweet, rose off the basket. “We should get this put away before the lettuce wilts beyond rescue.”

“Expensive, right?” Margaret reached for the basket.

“But such good produce,” Nen sing-songed. She looked around. The walls suddenly struck her as too minty. “We should repaint in here. More sage, less mint.”

“Your brother complains about the color, too,” Margaret said. “I always liked it.”

“It was just a thought.” Nen had let herself be sidetracked. “I found a treasure,” she said.

“Oh?” Margaret’s face was reflected in the glass-paned cabinet doors, prisms and fractured.

Nen wiggled her brows, remembering the vendor’s glee. “Raspberries like rubies,” she intoned.

Margaret laughed. “They got to you, too!” She looked in the basket Nen had carried, began lifting out frilly salad greens and a fat bunch of basil. “You didn’t bring them home?”

“I ate them right there on a bench. I’m sorry.”

“Everyone needs a treat.” Margaret’s voice was understanding.

“But I kept the treasure in the raspberries. From the raspberries.”

“And what was that?”

“A ruby.” Nen tried to keep her voice conversational; inside, she felt triumphant. She had been waiting for something special and amazing to happen. Just because she no longer cared about swimming didn’t mean she wasn’t ready for some excitement.

“A ruby?” Classic maternal amused disbelief.

“Uh huh.” Nen kept a straight face, all woman of mystery—total conviction.

“Even better than a decoder ring in the cereal box,” Margaret said. Nen’s secret was safe, if she wanted to keep it. Lady Fluff sauntered in then, tail high as a banner, and rubbed against Nen’s leg. Nen picked her up. Margaret grimaced, still defending the worn premise that picking up the cat in the kitchen spread hair on the counters and into the food, but she didn’t say anything.

“Why a ruby? Why not a sapphire?” Nen wondered aloud, not ready to let it go, even if she wasn’t going to unzip her coin purse (and what if it wasn’t there? had melted away?) for a skeptic.

“You didn’t buy blueberries.” Her mother’s answer was the kind of matter-of-fact adults used to mask condescension with children. *Tell me about the monster in your picture.*

Nen played along. “You think if I try again, I can choose?”

“Emerald with the Brussels sprouts? Maybe. But ruby’s your birthstone,” Margaret reminded her. She stood the basil in a jelly jar, ready to put it away.

Nen perched on a kitchen stool. “Who made up birthstones, anyway?”

“It’s out of the Bible.” Margaret spoke with her head in the fridge.

“You’re kidding.”

Margaret straightened up. “No. At least, it’s sort of based off the Bible. Something about priestly garments and the twelve tribes of Israel. We did a gems and folklore feature at the shop.”

“I remember that. But are you sure that’s not the zodiac?”

“I’m pretty sure it’s the birthstones. But it’s probably mostly jewelers promoting it. Or maybe fruit sellers.” Margaret winked.

Nen’s hackles rose. “It was real,” she said. “It *is* real. A real ruby.” Or garnet, she added silently, as if her mother might jinx it.

Margaret looked at her hard. “Okay.” She didn’t sound convinced.

“Never mind. You don’t have to believe me.”

Margaret sighed. Nen knew she was being unfair, feeding her mother such an improbable claim as if it were the most normal thing in the world.

She did go back to the market the next time it was open (Tuesdays and Saturdays, all summer long). Maybe a picker had lost the stone out of a ring—did people wear gloves to pick raspberries, or would that be too clumsy? She would ask. But the berry seller with the tower of braids wasn’t there. Nen felt like Jack, looking for the man who had sold him the beans; the other vendors didn’t seem surprised. “Berry season is so fleeting, isn’t it?” a woman with a display of butter lettuce commiserated. “She’s never here more than two or three weeks. Now Harrow’s, down the way, has an ever-crop variety, they get a second season. Come back in September.”

Nen kept the ruby, put the gem in a tiny box in her dresser, certain the extravagant, unmotivated gift was meant for her. She was surprised at how important the ruby had become, and how quickly. It didn't matter that she wouldn't get much for a single stone, if she could even sell it. The secret felt valuable. Even if it was just a lost gemstone in the wrong place, it held the possibility of wonder.

Fresh and rested after the Fishtide recess, Nen returned to Zinfeld headquarters to find her belongings boxed and left at reception with a potted plant and a card expressing the company's appreciation for her visionary work on the sweeper—enlightened, someone had written, with *light* underlined twice in green ink—and wishing her every success in her future undertakings now that the project was complete. Wicket's doing? All she had asked him at Fishtide was—what? She had asked about high ground, about the location of the estuary restoration.

She had felt clever, rubbing elbows with Mrs. Zinfeld's distinguished guests, but Merlin Wicket had been two steps ahead of her, or more. "Your project's nearly wrapped up," Wicket had said, voice smooth and velvety as that card that looked like an invitation to an awards banquet or a wedding but was really an invitation to leave. He wrapped it up for her.

She hadn't amassed much at her desk. The box that passed for her personal effects was full enough that she suspected Lucy or some other sympathetic soul of padding it with office supplies to help her toward those future endeavors. The young man at reception (she regretted not learning his name) had waved her over as soon as she stepped through the brass revolving door, pushed the box toward her with a sympathetic smile but no word of explanation. Nen looked toward the elevator. She wanted to say goodbye to Lucy—surely Lucy had stood up for her? Cole she was less certain of, but she did want to see him, gauge if she could, even if she had to ask directly, how much he had known about the firing and if he had taken her part.

Something stopped her. She couldn't trust herself to say what she wanted to say—couldn't be sure *what* she wanted to say. She felt cheated. It was hard to think straight, to take in what had happened. She felt her eyes prickle and her chest tighten and knew she had to get out of the lobby quickly if she didn't want to risk dissolving in a puddle of angry tears on the gleaming marble.

Unable to look for that sympathetic soul, if there was one, at headquarters, she sought refuge at the café. Jick was gratifyingly outraged. “Can they do that, after you redesigned the whole thing?”

“Maybe it was naïve of me to think the job was anything like permanent.”

“If you were naïve, it was in crossing Wicket.”

“I didn’t even think I crossed him. I mean, not much, not him directly.”

“To some, questioning *is* crossing.” Jick’s tone suggested he could say a lot more on the topic.

“Well, today I skedaddled. Took the kiss-off letter and ran. What would you do?”

Jick ran a hand through his hair, pushed up his sleeves. “I’d probably cook something. Find something to do with my hands.”

“Will draw for food,” Nen said glumly, picking up the chalk basket before he could ask.

“That’s not what I meant. I love the way you do the menus, but you’re always welcome here.”

“I don’t know what’s the matter with me,” Nen blurted out.

“What do you mean?” It was an automatic reply, dismissive without intending unkindness, but then he looked at her again, more closely, looked her up and down. “There’s nothing wrong that I can see,” Jick said. “Maybe you meant something less visible?”

Now she was on the spot. She wanted to find someone who could tell her why she felt this way, and what had happened to her. It was hard to describe, which was part of the problem. She felt out of place, something missing, though there were no other symptoms—no blackouts, say, no vertigo, hives, palpitations. Mostly she felt puzzled; other times she was afraid. But not only that. She had a sense of release, as if she had sidestepped a trap. As if some set of frustrations had been laid to rest and now, freed, she could do as she pleased.

She made a mental list, inventorying her own body as she had encouraged Mrs. Zinfeld to do when she fell on the stairs. Maybe she should see a doctor. But there wasn’t anything wrong enough,

nothing she could clearly name without feeling like a fool. She didn't want to be comforted, not if it meant a pat on the head, a soft murmur with no real explanation.

No symptoms, but there were oddities: the lost memory, and the sensations, things that came back to her, like the full body awareness of pool chlorine in the headquarters basement. A memory flash—or not memory exactly, because that implied incident, recollection. She didn't remember anything about it—she had no context—but she had experienced that before, recognized the burn under her eyelids. Or the words she had heard before: *you don't get new eyes*. She couldn't tell a doctor about that, could she?

“I don't know what I mean. It was just . . .” Nen let the unfinished thought hang.

Jick patted her shoulder, almost imperceptibly—more like a wave in the vicinity of her shoulder. “Take a break if you need it. Take all the time you need.” Jick ran the café with minimal help—a dishwasher after the lunch shift, a busser on the busiest days. He did all the cooking, seemed to like it that way. Nen was afraid asking why he didn't hire more help would look like angling for a job. She didn't want him to feel obligated, didn't want to take advantage of whatever boost she might have because he liked her. Maybe she didn't want to force him to admit she wasn't that special.

Jick returned to the kitchen. Nen started drawing, hoping to occupy her mind. Today the chalkboard kept only her hands busy: they seemed to draw without her, the menu taking shape almost on its own. A good thing, because she could barely focus—if she wasn't thinking about that stupid goodbye plant, her mind filled with images of bricks and rubble.

She remembered it all now, her mind on the rubble and her body leaning forward, trying to make legible the looping script she was using to describe the soup of the day without losing the sinuous sweep that had entirely caught her up—the opposite, in its horizontal, open movement, of that collapsed tower, the jutting skyward, *up, up, and away!* The tendrils of soup were earthbound, homely, hypnotizing, and that was when she remembered, why she remembered: the contrast, filling

the space. Each doubt, every shout she heard from outside (she was sure she could hear them, as if the building were still falling; the prolonged dream fall that settles only with the thudding crash into wakefulness) brought back that giant column of roiling red dust.

Nen cried when she saw it. Cried because of the people trapped inside, but also because she knew, the first day she remembered in North Benton—the first day she could remember at all—there had been that row of old-fashioned, big city towers against the thin white clouds. She had seen them clear as clear and stepped toward them—walked, swam? Now the skyline was incomplete.

She had been so sure of herself, had begun—or so she imagined—to make the place her own. They would save thousands on the redesigned sweepers in materials alone, not to mention the public relations boon of alleviating workers' stress—which couldn't have come at a better time, given the rising criticism of past practice. Maybe she was taking the blame for that opposition. Or maybe it was those very protests—*new sweeper, new lies!* Her intentions were good, the lighter sweeper was easier to carry. But that meant Zinfeld Industries could feel good about lightening the sweepers' load without addressing the problems of long hours, low pay. The first thing it occurred to her to fix—total newbie in a fancy job she didn't fully understand—wasn't necessarily the best thing.

Nen was proud of making the sweepers' job easier; she felt she had made a difference. But there was the lingering uncertainty about whether the sweeping should be done at all, whether it was all a cover for land speculation, a way to delay any real response to water problems across the region. The acid fury of having been let go was compounded by chagrin that she had never seen it coming.

Clean slate time. Nen pulled herself back to the café, tapping her chalk against the table. She thought about the tiny slates they'd colored and erased on Fishtide Eve. Jick returned to the dining room, arms full of freshly laundered tablecloths. Nen watched as he spread them on the empty tables, then refilled the mug of tea at Nen's elbow, poured a cup for himself. Nen waved in the direction where the building should have been. The site wasn't visible from the café windows.

“Did they ever find the bodies? Any bodies? Besides the custodians and the security guard?”

There hadn’t been many reports. The official bulletin was issued, then things went quiet.

“Three people is a lot. Even if it could have been worse.” Jick took a long swallow of tea. “I don’t know any more than you do. So the answer would be no. No one’s reported anyone missing.”

He put down his cup. “Lunch special calls,” he said. He sounded frustrated, a little sad.

Nen let out a breath, puffing out her upper lip. “Maybe a simple list today? I don’t feel . . . I don’t know, inspired.”

“You don’t have to do the boards. I wasn’t trying to rush you.”

She tried to mouth *thank you*, but she was looking down, it would have been hard for him to see.

Nen sat on her stool, listening to the café movements around her, the swing of the door and hum of the lights, inhaling the scent of the beet and white bean soup beginning to waft out of the kitchen. The soup she wasn’t doing much to help sell, but would gladly help eat.

Ben Weymouth’s Fishtide outburst had been a lone scream; Nen had followed with a question of her own, and look where it got her. Maybe that was why no one had stepped in to stop the brick salvage. The sooner the site was empty, the sooner they could pretend it never happened.

She needed to find out what Merlin Wicket was trying to hide. There was no tide involved in the building collapse, Wicket had said. Then he’d asked if she read detective fiction. He’d reminded Nen that rumors can be dangerous things. Whatever his secret, Nen felt sure it was connected to the toppled filing cabinets and missing files. That seemed so long ago now, her morning in the basement with Lucy. It felt unreachable, almost another lifetime—and that, too, gave her pause, that *another lifetime* should seem a recognizable sensation; she couldn’t describe it, but she knew what it was.

Martina came into the café quietly, a small animal peeking out from its burrow to scent the air. Hunched over her chalkboard, Nen didn’t see her right away. When she looked up, Martina was

already in the corridor to the toilet. She wore her winter uniform, long-sleeved, like the summer version—same plaid accents, same color scheme—but warmer. North Benton was cold this time of year. Nen saw right away that Martina had one of the new sweepers.

Nen had nearly given up hope of finding Martina. If she'd had access to a route map, she might have tried to intercept her, but she couldn't sit in the park opposite headquarters, lying in wait. Martina remained a stranger, and yet she felt like home—like a duckling, Nen had imprinted on her, looking up from the pavement to see Martina bending over, feeling the nudge of her foot. Nen recalled the sensations of that day, the sense of tugging her leg up out of the pavement. The suction pull of the ground, the pinprick tingle of her thighs, as if the muscles had fallen asleep. She remembered Martina's wariness, the way she'd said, "It's not public water," and her shock at the paint on Nen's toes. The way she'd asked, "Where did you come from?" a question Nen was even now unable to answer.

She worried Martina would go right back out the door; instead she walked, as unobtrusively as she could in that pink and brown plaid, to the counter against the opposite wall. A tray of glasses and a pitcher of water stood on a shelf under the counter, free for the taking. Craning her neck, risking a fall off the tall stool, Nen saw ranks of salt and pepper shakers, tea tins, napkins—the odds and ends of table service kept within reach.

Martina poured a glass of water. Nen assumed she was in a hurry, sensitive to the push of the hover trailer; she wouldn't want to talk for long. Still, Nen waited for her to drink before she approached. "Martina," she said quietly.

"Oh!" Martina jumped, fumbled with something on the lower shelf as she turned. It was another second before her eyes lit in recognition.

"Does it help?" Nen asked, indicating the sweeper. She had been looking for Martina, wondering if she was okay, but curiosity and pride in the new sweeper got the better of her.

“It does,” Martina answered, composure restored. “The strap placement is good.”

“I’m so glad,” Nen said. And then, “I’m sorry, I didn’t even say hello.”

Martina smiled. “Hello.” She tucked a wisp of straw-like hair behind her ear. About the same height as Nen, she was slightly hunched. Every so often she’d straighten her spine, as if someone had reminded her to work on her posture. Years with the sweeper had taken a toll.

“Does the new design shorten your hours, or just make them easier to get through?” Nen asked.

“Easier to get through.” Martina looked around the dining room. She seemed distracted, but also pleased, with an underlying eagerness. Nen wondered if she was expecting someone. “I was lucky to get one,” Martina continued. “I thought I might be further down the list, after—”

“What?” Nen asked, then regretted her interruption.

“Senior sweepers have priority. Did you have a rich Fishtide?” There was a note of tension in her voice, not relief.

“God, so rich! So much food . . .” Nen trailed off. Martina was only half listening. “Yes, thank you,” Nen said quickly. “And you?”

Martina shrugged. “It was quiet.”

“I shouldn’t have interrupted. What were you going to say?”

Martina made her face blank—it was as if she had an eraser. “It’s a good design,” she said. “The straps are really solid.”

“As you said.” Nen felt Martina looking over her shoulder, afraid of being overheard, or else worried about the trailer’s relentless countdown. Her hand strayed to the shelf.

Nen forced herself to be patient. She had almost given up when Martina said, “I need this job. I went to that protest, but I need to save money. I’m close, but it’s not enough yet.”

“Of course.” Nen wondered how much money Martina required, how long she thought it would take to save, and regretted again having possibly put Martina, or her job, in danger.

Martina faced Nen, her expression challenging. “You asked if we could make it lighter. The real question should be, what if we stopped carrying them at all?”

The question stopped Nen cold. “What do you mean?”

“Momentum.” Martina looked around again. Maybe she wasn’t afraid of being overheard, so much as gathering herself to make a point.

“What?” Nen didn’t follow.

“We keep on sweeping as if nothing has changed. But long-term damage is complicated, and fixing it, even more so. It’s all about the horizon of deniability, serial postponement; the danger is far in the future, or far in the past.”

“That’s what the protesters have been saying,” Nen said. Martina took a last swallow of water. Nen wondered how to keep her, knowing it selfish to try. “When the West Building fell—did that affect the sweepers?” she asked.

Martina shook her head. “Not really. The area’s pretty contained, right?”

“Lots of people going in and out,” Nen said. “Picking up bricks.”

“That’s so. Makes you wonder why was there no attempt to keep people from scavenging. Not even a token insta-fence.”

“I wondered that, too. Almost as if someone wanted to get the site cleared as soon as possible.”

“Cheap labor, if you can make people think they’re salvaging, not doing debris removal for free,” Martina said. She glanced at the window.

“So, I lost my job,” Nen said in a rush. Saying it aloud, it didn’t seem that awful, except she didn’t know what she’d do next.

“You were fired?”

Nen thought it over. “Fired implies confrontation. Like I was punished when I did something wrong. This was more like, thanks for your time, don’t let the door hit you.”

Martina nodded. “Since the design project was done,” she said. Nen had expected a stronger reaction, but Martina was only half paying attention. She seemed to be looking for something, searching by feel below the overhanging counter, *pat pat pat*, eyes up, out the window, around the dining room, nothing out of the ordinary, a young woman on a break.

Nen watched for a second. “I had this weird conversation with Merlin Wicket at Fishtide. He sort of let me know I might not be there much longer. He kept talking about absent friends.”

“Lots of people have someone far away,” Martina said.

“I think there was more—” Nen was interrupted by a low beep from Martina’s wristband.

“I should get back to work,” Martina said, silencing the monitor with a tap. Nen had begun to map a pattern in the way she checked the door, the window, the other window, the toilet corridor, the door to the kitchen, back to the window. Martina had already taken a few knocks, wouldn’t be all that surprised when another blow fell. She maybe thought Nen had already lucked into the redesign job, she should shut up and be grateful and look for her next position.

Martina was rooting around on the shelf. Not finding what she was looking for, *pat pat pat*, she grew more agitated, shoulders tense, whole body a degree tighter. One of the salt shakers tipped over, a tiny crash masked by general café noise. Nen heard it, her attention riveted on Martina; Martina obviously heard it like a shot going off. She jumped, then recovered, made sure no one else had registered the sound. Nen didn’t give her away.

Instead, she went out on a limb with another question. “How’s your daughter?”

Martina looked at her for a long moment. Nen almost thought she was going to leave without saying anything more. “She’s well, thank you.”

Another beep from the monitor, louder this time. Martina bent to look under the counter directly. She had either decided to trust Nen or concluded she had no other option. “What are you looking for?” Nen asked.

“My chit-roll.”

That meant nothing to Nen, but Martina’s attention had shifted. She stooped to really look for whatever it was she needed off that shelf, and whatever it was clearly wasn’t where it should be. Martina screamed. Not screamed—even here she was careful, a loud bawl and then the volume was controlled; a lowing, dull but anguished. She pulled out salt shakers, pepper shakers, lined them up on the counter in neat, inscrutable ranks and still didn’t find what she wanted.

For the most part, the other customers kept eating their meals. One or two looked over, a woman clucked sympathetically. People were used to minding their own business, Martina used to slipping by unnoticed. At the back, Jick narrowed his eyes, then disappeared into the kitchen. When he emerged, he walked over to Martina, placed a tight roll of bills at her elbow.

“I don’t care to have chits lying around,” he said, voice sharp.

Martina poked at the money, as if it might be a mirage, then lifted her head.

“Other people use that shelf,” Jick said. Nen was struck for the first time by how much alike they looked. Something about the color of their eyes, the shape of their chins.

“I didn’t expect anyone would find it,” Martina defended herself woodenly. “I thought it would be safer if I didn’t say anything. I didn’t think anyone knew.”

“Why don’t you use a bank?” Nen asked.

“Fees,” Martina said. “Nibbling, cobbling fees. And too many questions.” Which might have been directed at Nen as much as offering a description of the banks.

“Well, it was safe enough,” Jick said. “Not a lot of people have any reason to look at that shelf. But you could have asked me.”

Martina’s posture stiffened. “I didn’t want to obligate you.”

“Chit-rolls left around my café don’t obligate me?” She had both trusted and distrusted him, stashing the money. Nen wondered how much it was, whether a small fortune or spare change.

The beeps from the wristband had grown more insistent, louder and closer together, Martina's silencing taps almost automatic. Now the dial began flashing and the beeping shifted to a solid tone, rising in volume to a siren wail. Nen half expected a hectoring, disembodied voice. The trailer was about to depart. People were looking now.

"You better answer that," Jick said.

Martina moved briskly, pushing buttons on the wrist dial almost at random. She pulled open the café door, then froze. At her shoulder, Nen watched with Martina as the hover trailer pulled away from the curb and began to slide down the block. Smoothly, swiftly—what was the word Wicket had used at Fishtide? Inexorably.

Martina took a step forward. Nen expected her to break into a run, to sprint after it. The set of her shoulders suggested she was ready to spring. Instead, she tore the band from her wrist. "Clap it, that's it. I was never going to save enough." The monitor crunched under her foot as she turned, but she didn't pause or seem to notice it.

Martina stumbled, almost fell into a seat. Nen and Jick plied her with questions, reasonable and unreasonable. What would she do next? Could she afford to quit? Was it dangerous? There might be time to catch the trailer—should they run after it? Call the city, claim malfunction? Did she need a snack, a blanket, a place to stay, something to wear? Martina only shook her head back and forth, a pendulum, a metronome. A sweeper hose. Her skin felt clammy when Nen touched her hand. A man rose to go, leaving money on his table with a nod to Jick and a quiet *well done* for Martina. Two women in matching tweed coats glared at her, then turned back to their plates. The hum of conversation, interrupted by the trailer alarm, resumed.

Nen picked up the remains of the wrist monitor, set them on the counter, looked for a broom to sweep up the glass from the shattered dial, then decided not to bother. Jick was whispering to Martina as Nen rejoined them. Martina managed a near smile. She stood up.

“Stay for a meal?” Jick offered.

Martina looked tempted, then shook her head.

“Wait!” Nen started to say—but wait for what? She had nothing to offer. *What will you do?* she wanted to ask again. *Where will you go?*

Martina took her chit-roll. She left the sweeper on the café floor beside the counter.

Cloak and Water

Nen's thought was to put in a quick appearance, drop off her potluck contribution, then leave her mother to her celebration. Now she paused on the sidewalk. The scrupulously clean windows of her mother's shop sparkled under their green and white striped awnings as the gold in the elongated Celtic lettering of the sign caught the sun. Goldengrove Books. By coming early, she counted on missing the crowd. Bentondale loved its traditions. She was bound to be dragged into conversation by someone she knew but not necessarily well, who would wonder about her projects and plans.

It had rained in the night, leaving the pavement slick and shiny. The brick sidewalks in front of the downtown shops (quaint to some, hazard to others) were puddled with leftover rainwater. One low spot caught a reflection, just enough sky that Nen could make out a floating cloud, interrupted by an uneven rise of bricks. Even the bricks bore the weight of tradition, salvaged after the demolition of the first county courthouse in an effort to give the downtown shopping blocks historical heft. Nen bent closer to see if she could locate a still more miniature sky in the channels banked by those cluttering slabs. Corners had chipped over the years—the channels met in triangular pools before continuing their straitlaced journey. Scattered maple leaves lay on the ground, shaken loose by overnight wind. Reflected, the trees' rippled, feathering leaves seemed almost to be reaching up, fronds rising like seaweed.

Nen stood and stared for a long time. A flicker of something she had seen before—were there taller buildings reflected? It intrigued her, always, the way the world was reproduced yet altered in a shimmered image in window or water. She liked to imagine what might be on the other side. When she was a swimmer, the water in front of her was seldom still, more often blistered with the chop of other swimmers, tiny whitecaps, trills of wind. Sometimes she was lucky enough to catch the glassy early morning stillness at a lake campground, before the others were up or had even arrived. That

was a gift, and she would stop to contemplate the water, consider what it held, the suggestion of other worlds within.

Nen raised her foot, looked up and down the street. Step in or step over? She looked down again, and then her mother swooped out of the shop, cloaked and daggered, wearing a plumed, tricorn hat and velvet pantaloons, a cross between one of the Three Musketeers and an aging Queen Elizabeth in male drag. Lost in thought, Nen was doubly startled by this costumed apparition. Was her mother the Lost Elizabethan, or was she making up for lost time, reclaiming her misspent youth? Before Nen could sort it out, Margaret had slipped the cloak from her shoulders and laid it across the path, letting the heavy fabric settle over the reflection bridge. The hem hit the puddle and began to absorb water, darkening in a rising, spreading pattern like a tide pushing inland, taking the formerly dry wool as its domain.

“After you, milady,” Margaret said with a deep, involving bow.

Nen laughed, still midstride, foot poised. “Very Sir Walter Raleigh.” She waited a moment, no longer ready to complete the step she had been about to take. And then she let her foot fall, as naturally as the cloak had fallen, onto the surface newly paved with dampening wool. One step was all it took and she was across.

Margaret bent to gather the cloak off the ground. Nen grimaced. “Isn’t that too wet to wear now? Also, muddy.”

“The gesture is all,” Margaret replied, with another bow. This time she removed her hat, the ostrich plume grazing the pavement as she swept it before her in a gracious arc. She shook out her cloak, then draped it over one shoulder. It was barely wet—the wool was thick, the puddle hadn’t been deep. Nen could scarcely see the damp. “Rakish, wouldn’t you say?”

“Absolutely.” Nen bowed in her turn, balancing the plate of lemon bars. “My heartfelt, humble thanks for the unwarranted sacrifice of your most noble cloak.”

“Think nothing of it.” Margaret straightened her shoulders, dropped the character voice. “I didn’t know you were coming,” she said. “You’ll stay for the dancing?”

“There’s dancing?” Nen felt her small gesture begin to slip beyond her control.

“Beginners welcome. No experience needed.”

Nen had missed the previous summer’s Lost Elizabethan Days, completing an internship in the state capital at the Department of Environmental Quality. She’d been gone the year before as well, a long swim in British Columbia. Meanwhile, her mother had expanded the event. That was the thing about going away to college—life went on at home.

“I brought lemon bars,” Nen said. “It took me three batches before the custard set—I think I’ve lost my touch.” She thrust the plate at her mother, almost pushing it into her hands before Margaret, shifting the cloak from right to left, was ready. Sticky though they were, the bars slid from under the towel she’d used to cover them and plopped onto the ground like volcanic mud from a home science project, a shlorck of hot pudding, too thick but not thick enough. Nen heard them hit the pavement, the custard that had given her such trouble spreading into the sidewalk cracks.

Margaret righted the plate almost as soon as it tilted. Most of the cookies stayed where they belonged. Yet even two lost squares felt like a blow. Nen wanted this one small thing to go right, to participate on her own terms without some big, dramatic hoopla. She felt the fat sting of tears welling up and rubbed angrily at her eyes with the back of her hand. Her mother, buoyed by Nen’s showing up at all, and with a dessert to share, tactfully turned away.

“Is this okay?” Nen asked once she felt calmer, indicating her dress. She wasn’t in costume, but she’d put on a sundress, new sandals. She’d polished her toenails, too—her favorite bright green.

“Of course,” Margaret said easily. She looked at Nen again. “You seem different.”

Nen almost said something flippant—*I clean up pretty good, don’t I?*—then thought her mother had something else in mind.

“It looked like a bridge,” Nen said, glancing at the bricks her mother had dried with her cloak. Margaret frowned. “How do you mean?”

“Just bricks and the sky reflected—the surface is uneven, only a few places hold water. So one piece of brick made a teeny bridge between two bits of sky. All in miniature.”

“Watch your step with bridges. You never know what’s on the other side,” Margaret said.

“Good advice.”

“I wouldn’t want you to get lost,” Margaret added. Her tone was light, but Nen caught an undercurrent of anxious relief. “I’m glad you’re *here*.”

Nen frowned, impatient again. “Different how? What you said about a before and an after?”

Margaret adjusted the plate, maybe trying to remember what she had actually said. Nen waited. “Something like that,” Margaret said. “Did you talk to Douglas? About that report, the article—whatever you were trying to reconstruct?”

“I left a message. It’s not really his area. But what’s the point of having a brother who’s a reference librarian, right?”

Margaret laughed. “I try not to impose, but he’s been very patient with my costume queries.”

Nen looked down at her sundress. “You know I never liked dress-up.”

“No, you didn’t. Not even Halloween.” Margaret shook her head. “Don’t sweat the costume. Or the accuracy.” She turned with a swirl and swoop of her cloak, like a child about to take flight. Nen had put a spring in her step, or maybe it was the Lost Elizabethan buzz. It had always been Margaret’s favorite event, one she looked forward to, tweaking it year by year—a savory course at the Feaste, a costume contest, a recitation slam, extra points for those who declaimed in their best approximation of a period accent, whatever that might be.

Nen lingered outside. Where the puddle had been, there was hardly a hint of damp, no glassy sheen to reflect anyone’s sky, real or imagined. The leaves lay on the pavement, the breeze rustled, a

car alarm blurted out a harsh bleat and then another before it was hushed. The afternoon was ordinary in every way. But she did have the ruby in her pocket.

She had taken it to a jeweler for appraisal. Expecting questions, Nen prepared a tale about a grandmother's ring that had never been reset. "I have this stone, I'm not sure what it is," she told the jeweler. He pulled out his magnifying glass, pincers, a loupe. No significant monetary value, he'd said apologetically, but clear, a genuine ruby. From him, Nen learned the difference—more or less—between a ruby and a garnet. Rubies were harder, and harder to find; red garnets, abundant. He explained that a ruby should be a bright, vivid red, and showed her how attempts to scratch it with a fingernail or a coin left no trace. Nen never had to trot out that grandmother she'd never met, who likely never wore jewelry, would spin in her grave to hear her name taken in vain—or not, might perk right up in the great beyond, delighted to be in on the joke, pleased a granddaughter of hers had enjoyed a brush with glory.

Nen met Margaret's gaze through the glass—no reflection in those crystal clear windows. She took a deep breath and followed the flounce of her mother's ostrich plume into the shop. Margaret hadn't closed in preparation for the event, but the shop wasn't crowded. Clear light picked up the honey and amber tones of polished shelves and floors. Rolling tables near the door held new arrivals, gift suggestions, summer reads. Books on Elizabethan England, renaissance history. A platform at the back doubled as a stage, filled now with tables for the Feaste. To the left, the small café area gave the impression of a brightly lit home kitchen—tiny counter, toaster oven. Coffee and pastries, sweet and savory. No sandwiches; Margaret had no patience for people's condiment manias—*more mayo, less mayo, you sure you don't have any ranch?* It was a bookshop, not a bistro.

Margaret waved, beckoning, then turned to set down the plate of lemon bars. "Have a look around," she invited, indicating a display of costumes brought in from the theater department at the state university.

Nen hadn't been in the shop all summer. She had been about to go in the day she'd been waylaid by Lacey's grandfather with the NATIVE SPECIES stickers. She worried, now, that her mother would blow it out of proportion, her visiting at last. But Margaret had other things on her mind, abuzz and aglow with her Feaste preparations. She was glad to have Nen with her—Nen felt her welcome as an almost physical warmth—but, aside from that sweep of cloak on the sidewalk, she didn't drop what she was doing.

Nen's parents had expected to run the shop together, had saved for years to strike out on their own. Six months after they opened, Nen's father died. Before that, Margaret had been home with the kids—gardening, canning, making ends meet. Remy taught high school French and Spanish, worked summers as a small-time contractor, building decks and fences. Nen thought he might have been a bookkeeper for a while—she had a vague memory of an auto-mechanic's office—but she kept forgetting to ask. Margaret kept the name Remy had chosen, Goldengrove Books—Hopkins had been his favorite poet. Beyond that, the shop was fully hers, built to the full rattle and bloom of her imagination. She displayed work by local artists, sent hand-lettered newsletters, chatty and personal. Literary words of wisdom and notes of encouragement were posted around the shop; purple cushions lined a rocking chair. Nen saw her mother's hand in the neat shelves, eye-catching covers faced out, the scattered footstools (doubling as browsers' seats) that brought higher shelves within reach. Her section labels were whimsical: Birds, Bees, and Other Creatures; Potboilers and Whodunnits. A framed certificate, people's choice award—best bookstore, best community events. The shop offered a bit of everything, new and used—fiction, gardening, children's books. A geology major in college (with a minor in set-design), Margaret kept natural history well stocked. She considered self-help books a racket, and contemporary poetry made her impatient, but she was tireless with special orders and out-of-print searches, anything people asked for.

A pair of rhodochrosite figurines, tango dancers ten inches tall, occupied a shelf in the performing arts section (Stage Doors to Orchestra Pits). The pink stone figures had long stood on a shelf in their living room. Now Nen wondered when they had moved to the shop. Margaret and Remy had taken lessons for a while, found a sitter for the kids, attended tango parties with other fans, traveled to a few low-key competitions, just to watch. A picture of the two of them laughing—outdoors, full close-up—hung on the wall near the dancers. Nen paused. “Hello,” she whispered, then looked around. She imagined a small shrine in the stacks, maybe a rhodochrosite urn (did they make those?), and was grateful they’d scattered her father’s ashes in the woods, even if the Polk Lake access had since burned in a late summer fire.

Finding herself in *Trees and Rocks*, Nen picked up a guide to gemstones. Skimming quickly, she read that rubies were associated with royalty and wisdom, that ancient civilizations considered the stone an amulet to ward off nightmares and danger, its blood-red color protection against injury. Nen looked up from the page, puzzled. Blood repels blood? Contains blood? The logic escaped her. In her pocket, she pinched the ruby hard between her fingers, feeling the controlled jab reassuring. She shouldn’t be carrying it loose; sharp as it was, it was liable to work its way through a seam. A stone of prophecy, she read, the ruby grew darker to warn of impending danger, lighter once the danger had passed. That would come in handy.

“Gemstones?” came her mother’s voice behind her. It was time Nen developed some eyes in the back of her head.

Nen closed the book. “Just curious.”

“That’s right, you—”

“Elizabethans believed rubies could prevent poisoning. Sapphires, too, and emeralds.”

“How would that work? Did they wear the stones?” Margaret asked.

“Like a good luck charm. Or else crushed up in a drink.”

“Pricey beverage. Would that be an antidote, or a preventative?”

This was getting too technical. Nen felt the magic of the ruby in her pocket waver, an impossible, unmistakable tingle in her thigh. “I don’t know,” she said.

“Maybe a jewel exchange,” Margaret mused. “Courtiers, rivals, heads of state—they all gave jewels as presents. And then for the queen, retaining the authority to bestow a jewel or not, seal an agreement . . .”

“Show me the Feaste menu,” Nen said, cutting her off.

Margaret turned easily. “Not really a menu. I’ll show you the plans. The potluck is easier to manage, and people feel more involved.” In its first years, the event included a catered banquet, but it was too expensive and too much wasted food, especially the year Margaret forgot to check the football schedule and the town emptied for the regional rivalry, half the population driving up the interstate with their stadium flags flapping, the other half barricaded at home in front of the game on TV. Potluck generated leftovers, but within reason. The potluck also allowed Margaret to sidestep authenticity debates. “It’s not a reenactment,” Nen had heard her say more than once. “It’s a shared occasion.”

People were invited to come in costume—their interpretation of the period, choice of region, identifiable character (historical, fictional, fantasy) or not. There was usually a Hamlet or two, perhaps a Lady Macbeth. Plumes and cloaks and lace ruffs and white face makeup, even a dog collar from the vet, a white plastic funnel up around the would-be jester’s ears.

“Won’t it be crowded?” Nen asked. The broad stage was usually occupied by overstuffed armchairs, now back in the storeroom, and rolling shelves that had been pushed to one side.

“It’s a happy crowd. A nice problem to have. We serve in the café, and we eat in shifts—it’s a potluck, but we do have the seatings, early and late.” People signed up for a course when they

purchased their ticket—a nominal charge, but it helped with turnout; ticket scarcity kept down the no-shows. The dinner seatings always sold out.

“We don’t want people with their plates in the aisles, bumping elbows, spilling food,” Jacob said, coming over. Tall and thin, with long-fingered, narrow hands, he was a tailor on the side, reenactment costumes, anything pre-1900. Today he wore his usual black jeans and short-sleeved plaid shirt, leaving fancy-dress to others.

“You run a tight ship,” Nen said. Jacob had worked for Margaret almost since the shop opened.

“Not so much.” Jacob glanced toward the children’s corner. There was no one in the section this afternoon, but Nen knew, unofficially, that Jacob sometimes let a child linger while their parent finished errands, maybe even went to work, mumbling about coming right back. Margaret turned a blind eye and put Jacob in charge of café inventory, so she would be able to avoid asking awkward questions about bagel purchases, cookies gone astray. She was turning a blind eye now, fiddling with something at the back of the stage.

Jacob was looking at Nen a little too closely. “How are you?” he asked. It had been Jacob who recognized Nen when she fell on the street; Nen could see he wanted to say something about that now. The question was halting—difficult for him to pose and difficult for Nen to hear. There was a circumstantial intimacy, lumpish, uneven.

“I’m okay, thanks,” Nen said, forcing a smile. Her fear of awkwardness with Jacob was another reason she had wanted to drop off her lemon bars and make her escape.

“I’ve been concerned. I understand from Margaret that . . . you’re not quite yourself?”

“My mother’s been talking about me?”

“All parents talk about their kids. But no, she hasn’t said much. I inferred.”

Nen nearly snapped that he should infer his own business, but thankfully stopped herself—she didn’t want to be unkind. She wondered what it was her mother had said—or not said—that Jacob

found revealing. “I think she . . . it’s all muddled. I don’t want to do what I always did, you know? That upsets her. It’s not like I hated it, like I’m rejecting her—I just felt some kind of need of a change. Like I was in a rut, a rut I didn’t choose, working against the current and it wasn’t making any difference.” She had said too much and too little; she was a babbling fool.

Jacob was as kind and discreet as ever. “That sounds difficult. Maybe give yourself time?”

“Right. Exactly. Thank you.” Nen shook her head, frustrated again. “It seems there should be—some reason, right? Some starting point. It should be obvious when something breaks; you turn it too hard and the handle snaps off. It shouldn’t be that you go to turn on the toaster one morning and it just doesn’t get hot.”

“No, I see what you mean. But maybe we’re too wedded to cause and effect,” Jacob suggested.

Nen took another breath, let the moment settle. “Where’s there room for dancing once you fill the stage with tables?” she asked.

“We dance between the stacks.”

“It’s the conga line of renaissance dancing,” Margaret said then, her arrangement complete. She was laughing. Jacob laughed with her.

Nen had no idea what they were talking about. “How do you mean?”

“The dance is quite formal,” Jacob said. “Not a merry jig. Let me show you. It’s easier to learn by doing, rather than listen to a laundry list of moves that are hard to keep in your head.”

Nen would never have pegged him for a dancer, but the dancing was important to Jacob, and he was eager to share. Nen really didn’t know Jacob well. She had thought he was a bookshop type, a fixture, but he wasn’t any more of an oddball than she was with her cougar visitation and history of near-obsessive swimming.

Jacob raised his right hand, shoulder height, palm out, and motioned for Nen to do the same. Hands flat, palm to palm, never touching. “Trace a circle,” Jacob said. “Stately steps. Imagine there

are others around us.” His voice was quiet, his enunciation absolutely clear. He was not shy so much as reserved.

Nen took a step forward. Jacob nodded approval. “That’s the way.” They rotated around their raised hands. “As if it were a Maypole,” Jacob said, confusing Nen. “Tall,” he added.

He wasn’t demanding, but there were a lot of details: spine straight, shoulders squared, knees soft, not too fast, hands behind your back now, never clasped. Nen was relieved when the bell rang on the front door, an old-fashioned, jingly shop bell on a velvet ribbon that had once been red.

Jacob jumped as if he’d been slacking and excused himself to go help the customer who had come in. The man wore a NATIVE SPECIES button, making Nen that much more eager to retreat. First, her mother had a chore for her. “Would you give me a hand spreading the tablecloths?” Margaret asked.

“Why don’t you close for a while, to get things set up?” Reclaimed fir planks creaked as Nen stepped onto the stage. The rental company had left the tablecloths folded in a box near the back.

“I never want to miss a sale. Or a possible Feaster. A Lost Elizabethan on the brink of being found.”

Margaret shook out the first cloth, snapped it over a table. Nen smoothed the fabric along the table’s length. Long white cloths like shrouds—the thought was far too morbid, but Nen thought it anyway: table shrouds. Rented, like the tables—could you rent shrouds? Or coffins? Surely not. Her father would not have had a shroud, just the urn, and then no need for an urn once the ashes were scattered; and now there was nowhere to visit, no gravesite like the one Lacey’s mother was trying to protect, the sense of monument, a way to carry or honor the past.

They talked as they worked. With the rise and flap of each cloth, air moved like wind against the magazine rack, the sheet-music bin. The fabric was catering-grade, wrinkle-free polyester, but the motion was delightful, another dance. Shoulder release, fabric snap, cloth wavering, then floating

down like angels' wings or a bedsheet worn soft. No. The durable fabric settled with a thump, not quite audible, but decisive. No poetry, no flight of fancy; Nen's fancy took flight all the same.

"I found Douglas' trombone in the basement," Nen told her mother. "You used to say you wanted to learn to play."

Margaret smiled. "That was just an excuse to keep it all these years."

"Why not sell it?"

"No good reason." Margaret smoothed a cloth that was already smooth. "He stopped playing after your dad died. I always hoped he'd start again. Didn't want to acknowledge that part of his childhood was over. And I felt bad—he wanted to play cello, but I thought trombone was so cool."

"Plus Bentondale schools didn't even have strings," Nen pointed out.

"That's true." Margaret laughed softly. "If you save something too long, it takes on a weight of its own. An imperative."

"That's why I got rid of the swim equipment," Nen said.

Margaret let out a long breath. Her eyes were sad, tired. "I know," she said.

It struck Nen that her mother, in all her nudging toward purpose and goals and a return to routine, had never offered her a job. She wasn't sure if she felt grateful or slighted. She appreciated not being put on the spot, but what if her assistance was not welcome? Maybe her mother wanted to protect something for herself, but what if finances wouldn't allow it? Nen tried to push the worry aside, but it stayed in the back of her mind. Was the upholstery on the comfy chairs worn? Did the floor look scuffed? Should her mother be charging more for the Feaste, cutting corners?

"Did you ever think of closing down?" Nen asked. "After Dad died? Closing Goldengrove?"

"Of course. It was overwhelming. But what else would I do? I had to support you kids. And we'd sunk so much money into it. By the time I looked around again, I loved it."

Nen snapped down another cloth. "You remember how Dad used to talk about aspect?"

Margaret looked up, eyebrows raised, but didn't say anything.

Nen went on, "That's what I'm feeling: I'm missing an aspect. As in, the grammatical category."

Margaret shook her head, not understanding. "You're telling me you have no future tense?"

"Tense isn't the same as aspect." How had her mother missed the lecture? When he was teaching Spanish, her father had been relentless, *pretérito/imperfecto* morning, noon, and night. "Tense tells us when something happens. Aspect tells us *how* it happens, or how the speaker views it as happening over time. The perfective aspect refers to an event understood as bounded, with no reference to flow of time during the action—as in, *I helped her*," Nen recited. "Imperfective aspect is for situations that exist continuously or repetitively. *I was swimming, I used to swim*. Perfect aspect communicates that an event happened prior to the time of reference: *I have driven, I had seen, I will have won the race*." Aspect was all about relations of time; because the words were funny, Nen remembered her father's voice with a mix of humor and resentment—"You want to be perfect, don't you?"

It was a fishing trip, one of their attempts to catch the native rainbow trout in the mountain streams of Idaho, a camping trip one summer, two summers—how often had they gone?—and her father beside her in the sun, talking about aspect, and Nen listening and nodding and letting it wash over her, except it didn't wash; it stuck, seeped in, caught in her hair. It must have been not long before he died, that it stayed with her so clearly. Or maybe not that either—maybe she was younger, six or seven, enough earlier that it wasn't driven out of her mind by shock and despair and disbelief; enough earlier that it was waiting for her when she needed a memory. Her father was hit by a car, moving a deer. She remembered that, over and over. And there it was, aspect again. *Drig, drag, drug*. She remembered the mucky, hot, clear cottonwood smell of the creek, her father's old shirts sweet with sunblock and bug dope. The way he was meticulous about his nails ("That's why it's called a *man-icure*," he used to say, glossing over Latinate word origins when it suited him.) He didn't care for hunting, but to honor his own father, he wanted to be better at fishing than he was. He'd spent

plenty of time with his kids, but Margaret had been home with them more often. By now he was something of a blur. Douglas looked more like Remy every year; Nen looked more like her mother.

“You liked being a swim mom,” Nen said, out of nowhere.

“I did,” Margaret agreed. She adjusted the drape of the nearest cloth. “I liked the events, the commotion and the outing. I liked watching you do well. Having the ultra-champion child was never the issue. I don’t think I fully understood until this summer, but I think something similar happened to me. The before and the after.”

Nen concentrated on smoothing an imaginary crease. Did everyone’s parents do this, try to show their understanding by claiming whatever you were feeling was exactly what they, too, had experienced?

“I saw that eye-roll,” Margaret said. Nen looked up, caught in the act, but her mother was smiling.

“*Swim, swam, swum.*” Nen’s swimming had happened largely after her father’s death. Now her sense of time and duration and the possibility of completion had been thrown off. “I am no longer able to project myself into that perfective aspect, ‘I will have swum,’” Nen said. “I am solidly on swum. At swum. There is no more, ‘will swim.’” She laughed at herself. “That sounds so final.”

“Isn’t that what you’ve been trying to tell me? Change means loss, and the loss is not necessarily filled or replaced, but something else happens, and you go on.” Margaret considered the stage, now set for the Feaste. She turned back to Nen. “This is going to sound strange,” she said. “And you might not like it. But it’s this: if a part of you, almost another Nen, is elsewhere, saving the world or making muffins for a different child or swimming circles around whatever that otherworldly competition might be, then I can make do with the Nen I have. It’s not even making do—you’re still shimmery, still marvelous. So you’re unwilling to swim, no competitive drive—that drive was never

something we really shared, was it? It was something I took for granted, recognized as part of you. But maybe that doesn't matter. You'll find something, find your way."

Nen stood quietly with her mother at the edge of the stage. Saying the wrong thing would be worse than not saying anything. She looked at her mother, looked down again. She had been given a gift. All she could give in return was attention. "You could play Pall Mall," Nen suggested, trying to come up with something new. "Up on stage, before the dancing, or after the Feaste."

"Pall Mall?" Margaret prompted.

"An early form of croquet, like a precursor. You could do it like miniature golf, only smaller."

"It's a thought," Margaret said. "Perhaps for next year."

Nen looked around the shop again. "Is there anything else you need help with?"

Margaret surveyed the orderly tables, the serving area, the decorations and mounted costumes, Jacob at the front of the shop ringing up a sale. "I think we're in good shape."

Nen took a breath. She was glad she'd come, but she didn't want to stay and make conversation with lost Elizabethans as they started to arrive. Didn't want to stand behind the serving table, admit the lemon bars were hers, make little jokes about how things turned out and how delicious it smelled and maybe I'll allow myself one more treat, it all looks so good. She *really* didn't want to dance.

"I think I've done my dancing for today," Nen said.

"I know," Margaret said. She hugged her daughter. "Have danced, will dance, were dancing," she added softly. She did understand.

Inspired by Martina's example, Nen had been determined to march into headquarters—stride through the front door, take the elevator as she had done every day for months—and claim that box of belongings and a rightful explanation. She stopped short at the heap—or absence of heap—that had been the West Building, thought again of all those battered bricks, somehow worthy of salvage. When she looked up, she was sure she saw a tilt to the Zinfeld tower. More than previously acknowledged. Served them right. She'd probably been holding it up, just with her presence. *Ha!* The outrage didn't propel her forward as she'd hoped. Nen stared at the shiny brass of the revolving door, felt the pull toward the building—almost, almost—then lost her nerve and walked on.

She hadn't lost her nerve—not fully, not really. She needed to collect herself, another loop around the block. Then she'd be ready. She pulled her shoulders back, gave herself a shake. Then she noticed a sandwich board propped on the sidewalk: history tours, “Benton Before” and “Benton Below.” She hesitated at the ticket booth, a free-standing blue shack. It looked like a cold place to spend a winter day, but when she got closer, there was a smell of singed felt, so maybe the ticket-seller had a brazier at her feet, or a space-heater and a blanket.

Nen had heard of the tours. Cole had made a joke, then admitted to buying tickets when out-of-town relatives came to stay. “A skim cheesy, but fun,” Cole had said. “Better than I expected.”

“Your timing is good—ten minutes to the next departure,” the woman at the ticket counter said.

“How far are we going?” Departure made it sound as if they'd be traveling.

“Entry's right over there.” The woman indicated a narrow door in the brick wall of the alley.

“Departure means start time.”

“What's the difference?” Nen pointed to the two tour titles.

“One starts in ten minutes, the other in an hour and a half.”

Nen weighed what she knew about shifting ground, the building collapse. “Is it dangerous?”

“Safe as houses.”

She bought the ticket. It was a stupid thing to do—she spent half the cash left in her wallet—but she was curious, and bored. A tour group would provide some company.

Twelve or fifteen people had gathered at the entrance before the guide emerged from the back of the booth, a slight woman dressed head to toe in black, save for a royal blue vest with fur accents at collar and hem. She moved like a dancer, but her words weren't especially elegant. She lined up her charges and herded them toward the stairs without explanation; that would come inside. Two or three children, mostly adults. Heavy-set, eager, bundled haphazardly against what they had evidently been warned might be cold, down in the tunnels below the streets of everyday. Half of them, eager to be impressed, buzzed with delighted curiosity. The other half, born jaded, had seen it all before, the last tour they'd been on was much better than this—they could already tell, it was obvious from the cheap paper of the tickets or the short wait for the guide or else because they were hungry—but they had to have something to write home about at the end of the day.

The stone steps were slippery, worn at the center of the treads. Barely tourist-worthy, unless the wear was part of the attraction, a suggestion from the very first moments that they were seeing behind the curtain, secrets would be revealed. Uncommon knowledge, off the beaten path, the promise of something unseemly, unexpected.

They paused at the base of the stairs, a low, dim room lit by purplish skylights. The skylights were cloudy glass tiles set into the sidewalk above. Back outside, Nen would find them suddenly omnipresent, though previously overlooked. “Safe as houses,” the ticket-seller had said, but Nen asked the guide about tour safety anyway.

“Nothing to worry about, all overblown,” was the reply. Until or unless someone got hurt, the tour company, too, had an interest in downplaying any possibility of change. The tour was “Benton Before”—how it used to be, not a hazards alert to how it was now.

North Benton was not a big city, with the two-tiered roads for haulage and waste removal a greater metropolis might boast. The passages were neither deep nor elaborate. But there were old pavements, the lower portion of a building or two. The group's footsteps boomed and echoed as they passed brickwork, limewash, mineral seepage, water stains. Nen heard water dripping in slow, sporadic plops, no real pattern. The air was stale, but stray currents blew in, as if from vents above—a blast of frying donuts, a hint of rot, the sharp sting of ammonia.

The guide stopped at a grouping of pictures on the wall. “This is what street level looked like seventy-five years ago,” she said. Her charges leaned in, squinting. The images had blurred in the enlargement; the long-ago street was hard to place. People peered at the ceiling as if they might be able to see through to today's streets, looked back at the pictures, listened to the guide. There were no photographs of the time before the buildings, of the river as wide across as a lake. The land reclamation had happened long ago.

Crowded around a three-dimensional map mounted on a pedestal in the middle of the room, they were encouraged to imagine the old North Benton, swampier, muddier, pummeled by weather and wind. The map's boundaries were vague, the scale unclear. Running her finger over the riverbed—always in the air, obeying the injunction not to touch—Nen tried to remember the map she and Lucy had found. She knew the estuary project was south of town, a no man's land not included in the present model. The tours offered up common knowledge without specifics. A sense of historic achievement was at the forefront—*this was all swampland once*. Then on to the next display without pausing to consider whether it might be swamped again.

One old storeroom had been redone as a teashop. The business hadn't thrived, and the guide passed over the teashop era quickly, not sinking so low as to claim historic merit for the tables and chairs, the pink tablecloths left in place, as if patrons and hosts had left in a rush. Without another enterprise in the wings, there was no need to clear the stage, remove the traces. It gave the room an

eerie, homey cast—*people lived here, passed the time of day*. One wall was covered in feathery ferns, all bathed in that bluish forest light from the glass sidewalk-ceiling blocks. Nen wondered if the ferns were a tearoom décor element gone feral. She ruffled the fronds—wasn't maidenhair a kind of fern?—releasing a lettuceey, outdoor scent against the musty damp. She almost bent to sniff the leaves, then held back. “Did these grow here on their own?” she asked.

The guide blinked. She had invited questions, but clearly had never been asked about the ferns. “Beautiful, aren't they? There's not a lot of light, so I expect they were planted at some point. We don't tend them, if that's what you mean. There's no gardener.”

Rather than linger over the failed tearoom, the guide drew the group's attention to several large-format newspaper pages, framed and mounted on one wall. A collage of old clippings praised visionary developers, civic leaders. Nen tried to make out the fine print. Warren, Walden, Yarrow—the names sounded familiar, or some of them did.

“These are really special, a charming custom,” the guide beamed, standing beside the most prominent panel, a collection of personal ads. “A delightful relic from the days of early North Benton.” Wooden floorboards creaked underfoot when she shifted her weight. “Pages and pages of them in the old library,” she added. “Come to North Benton, come build the future.”

You stole my heart. If I weren't in jail, I'd steal it back—Martha, send bail!

Wanted: experienced carpenter, must understand joinery; tell your grandchildren, you built North Benton.

Lonely businessman seeks wife. Small town, you'll brighten it.

“Get away to North Benton—and away from me!” proposed a member of the group, stooped and sallow but smiling broadly.

“Don't let the door hit you,” the woman beside him supplied.

“Mostly kinder than that,” the guide said. Things were slipping out of her control. She led them forward—no time to tarry.

The corridor sloped down. Three shallow steps at the end of a passage, then they found themselves in a wide room lit by lamps mounted on wall brackets, no skylights any longer. Nen tried to keep her bearings, thought they had turned away from the river. If today's riverbank was once too swampy to build on, further inland—a block or two over—there could be evidence of earlier foundations. She wasn't sure what she was looking for, but there had to be something.

A glass panel was set into one wall, a window onto the dirt. It looked like bones—a glimpse at archeological remains, a dig in progress. Nen shuddered, thinking the curve she saw was a skull. Looking closer, she could make out a teacup, a broken saucer, the blue rim of a bowl. She exhaled in relief, caught the eye of the woman next to her, who looked at her in surprise, then grinned. Nen waited for the guide's explanation rather than ask.

“The infill was completed over one hundred years ago,” the guide told them, her voice thick with pride. “Ladies brought their scraps and broken dishes, everyone contributed something. Like an old-timey barn-raising. Everyone did their bit.”

“Did they break dishes on purpose?” a child asked. “So they'd have something to bring?”

“I don't think so,” the guide said. “I think they'd have considered that wasteful.”

Nen suppressed a smile at the thought of a dish-smashing party, then thought of the bricks from the West Building, the people who had carted them away. Maybe the salvagers had their own swamps to fill, water rising in secret, unacknowledged mushy ground.

The guide gathered her flock once again. “This way. To the elevator, please.”

“Safe as houses?” Nen asked wryly, uneasy at the thought of going further down.

“No houses to see,” the guide said without turning.

In the rickety car, crushed between the musky perfume of a woman in a puffy green coat and the squirmy impatience of a sweaty twelve year old, Nen felt her pulse speed up. She pushed her hands into her pockets and counted silently, *one, two, three*, inhale, exhale, *four, five, six*, again.

“I heard they found bog mummies when the West Building fell,” a woman said as they jostled out. She was there for the ghosts and the gore, if there were any to be found.

“This area was never a bog,” the guide said quickly.

“So they *did* find mummies?” the woman asked.

“If they did, they weren’t *bog* mummies,” a man in an orange cap whispered with a smirk.

“Mom!” one of the kids whined, a low warning.

“Mummies of any kind seem unlikely,” Nen began. The group and the guide turned to her.

“Of course,” the guide agreed, gratefully. “Mummies are—”

“Because the conditions just aren’t there, are they?” Nen continued. “Like you said, this isn’t a bog, probably never was. But it’s also too unstable. The ground hasn’t been undisturbed long enough. I mean, a hundred years . . .” As she trailed off, Nen could hear water dripping below the staticky buzz of the lights. The group was staring at her now, maybe interested, maybe disappointed.

“So are there bodies down here?” another kid asked.

The guide laughed nervously. “I don’t think so. Some people say there are ghosts,” she added, before they were too disillusioned. Before they dropped the sensational in favor of attention to real and present dangers.

Nen looked down and saw a not-quite reflection at her feet. She felt herself pausing too long, drawn to the rippled blur, not an image so much as a shadow in the water on the floor. Leaves, possibly sky, as if she were outside, and the hint of a face. It must have been her own reflection, no more than that, but she didn’t think there was enough light, the lamps were placed wrong. There shouldn’t be that much water, either. Did she hear sloshing, a grinding clatter of pottery underfoot? A draft at her ankles pushed its way under the hem of her sweater, circled her waist, tickled the nape of her neck. The patriotic ladies’ crockery infill was too porous and slapdash to last forever. She raised her head to ask the guide another question, but the guide was far ahead, the group had left

Nen behind. What had she almost seen in that quarter inch of water where there should have been no water at all? It was already lost, the blurred image blurred further by incomplete recollection.

Stumbling on the rough floor, Nen reached for the nearest wall to keep her balance. The wall gave way like soft dough, as if her hand were about to be sucked through. *No!* She stumbled a step further before she was able to yank it back. Her hand released with a suctiony pop as the wall healed over. Nen studied her hand, wiggled her fingers. She was fully present, bodily whole. No chlorine burn in her eyes, like in the Zinfeld building, no handprint, not even a faint track. She wondered if her handprint above the empty pool had survived, a cave painting, ancient now in its unintelligibility, unanswerable evidence of some fleeting occupation of that abandoned space. She had wanted to go back down to the basement to look, but never got the chance.

What if she hadn't pulled her hand back? Could her whole body have followed it into the wall? And to what? She had felt a sharp certainty that she wasn't ready. Her redesign of the sweeper may have been necessary, but it was not sufficient, and maybe had been misdirected all along. Even if her goal was still unclear, she knew she hadn't yet arrived.

She touched the wall again. Just a finger, a tap. Ordinary brick—no sign, no message. No one else seemed to have noticed anything. Nen wanted to leave, but it was hard to see how. Were there no emergency exits? They were at the lowest point of the tour. Nen stared at the wall, nearly convinced herself she saw the floor level drop, like a slow-motion elevator, but knew it would not be so obvious—reach for the guard rail, the light switch, and it's already over your head.

That was the problem. The sinking *wasn't* obvious. But it was real. Nen could all but feel the ground subside, the brick floor drift in surrender. She tried to swallow her dread, felt it rising still, an intractable hiccup, involuntary burst and breath of fear.

She concentrated, tried to make the guide's cheerful, droning voice her only path. The passage was low. She could touch the ceiling if she stretched. Catching up to the group at last, Nen heard a

faint splash under her feet. Water dripped onto her hand—a drop, two drops. “Miss!” Nen said uncertainly, and then louder, “Miss?” The guide turned, waited for Nen to go on. “Isn’t it too wet in here? Wetter than it should be?” Her socks felt damp.

“Well, a basement will tend to be damp,” the guide said. “Another reason to do a good job of the Fishtide clear out, right?” She looked to the group for support.

Appreciative nods and understanding smiles rippled through the group. Nen looked down and saw water around her shoes. She turned to go back, wanting to put her hand on the wall again, but the guide blocked her way. “We have another tour coming through soon. You understand.”

Nen started to object, then followed the group without comment, relieved at the prospect of being above ground once again. Surely she had imagined the porous, unstable wall.

They emerged a block from where they’d entered, taking another elevator and then a sloped hallway, carpeted in a dull red with handrails like bannisters, as if they might slide backwards. The sky had clouded over while they were underground, but it was still daylight. Nen felt dazed. She wanted to tell someone about what she had experienced, but the group was already dispersing, their accidental association at an end.

After the tour, Nen walked home slowly. She was more certain than ever that she needed another look at the Zinfeld Industries basement, another look at the files Lucy had gathered, but she needed a plan. Headquarters would be closed now. She almost went back to the café, but she didn’t want to explain herself—her latest fears, the certainty that had come over her, when she was one more tourist in the white brick basement, that North Benton really was sinking. Better to go home, find some quiet in which to think. Half rational, half wild, and frightening, either way: the fear of water in the night, lapping at the feet of her bed. Fear of toppled buildings, raining bricks, she herself falling from the fifth floor—or with the fifth floor—though that wouldn’t be a problem, now

that she'd been fired. Safe as houses, the guide had said, and the ticket seller, but none of the houses were safe, not if the ground was shifting, crushed from above as the old crockery continued to shatter and crumble, washed at the edges by river water or tides, or even from below, rising groundwater suctioned out of the underground pockets where it had seeped and settled, had waited for generations—and now, disturbed, might be rising like a monster from the deep.

The walk felt both longer and shorter than the first time she'd made it. Shorter because she knew where she was going, longer because she was tired and afraid. The wind had picked up, the sky clouded over. Not many people were out, though the streets weren't empty.

She took the long way. She didn't cross the river, but she made time to visit the lion bridge. Ordinarily, she found the lions comforting. There was a whimsy to them, a pleased smile about the mouth, their manes curling in ringlets rather than waves, a warm yet complacent look in those stone eyes—she was reading too much in, of course, but she loved those lions.

Today, the lions didn't help. Nen stared into the stone eyes and they stared back. Finally, she turned and went home.

The apartment door was closed, but her key turned too easily—the deadbolt wasn't engaged. Could she have forgotten to lock it? Nen listened before turning the knob, then pushed the door open. Inside, she found Mrs. Zinfeld and Aria Moss, deep in conversation. The words Nen caught were “move,” “month,” and “storage.”

“Oh, Nen!” Mrs. Zinfeld exclaimed, turning at the sound of Nen in the doorway. “I hope you don't mind, I was giving Aria the lay of the land.”

“Mind? Of course not. Should I offer you tea?”

“Don't be silly. We intruded on you.”

Nen knew (or assumed; she'd never thought about it) that Mrs. Zinfeld had another key. She hadn't used it since Nen had lived there, so far as Nen knew. But Aria had said at Fishtide that she was ready to settle down. Logically, that meant she needed a place to live.

Aria looked even taller than she had before. Her braids were piled on her head, woven into a crown that should have been precarious but looked solid as the castle it resembled. Nen felt displaced, and therefore on edge, but also admiring. Aria's clothes were simple—narrow wool pants, soft leather shoes, a sweater that matched her braids in a shade between silver and steel. She moved like some kind of large, wild animal, and her low voice was soothing, a sound like water against skin.

Nen stepped out of her shoes and hung up her coat. She lined up her shoes by the door, taking time to collect herself and remind them, while she could, that she still lived there, had some claim, however tenuous. Nen's indefinite stay in the garage apartment had been extended without discussion. Once she started at Zinfeld Industries, she could have raised the question of rent, but it was easier not to. Now, newly fired, she was once more a charity case.

Mrs. Zinfeld had evidently assumed Nen was resident on a long-term, temporary basis. A reasonable assumption, except Nen had no clear sense of what long-term was. It was as if she had always lived in the redone garage. She must have lived somewhere in the past, but that somewhere else was just a feeling, bunched sensations that overtook her unawares, echoes in other people's voices. Nothing firm, nothing grounded and stable enough to stare at for any length of time. Mrs. Zinfeld had not grasped how thoroughly Nen had nowhere to go. Perhaps—shades of her own daughter, a lingering back-of-the-mind hope—she believed Nen, too, must be awaited somewhere.

“Things are going well, yes?” Mrs. Zinfeld prompted, smiling. “The new Sweeper has made quite an impression.”

Too late, Nen understood she had been too careful, had not admitted enough uncertainty. Had managed to fake it too convincingly. Now this elegant old woman was taking over her home, and

Nen didn't even have a job that might let her rent something else. It was all too much, just too too too too much, the unfairness of the universe since the beginning of time. Nen couldn't move another inch, couldn't take another step. Another breath. She couldn't bear it any longer. She wasn't even going to try.

She opened her mouth to speak, then closed it again. Swelling panic made it hard to breathe. Nen felt like she was trying to gain altitude, climb out and over her own chest, cross her own breastbone so she could take a real breath. That was the panic, the way the airless clog kept after her.

Aria seemed to sense the insecurity of her footing. "What's wrong, Nen?" she asked.

Aria's kindness pushed her over the edge. There was too much to explain, or too little. It was another building collapse. Nen broke down, hiccoughing and snorting, snot dragging across her face in threads and knots, ugly misery puddled on the durable rug where Nen crouched, arms hugging her torso and air escaping in shuddering rasps, choked breaths like a wheezing bellows gathering itself to blow again, horking mucus back down her throat in a pitiful attempt to breathe through her nose as her eyes were washed and washed again, no chance of focus, no end in sight, nowhere to go.

Aria bent down next to her for a moment, then took a seat on the sofa beside her. She stroked Nen's hair once or twice, rested a hand on her shoulder. Warmth radiated from her touch. Nen tried to anchor herself, braced her hands on the floor, pushed herself upright and almost fell onto the backseat sofa. She sat a few minutes longer, until she felt able to speak. "I took the Benton Before tour," Nen said, as if that were the root of everything.

"Oh! Today?" Mrs. Zinfeld sounded startled.

"With the West Building collapse, the other issues—they're still running those?" Aria asked.

"So far," Nen said. Slowly, painfully, she got the words out. Not all of them, not the full desolation. But the job, and nowhere to go, and Martina leaving her sweeper in the café when the hover trailer took off without her. Mostly about the job she no longer had, and what she'd seen on

the tunnel tour, the wall of ferns, the water on the floor. The fear that North Benton might be sinking. How her hand pulled into the wall when she touched it—that Nen kept to herself.

Mrs. Zinfeld focused on the firing. Nen felt her bristly need to put things right, intervene with reassurance or comfort. She offered a loan, told Nen she had no intention of putting her out on the street. She was ready to take on Wicket, wrestle him to the ground bare-handed. “You must believe, this was in no way my doing,” Mrs. Zinfeld repeated. Nen didn’t even care. Of course she *cared*—it was some comfort that Mrs. Zinfeld had not looked to force her out. And she was relieved that Aria’s presence in the apartment wasn’t part and parcel of the plan—first the office, then the home. But it wasn’t much comfort. It only underscored the limits to Mrs. Zinfeld’s influence.

“So you were fired only this morning?” Aria asked.

“When I went in, my things were on the reception desk. Along with a plant.”

“A plant?” Aria echoed.

“Did you talk to anyone?” Mrs. Zinfeld sounded sympathetic, but it was clear she wanted to know what Nen had done to help herself.

Nen shook her head. “I didn’t even take the box. There wasn’t anything in it.”

“Nothing?”

Nen shrugged. “A folder or two, a crystal paperweight that was on the desk when I got there. Nothing important. The folders were empty—I did check. It’s almost like someone was stealing office supplies *for* me. You know, save me the trouble.” She tried to smile, make it a joke, but then she understood something more: “If I’d had anything, anything of value—”

“Anything incriminating,” Mrs. Zinfeld cut in. “Yes. Whoever put that box together had ample time to help themselves.”

“And no reason was given?” Aria asked.

Mutely, Nen handed over the card. It had her name on it—as if that were a reason to keep it. She had so few keepsakes. She'd read it over a dozen times, as if rereading would reveal some greater meaning between the lines extolling her visionary work and wishing her every future success. Signed by everyone as if it were a sympathy card, a going-away-under-her-own-steam send-off. Now she looked at it again and saw that Lucy hadn't signed it. She wondered if that was deliberate.

It didn't take Mrs. Zinfeld nearly so long to make sense of the card—once over was enough. “That's Paula Ann's handwriting,” Mrs. Zinfeld said. “All of it.”

“Who?”

“Merlin's personal assistant.” She turned the card back toward Nen. It did look like the same writing, even if there had been some effort at variation for the different names signed—one sloping back, one loopier, one impossible to read.

Mrs. Zinfeld reread the message. “Since when did Zinfeld Industries let people go as soon as a project was completed?”

“Well, that's what I was there to do,” Nen said. She heard a defensive rise creep into her voice. Whose side was she on?

“And yet you did more, didn't you?” Aria said gently.

“Like how I was down in the archives with Lucy?” Too late, Nen tried to remember how much Mrs. Zinfeld knew. All of it, likely. She'd been at the protest when Nen and Lucy emerged from the basement. They'd talked about the false alarm. At Fishtide, when Ben Weymouth brought up the tilting buildings and the infill, she'd been more circumspect. Had she? Nen tried to remember what everyone had said. She'd needed Wicket, that she was sure of, and had done so for everyone to hear.

“It's time we let it fall,” Mrs. Zinfeld said abruptly. “Take it down.”

“What?” Equally surprised, Nen and Aria both turned at once.

Aria spoke first. "Take what down?"

"Headquarters, the riverfront, all those buildings. We should take them down in an orderly fashion so no one gets hurt, so the materials aren't unduly damaged and can be reused."

"And what goes in there instead?" Aria asked.

"Maybe nothing. Maybe it's time we back off."

Aria raised an eyebrow. "An orderly retreat?"

"Precisely. Though all of history would tell us that's a contradiction in terms." Mrs. Zinfeld was leaning heavily on the back of a chair. Nen could hear her fighting to measure her breath. She was surprised Aria didn't seem to notice.

"Are you all right?" Nen asked.

"I think I'll sit down. All nobby," Mrs. Zinfeld said.

"I should have taken the plant," Nen said, returning to her seat on the couch. "But it was heavy. I didn't want to carry it."

Aria folded her hands in her lap, her expression doubtful. Nen noticed a ring on her finger, similar to the rings Martina wore, though the silverwork was more elaborate, cupped around a central point, as if a stone were missing.

Mrs. Zinfeld, more attentive than Nen had been willing to credit, followed her gaze. "Didn't that setting hold a ruby?" she asked her friend.

"It did." Aria regarded the ring. "It makes me sad to see it this way, but I would be more sad to give it up entirely."

"Why not replace the stone?" Mrs. Zinfeld asked.

"It's not something you simply replace. One's not the same as another."

"It's pretty," Nen said. "Even this way."

"You don't find it unfinished?"

“That’s not all bad, is it?” Nen suggested.

Mrs. Zinfeld chuckled. “You do have your own way of seeing things, don’t you?”

Nen nearly said something sharp, but Mrs. Zinfeld’s smile was kind. “I guess I do. I’m unfinished. I mean, I’m finished at Zinfeld.”

“I’m sure you have a range of skills,” Aria said. She asked Nen where else she’d lived, where else she’d worked—prodding, helpful. Nen fought not to squirm in her seat.

“Nen fell from the sky,” Mrs. Zinfeld said at last, an edge to her voice. “That’s all she’ll tell us.”

“Or all she knows.” Aria turned back to Nen. “Is that how it feels?”

“No,” Nen said firmly. “That’s not how it feels.” *Fell from the sky* was nothing like how she felt. She forced herself to meet Aria’s eyes. “But there’s nothing else,” she admitted.

Aria nodded slowly. “Sometimes that’s an answer in itself.” The way she said it was comforting. It was also somehow explanatory. She included no detail, no step-by-step breakdown, and yet Nen felt Aria knew something. She could help.

Nen shook off the droplets of impossible recognition. She cast about for something mild. She didn’t want to further upset Mrs. Zinfeld, but she couldn’t forget what she’d seen in the tunnels, the splash underfoot, her damp socks. “What do you think of the marsh project?” Nen asked Aria. “The estuary restoration?”

Aria glanced at Mrs. Zinfeld as if to see if she’d heard. When Mrs. Zinfeld turned away, Aria smiled in the too-knowing way she had (Nen found it at once reassuring and aggravating), asked if that was the fight she wanted to take on, and purred something indistinct and unobjectionable about a time whose time had come, about restoration and reconciliation and the end of all justified means.

Nen’s throat was dry; it wasn’t just leftover hiccups that made it difficult to speak. Crying had dehydrated her, as if she’d hiked through a desert. Her voice came out a croak. And why a croak, when your throat was dry? Weren’t frogs wet, amphibious? She almost asked the question aloud,

wanting for another moment to think about something else, but stopped before she showed herself a completely harebrained fool.

“Let me get you a drink of water,” Aria said. Less ceremonious than Mrs. Zinfeld, she filled a glass from the kitchen tap.

“Oh dear,” Mrs. Zinfeld lamented, “I should have thought of that.” Floored by the hugeness of Nen’s grief and confusion, Mrs. Zinfeld’s nurturing responses had deserted her. She had not witnessed or waded through so much emotion in years.

Nen wiped her eyes with the back of her hand—useless—then her sleeve, mumbled thanks, and took a sip from the glass Aria handed her.

And spat it right back out.

“Salty,” she said. At Fishtide, Nancy Weymouth had complained of occasional salt in her taps, but the Weymouths lived a ways down the block. If saltwater had made it as far as the Zinfeld household, something was very wrong indeed. Misplaced pumps, corroded pipes—the whole system might be compromised. Aria drew her brows together—worry, disbelief? “Really,” Nen insisted. She took one more sip, the tiniest possible, and set the glass on the floor. Aria picked it up, sniffed it.

“You can’t smell salt,” Mrs. Zinfeld snapped, leaning forward to take the glass, her breathing difficulty forgotten.

“Well yes, you can, in high enough concentrations,” Aria said. “Think about when you’re at the ocean. You smell the salt.”

Mrs. Zinfeld pursed her lips. Nen almost laughed, seeing the Zinfeld lip-pursing directed at Aria. Aria only smiled. “You know you do,” she insisted. “But taste it, if you’d rather.”

Mrs. Zinfeld took a delicate sip, then winced. “Salt,” she agreed immediately. She did not spit.

“Go ahead, spit,” Aria urged. “You know you want to.”

Mrs. Zinfeld set the glass, still nearly full, on the counter and spat into the sink. She spat again, grimacing. “Time to call the plumber.”

“It might not be a plumbing problem,” Nen said, surprised at her certainty.

“Meaning?”

“It might be systemic. If water levels—the aquifer—were drawn down too far during drought years, that would leave room for salt water to seep in.” Nen thought again of water pooling on the floor of the Benton Below tour. “Do sweepers ever work indoors?” she asked, wondering why she’d never thought of that before.

“Not as a rule,” Mrs. Zinfeld replied. She turned to Aria, “We should go, don’t you think?” To Nen she said, “Do you need a moment to yourself? Would you care to join us for supper?”

“I’m fine,” Nen said. “I have some bottled fizztea. But yes to supper. I’d like that.”

“No mycoccine this evening,” Mrs. Zinfeld said. Did she wink, or did Nen imagine that?

Aria laughed. “Wonders never cease.”

“You don’t like it?” Nen almost added *either*, but caught herself in time.

“Mycoccine is a virtue food,” Aria said. “No one really *likes* it.”

“I find—” Mrs. Zinfeld began.

“Considerable nutritional value, high-quality protein, yes,” Aria finished. “No aftertaste.”

“I hardly—”

“You used to hurl a mean spitball,” Aria interrupted. “Laser aim, clear across the room. Poor Miss Davies, smack on the back of the neck.”

Mrs. Zinfeld smiled at her friend. “The way she pinned her hair up—what a target. And the way she grizzled on about unruly girls.”

Looking from one to the other, Nen felt a wash of envy, wondering about herself at school. She wanted to say something about how she couldn’t believe they were ever that young, that disruptive,

but realized she had no point of comparison, could not remember a self much younger than she was now. Aria managed to carry a tempting whiff of danger or unpredictability; Mrs. Zinfeld bore the weight of authority, but authority eroded, its half-life spent. Nen went looking for her own memories of youthful mischief, sending a rodent into the memory pantry in search of crumbs—but came up empty. No room at the inn, nothing to see here people, move it along.

“I bet I still can,” Mrs. Zinfeld was saying.

“Throw in your button and we’ll see,” Aria goaded.

“Get another glass of water, you don’t want to run dry.”

Aria refilled the glass.

“Is it still salty?” Mrs. Zinfeld asked.

Aria took a sip. “Not so much. Still, worrisome.”

They trooped out back, nudging and jostling. Nen watched through the window. A spirit of wild play had come upon them. Soon Mrs. Zinfeld and Aria Moss were engaged in a spitting contest in the garden, school friends giddy with mischief. “You’re not helping,” Nen wanted to tell them, ready to cry all over again. She saw how much fun they were having. She wanted to join in, even though they weren’t helping, or maybe because of that.

Nen felt a forward impulse, a need to do the next thing. Maybe she was compensating for her lack of past, or maybe she had always been this way. She tried without success to recall what plans she’d had, what kind of goal on the horizon. Yet it felt right, the pushing forward. Felt authentic, the real Nen—whatever that meant.

But what next thing? She thought about Martina, wondered where she’d be spending the night. On the tour, Nen had been reeling at having been fired, and at Martina’s impetuous bravery, throwing down her sweeper when the hover trailer floated off. Then she was frightened by the suction of the wall against her hand, the force it had taken to pull free. Looking now, one hand still

seemed redder than the other. Peeled, as if the outermost layer of skin had been removed, like the slick shiny surface of a scar. She hadn't paid enough attention, or hadn't paid attention to the right things. But those founding names on the wall, Walden among them—she'd heard that one somewhere. She pulled out her list from the otherwise empty drawer where she'd put it for safekeeping, read it again. The back was a mumbo jumbo of truncated lines. *pollutants . . . flow . . .* *ological benefits . . .* On the front, handwritten: “%s are off.” Could that be saltwater flow? Pollutants? Nen slipped the list into her pocket and followed Aria and Mrs. Zinfeld outside. The game was winding down.

Wanted posters, hand-lettered and crude, appeared on trees and light posts around town, a leering Merlin Wicket at the center of a bullseye: *Merlin Wicket isn't quite cricket*. A truckload of girdles was dumped on the doorstep of Zinfeld Industries, all monogrammed with the initials *MW*. Rumors spread—rising water, shaky ground, payoffs small and large. Now the accusations came with evidence, grainy reproductions of signed statements from the Zinfeld board of directors, Merlin Wicket prominent among them. The instability of the riverside buildings was established, but who was responsible? That was the question people needed to be asking, the question all those posters were meant to provoke. Who had ducked responsibility for fixing problems once they became known, had continued to deny there was any danger to address? Who was responsible for letting it happen in the first place?

After being fired, Nen spent more time in the garage apartment. She didn't have much else to do. She helped Mrs. Zinfeld with the garden, trimming back woody herbs that were edging out of control—rosemary, lavender, sage. Indoors, she polished mirrors, dusted the molding. Her sense of Mrs. Zinfeld supervising in the background had prompted her to keep the place neat ever since she'd moved in. It didn't take much. Her apartment remained sparse, though by now she had collected a few treasures. The midnight velvet Fishtide dress she hoped she'd have another chance to wear. A tea towel Jick had sent her home with, wrapped around a warm loaf. Pebbles she'd picked up along the river on a longer walk, beyond the center of town, where the banks were low.

Nen had saved during her time of employment; in the back of her mind she was afraid the job wouldn't last. Having no past and no particular reason to count on a future might have made her spendthrift. Instead it made her cautious, and she had put money aside every week. She used it now for groceries (mycoccine was ridiculously cheap), for a new hat, but also to place personal ads. Like

the ones displayed on the underground tour, with a twist. They took off like wildfire, posted and reposted on electronic bulletin boards, in newspapers and digital newsheets.

The early ads she'd seen on the tour had been the stuff of land speculation and romance. Nen's were sharper: *Shaky Foundation Seeks Supportive Partner. Wanted: one time traveler—Turn back the clock and turn on my heart. Depopulated Estuary Seeks Shorebirds for Resettlement Opportunity.* The ads seemed funny at first, no more than that; as people began to understand, they started to catch on. Jick kept track of the clever ones, shared them with Nen before he knew she had anything to do with them. Café chatter swelled; people read new ads aloud, chalked them on the pavement; one young woman had her favorite tattooed on her calf. Nen shared their smiles, but didn't give herself away. The secrecy itself was satisfying, the air of possibility, not knowing where it might lead.

It took some time to reach Lucy. Somehow, messages Nen left at the office didn't get through. Surprise, surprise. She had no other way to reach her, short of camping out on the doorstep and ambushing Lucy on the way into work. She didn't want to do that, not unless she had to. She was afraid, for reasons she chose not to examine. Eventually, Lucy answered the phone.

Nen wanted to show her what she had seen on the tour. Not just tell her about sloshing water on the ground, the guide blocking her return. Not after that "pop" in the wall. She wasn't sure what had happened, but it was clear, the tour was becoming dangerous. If Lucy saw for herself, she might understand, and help Nen understand, the pieces that weren't falling into place.

They met at the ticket booth. What should have been the ticket booth—the window was boarded over. The door Nen had entered barely three weeks earlier with fifteen other local history buffs in search of a none-too-cheap thrill now had an outer door of metal bars, padlocked and chained as if to secure pearls beyond price, treasure that had been hoarded for years. The chain even looked a little rusty—the set designers had thought of everything.

“There were tons of people,” Nen said, disbelieving. “There was a line to get in. They hustled us out at the end so the next group could start.” She pulled on the chain, half expecting it to snap off in her hands, but it was solid.

“I don’t think it’s a gone-out-of-business closure. More like, closed down,” Lucy said. She wore a fuchsia wool coat, the collar turned up against the wind. Nen was surprised—Lucy seldom wore flashy colors—but it didn’t seem worth mentioning in the face of that locked door.

Nen felt like the hapless heroine in a fairy story: *there was a forest right here, a building*. Now the castle was overgrown, the briars had taken over. “I was just here.”

“Are you sure? You’ve talked about your memory holes.”

“That’s before. I mean, I have no memories from before . . . I don’t know, before that day I met Martina, the water-sweeper, when it was like she found me on the street. But I remember everything since, practically minute by minute. It’s not a memory *problem*, it’s a void—I don’t have this stockpile other people seem to count on, some deep prior experience for every day of the week.”

“Sorry, sorry, all nobby,” Lucy soothed.

Nen was getting wound up, explaining too much without explaining anything. Lucy shifted the plant she was carrying to her other hip. It was the plant Nen had left behind the day she was fired. A yellow bow was still tied around the rim of the pot. The red glaze was almost iridescent. It was too nice to throw away, but too much trouble to keep alive in an office. It was also too big to carry around—Nen thought it looked bigger by the minute, as if it were growing before her eyes.

“I thought you’d take the clapping plant when you left,” Lucy said. Her words were angrier than her tone. Had the plant been Lucy’s gift all along?

Nen held out her hands. “Let me take it now,” she said. “But I didn’t leave, exactly. I was fired.”

“Never mind, it’s not the plant I care about. Where to?” Lucy asked.

“The park?” It was cold, but they were dressed for it. If they went to the café, Jick might think Nen had come for free food—not that she was above accepting a sandwich. Besides, there was something in the park she wanted Lucy to see, if she couldn’t show her “Benton Below.”

They walked without saying much, settled on a bench facing away from the street. “Not as shady as last time I sat here,” Nen said, looking at the bare trees. Leaves had been raked up to mulch the perennial borders and the park smelled of fall—dry straw, an odd freshness of incipient decay. She remembered the way Martina had led her to the bench, when she could barely walk on her own. Months ago now, that other lifetime. One tree stood out, a frondy evergreen. “What’s that tree called?” Nen asked, pointing.

“The fern tree?”

“Seriously?” It seemed a frivolous name for an elegant tree.

Lucy nodded, then looked around. “Will you look at that!”

A croquet court was laid out in the park. Wickets were wrapped in foundation garments, fluttering bits of beige or blue elastic that would have obstructed the path, had the wickets been meant to be played. Nen was surprised no one had cleared them up—censorship in the guise of civic neatness—but perhaps the people charged with maintenance had been amused, or simply tired. The pegs at either end were towers, Zinfeld Industries and the New Tower, the one building that stood beside it, now that the West Building had fallen. Nen was proud of those pegs—she’d taken some trouble, painting a semblance of the Zinfeld tower’s brass revolving door at the base of one peg, a wash of green window crisscrossed with gray on the other.

“Nice sentiment. But who has the time?” Lucy scoffed, waving at the bent and tilted wickets.

“Me, for one,” Nen said. “Having been fired and all. I’ve got nothing but time.” She crossed her arms, pulled her sweater tighter. The wind was colder than she’d expected.

Lucy looked at her hard, obviously curious under her cool façade. “You’re not telling me—”

“Yup.” Nen couldn’t suppress a grin of pride, but then she saw Lucy’s look was more one of disapproval than of wonder.

“Ingenious. But does something like that make even a tiny bit of difference?”

“I don’t know,” Nen admitted.

“What if you make it all a big joke? With your whimsy brigade or whatever you call it?”

“It’s just me,” Nen said. “I’m not a brigade.”

“It won’t get your job back.”

“I don’t want the job back. I want to bring down Wicket.” He had cost her a job, but he was endangering others as well, putting lives at risk, not just paychecks.

“He’s more dangerous than you think,” Lucy cautioned. “And he won’t like you mocking him. Especially about croquet.”

“He did seem righteously pleased with himself at Fishtide,” Nen admitted. “Croquet this, croquet that—as if everyone there didn’t already know who he was. But that’s why it works, see? The dressed up croquet pegs.”

“You want to be careful about waking a lion,” Lucy warned, and Nen thought of the lions on the bridge. But then Lucy added, more dismissively, “He’d need to see it first. He’s not omniscient.” Making Nen’s efforts at once foolhardy and futile—not even faint praise.

Nen took a breath, ready to defend herself, then exhaled without speaking, more sigh than dissent. Out of her depth yet again. Lucy shifted the plant onto the bench. It was awkward between them, an overdone centerpiece at a holiday dinner. She lifted it back to her lap. At that moment, Nen understood Lucy might be as uncertain as she was. Lucy was always so serious—cynical, wry—yet here she was, hugging a nameless, unlikely-ever-to-bloom houseplant in a glazed ceramic pot.

“Who chose the plant?” Nen asked.

“Cole. You know, clean lines. It was kindly meant.”

Nen stroked one of the plant's leaves with a fingertip, thought about where the kindness might lie. "Why did you bring the thing, anyway?" The plant had tall, slender leaves, like licks of green flame, variegated, darker and lighter green. The fronds seemed to come up from the soil one by one, like a clump of grass, the blades an inch or more across at their widest, tapering at the tips.

"I was trying to put something in the box for you. Then Cole showed up, so I shoved it into the dirt as fast as I could. I don't think he saw." Lucy moved the plant to her other thigh.

"Saw what?"

"The doc-fob. But then you left the plant."

Nen was impressed. "A doc-fob? Aren't those things expensive?"

"Which is why I was counting on you to take the hint."

"And they're dirt-proof?"

Lucy tapped the rim of the pot, as if in encouragement, or maybe knocking wood. "I guess we'll find out. I added a couple of folders to the box, to make you think *documents*."

"Very cunning. That was supposed to make me poke around in the soil?"

Lucy raised her hands in surrender. "I know, long shot. But it was also to have something to put in there. That and the paperweight."

"I loved that paperweight."

"But you didn't take it, either." Lucy seemed put out that Nen had missed the sentiment as much as the subterfuge. She was professionally disappointed and personally hurt.

"The whole thing ticked me off—being fired, that stupid box. So I missed your secret message."

Lucy moved on. "This morning, with Cole watching, I couldn't dig out the doc-fob, so I brought the whole pot. The box was in people's way at reception, I took it upstairs. Before, I mean."

"Did you think I'd come back?" Nen had been making a statement of her own, leaving the box.

“Who knew? Any road, you know how Cole’s always there, early and late. I felt like he kept looking at it, keeping an eye on it.”

“He was watching the pot? He should have known it wouldn’t boil.”

Lucy looked at her blankly.

“You don’t say that?” Nen asked. “A watched pot never boils?”

“No.”

Nen shrugged. The way she talked still made her stand out; thoughts that sounded normal to her sounded strange to others. She asked, “What did he say when you took the plant?”

“I did it at lunch.” Lucy smiled. “I feel like a spy. A movie spy.” She pulled her coat close at the throat, looked furtively over her shoulder, eyes wide behind her horn-rimmed glasses.

Nen laughed out loud, savoring the playful Lucy. Then she took a deep breath and came back to the point. “So, I went on the underground tour.”

“As you mentioned. Any good?”

“It was pretty entertaining. Did you know the landfill is full of smashed teapots, broken plates?”

Lucy nodded, pushed her glasses up. “Oh, yeah. They had ladies’ salvage drives.”

“You knew about that?” Nen had thought it too crazy to be true, or too small-scale to be credible. Lucy’s calm awareness was deflating; her matter-of-fact assimilation of what to Nen had seemed bizarre and incriminating felt like a slap in the face.

“It was in the archives. It can’t have been much, as a percentage of fill. The population wasn’t big, and how much smashed crockery does any one family have piling up in the shed? It was a propaganda thing, get the ladies on board, appeal to their patriotic boosterism.”

Nen had on a heavy sweater, ready for the chilly underground tour they’d been unable to repeat, but she shivered as the wind cut through her sleeves. She felt her hands starting to chap and wished she’d worn gloves. “Is that plant going to be okay?”

Lucy looked at the spiking leaves, thrust her head forward and sniffed, as if that might tell her something. “Should be fine. I don’t think it’s tropical.”

“It’s freezing out.” The sky was clear—the wind had swept it bare of clouds. Nen scuffed her toe through the leaves in front of the bench. Whoever did the raking had missed some, or else they’d blown loose from the pile. There was no smooth way to introduce the subject, so she jumped in. “I’m worried about Promenade,” Nen said. The holiday was an annual carnival of outdoor walking, with costumes, puppets, giant balloons. Even those who didn’t gather at the riverside made a point of a midday stroll. There was reasonable hope of good weather, the first breath of spring.

“Worried how?”

“That whole riverfront area is way less stable than anyone wants to admit.”

“Tell me something I don’t know. But I don’t think—”

Nen cut her off. “I think the combination of a lot of people, and if there were a high tide—”

“But—” Lucy’s voice started to rise.

“Let me finish. I looked it up. There’s another king tide due,” Nen said.

“Like the original Fishtide? Water up to who knows where and fish swimming in the streets?”

“Only there weren’t even most of these streets then, right? I mean, the whole Fishtide thing must be mostly myth, but we don’t want to count on another miracle.” Even in the face of drought, sea levels had risen. Everything was off kilter, out of expectation.

“What do you want me to do?” Lucy asked.

“I’m worried the walk could collapse. Maybe I want you to tell me I’m overreacting.”

Lucy thought for a long moment. “I can’t do that,” she said at last. “I mean, I don’t necessarily think the bank is about to collapse, but the whole thing is clapping unstable. And I didn’t think about the tide—we’re so far inland, I didn’t think to look it up.”

“Once upon a time, this was all tidal marsh,” Nen said. It made no sense to her that people seemed to have completely forgotten the ocean. It was only a few miles away.

“Once upon a time, there were dragons,” Lucy said.

“Ha, ha. Didn’t Cole talk about his grand-gran saying the river looked like a lake?”

“Prior era.” Lucy sounded tired. “I know, missed opportunity. We should have done more. Any road, the doc-fob.” She dug with her index finger in the loose soil at the edge of the pot.

“It’s still in there?”

“I told you, I didn’t have a chance to get it back.” Lucy seemed to be having trouble finding it now. She pulled her gloves off and rotated the pot, as if unsure which side she’d buried it on.

Nen felt herself subside into the bench. She was no more stable than the tide-weakened landfill, no more firm in her convictions. Lucy’s expression softened. “I was mainly looking for a way to back it up, get it out of the building. I’m not sure what I thought you could do with it. What you should do with it. There!” She fished it out with a grunt of triumph, blew off the loose dirt. The doc-fob was the length of her index finger, flat and narrow, black with a bright yellow tip. Metallic, not too plasticky. She held it out to Nen.

“I need a way to access it,” Nen said, “make sure it’s not damaged. Mrs. Zinfeld has a reader.”

“Is that a good idea?”

“She wouldn’t necessarily ask why I needed it. I’ve used the reader before. But also, I think it would be fine if she did ask.” Nen told Lucy about Mrs. Zinfeld’s offer to tear the whole place down, her expanded interest in the estuary and restoration and all that entailed.

Lucy listened, noncommittal. Nen had begun to understand that the sweepers might be a problem in themselves—a “solution” that should be abandoned. But she was fancy free now, while Lucy had worked hard for promotion and probably wanted—needed—to keep her job.

Nen reached into her pocket, then held up a clipping of the first ad that had appeared in the local weekly. “Did you see these? I placed that.”

Lucy’s eyes widened. “You’re kidding.”

“On the tour, I saw these sheets of old newspaper up on the walls, and I thought, I could do that. We all could.” Nen felt herself beaming.

“Who else knows? You don’t want to get into more trouble.”

“I’ve already been fired.”

“There’s worse things.”

“I have more,” Nen said, pushing the warning aside. She’d written out the ads she was about to post on scratch paper in neat block printing. She showed them to Lucy. *Lonely building seeks proper caretaker. Older building, hoping to get in touch with its roots. Are you the one that got away? Meet me by the river.*

Lucy read them, read them again. Then she chuckled. “Maybe a skim subtle for your audience.” She pushed her glasses up, stretched her legs out in front of her. Seemed to be thinking.

Nen had been thinking, too, about more than her ad campaign. “You know how the posters for those tours always imply deep, dark secrets—unknown North Benton, all that?” she began. “Who did the Zinfelds buy the building from? Was there a Walden? Or Yarrow?”

“Walden? That’s on the deed. The West Building deed.”

Nen stared.

“That’s what I’ve been wanting to tell you,” Lucy went on. “I figured out who owns—owned—the West Building. It’s all there on the doc-fob.”

Nen swallowed. “You know who that is, right? That’s Merlin Wicket.”

“No clapping way!” Lucy sat back on the bench as if pushed. The plant wobbled on her lap. Nen reached out a hand to stabilize it.

“He told everyone at Fishtide. It’s not even a secret. Or he never thought I’d follow up.”

“Swaggering clap. You need to see this.” Lucy dug in her pocket, pulled out a flexible reader screen in a burgundy frame.

“Why didn’t you—?” Nen started.

“I have a pocket reader for work. I wasn’t sure I wanted to get it out in public. But you need to look *now*.” Lucy stabbed the doc-fob into the reader’s upload bay and offered it to Nen. “First doc in the queue,” she said. “You’ll see when you open it. Do a related-term quick search. Keyword, *insurance*.”

Nen began to enter the words. Her fingers were cold and the input pad was sticky. She squinted at the tiny screen, trying to make sense of what she saw.

M. Walden. In his arrogance he had hidden in plain sight. It worked for decades, because his lies had been mainly of omission: he had known much more than he said, always, and had profited, pocketing the difference. Merlin Wicket owned the West Building—what was left of it. And because it was heavily insured, Wicket stood to gain by the building’s destruction. He could afford to be indifferent. Stand or fall, feast or famine, he’d come out ahead.

Nen felt Lucy growing impatient, thought she was about to grab the screen back and read it herself, when Lucy hissed, “Careful! Look!” Nen saw Martina crossing the park, looked for a hover trailer in her wake before she remembered. “I’ll tell you later,” Lucy said quickly, motioning for Nen to put the reader out of sight.

Martina stopped for a moment before coming forward. “Hello,” she said, her smile tentative. Nen felt unreasonably happy. She hadn’t seen Martina since she’d abandoned the sweeper and her smashed wrist monitor at Jick’s café.

“Have you met?” Nen asked. “Martina, this is Lucy; Lucy, Martina.”

They nodded at each other. Martina remained standing, as if she were being interviewed or would soon be on her way. Nen felt tension snap between the other two. She knew Lucy had no

way of knowing how far she could trust Martina, how far to include her in their confidence, but the undercurrent made her nervous.

“What brings you here?” Lucy asked, then caught herself. “Sorry, that came out wrong.”

“Day off,” Martina said. She waited a beat. “They’re all days off, now.”

“You were at the Zinfeld Industries protest,” Lucy said.

“I was,” Martina acknowledged. “I’m not sweeping anymore.”

“Martina has—” Nen began.

“I’ll be leaving soon,” Martina said, cutting her off.

“Leaving North Benton?” Nen asked. If she might not see Martina again, how could she recover the connection from their last conversation? Maybe they weren’t quite friends, but they might become friends. “I hope you’ll stay in touch,” she said, then felt the weight of every farewell platitude pulling her down.

“You’ll miss Promenade?” Lucy asked.

“I might try to get in with one of the vendors,” Martina said. “Sell snacks or some nonsense. Earn some chits.”

“Nen remembers back to the day she met you, but nothing before that,” Lucy said. “She says it’s a blank wall. Does that make any sense?”

Nen shifted on the bench. All of a sudden, Lucy and Martina were dissecting Nen and her problems as if she were another plant in their care.

“I guess so.” Martina looked past them, into the trees—as if she felt put on the spot but didn’t know how to get away. There was hardly room on the bench for a third person, and it would be hard to converse, lined up in a row, but that left Martina standing before them, a supplicant.

“Do you know anyone else with that short a memory?” Lucy pressed.

“I don’t—” Nen started, then thought, why bother? She had already tried to explain.

Ignoring Lucy's question, Martina spoke to Nen. "You were just there," she said. "Out of nowhere. It started out an ordinary day, but it doesn't happen all the time; one minute you're looking at a shallow pool of water, next minute there's a person lying there and the water is gone."

"Maybe you sucked me up out of the ground, with the sweeper."

Martina snorted, then looked at Nen more closely. "I don't think so."

Nen had been semi-serious—she had, at least, been ready to hazard the possibility, and wondered if Martina would think it could have happened that way—but Martina treated the idea as too silly to consider. She had laughed it off and moved on before the paint was dry.

Nen wasn't ready to leave the thought. "Maybe I used to be made of water. Maybe the water turned into me." Spoken aloud, the idea was almost plausible.

Martina smiled. "You're a water creature," she said.

"Are you even real?" Lucy whispered, joining in.

"I think so," Nen said. She couldn't tell if Lucy was joking.

"I remember every bit," Martina said. The hesitation was gone: she had given this a lot of thought, had worked to recall the details. "I must have been absorbed in my own thoughts," she continued. "And Nen, I think you hit your head. The day was scary bright. It's my job to be observant, or it was, but some days—it could be so beautiful, you know? The chance to be outside, the sunshine, the way the clouds move. Maybe I was distracted by those clouds. I remember they were ribbon thin behind the towers, stretched across the sky like another river. Like the game we play at home, my daughter and I. She loves it, it's been too long since we could play in person: find the shape in the cloud. We try to play over the phone, but she gets distracted, and sometimes the phone reminds us how much we miss each other, more than it helps. Sometimes my mother asks me not to call. My daughter always sees animals in the clouds, ever since she was little—horses and birds. Never fish. She always lived far from water. Creeping salt pan doesn't count."

By the time Martina finished, Lucy was nodding. Martina looked down, pink-cheeked, as if relieved to have gotten it all out and a little embarrassed at the long confession. Nen noticed how still Martina held her hands.

“Your rings,” Nen started. “Do they, I don’t know, mean anything? Are they part of a—”

“Traditional costume?” Lucy supplied. There it was again, the condescension Nen had noticed before, as if Lucy saw Martina as coarser, lower class.

“You can call it that if you want,” Martina said. “A lot of people where I come from wear them. They get handed down.”

“I’m sorry,” Lucy said sheepishly. “I do know better.”

Martina let her words hang in the air, gossamer of apology and recognition. Then she said, “My gran should have had a piece of that. Of the evaporation fields.”

Lucy perked up. “What do you mean?”

“There was an inheritance, money and a tiny piece of land. Prior era. I don’t have particulars.”

“Inheritance from whom?” Lucy asked.

“I’m not sure. Her gran, or her grand-gran . . .”

Nen wasn’t following. “If that was before the evaporation fields, now . . .”

“It could be worth a heap. Or could have been, when they set up the field,” Lucy said.

“I thought you told me all the land out there was ruined,” Nen said to Martina.

“It is, for farming.”

“A whole lot of small to medium-sized plots were pieced together to make the evaporation fields,” Lucy explained. “That was one thing they got right, for the most part—landowners were decently compensated if they sold; others found favorable terms on a long-term lease.”

Nen began to understand. “So it could be worth a lot. And keeping the sweepers going—”

“Protects property values,” Lucy finished. “For some—so long as the fields remain active.”

“My gran said it was worth a heap,” Martina said. “But no proof, right?”

“Wait a sec.” Lucy made a grabbing motion with her hand, opening and closing her fingers. “Let me see the reader again.”

Nen moved over on the bench to make room for Martina and passed Lucy the doc-fob. Lucy viewed several documents before finding what she wanted and waving Martina closer. It took Nen a moment to make sense of the lines and letters on the tiny screen, understand she was looking at a map of properties leased or purchased for the first evaporation field.

“Look, there’s M. Walden again,” Nen said, pointing.

“Let me see that.” Martina leaned in closer. Lucy hesitated, but Nen took the reader and handed it over. Martina held it gingerly, as if it might be hot. Nen watched her eyes as she scanned the chart, then went over it again, scrap by scrap. Martina let out the breath she must have been holding.

“That’s a family name—I know there’s a Walden, a grand-gran. That’s my gran.”

“What? Who?” Lucy and Nen both spoke at once.

Martina’s voice was level as she settled into her conviction. She gripped the reader screen so tightly, Nen thought it might break. There had been two shares, one intended for her gran and one for a cousin. The cousin went ahead and took it all and never looked back.

“That’s not so long ago,” Lucy said reasonably. “Why didn’t your gran fight it?”

Martina shivered in the wind. “I don’t know. Maybe she wasn’t sure? Her mother died young. Families drift, there’s rumors . . . Fighting land titles is costly.” She paused again. Her next words were much softer; Nen had to bend to hear. “I even wondered, you know. Was it really true, did she make it up, wishful thinking . . . ?”

“Of course you wondered,” Lucy said briskly. “Who wouldn’t?”

Nen thought Martina’s admission was more than that, a confession of doubt where she should have had faith. She crossed her arms, regretting her gloves. The sky was beginning to cloud up.

Martina was growing agitated. More worried, but also more resolute. This was the Martina Nen had seen in the café, after the hover trailer gave its final warning and started on its way. She stood up, nearly tripping over the plant, and held up the doc-fob. “Can I keep this?”

“What? No!” Lucy snatched the reader back.

“Just the doc—” Nen started to say.

Martina turned on her heel and stalked off, breaking into a run as she left the park. Nen was too startled to say anything, and then Martina was gone. Nen felt as if she’d finished a race—but come in second. She should defend Martina, but wasn’t sure what to say. She had only begun to piece together how far Wicket’s schemes extended. She’d been hurt by Lucy’s comment, but maybe her whimsical approach *was* frivolous, even dangerous. If Wicket had cheated those above and below, what might he not do?

Lucy closed the reader, extracted the doc-fob. She seemed to have reached a decision. “I’m going to take this with me. I want to have another look.”

Nen couldn’t really object, but hadn’t Lucy been trying to smuggle the doc-fob to Nen a little while ago? She didn’t know if Lucy had shown her everything, or only what seemed relevant at the moment. She wouldn’t have minded going through it more carefully, but she couldn’t do much detective work on her own, unless she asked to borrow Mrs. Zinfeld’s reader. She did wonder how much Mrs. Zinfeld had known about Wicket-was-Walden’s titles and schemes. Doubt pushed in and twisted and stirred and cut and threatened to bleed.

Lucy righted the plant, patted the loosened soil into place, then left it behind. Nen picked it up to take home. Always gathering scraps. She didn’t know what else to do.

By Fruit Alone

“The tree keeps time,” Lacey said.

Nen laughed, imagining a cartoon tree, its branches moving like the hands of a clock. She breathed in the field smells of dust, crushed leaves. It was a wide summer afternoon, sunny, dry. Lacey had mentioned her efforts with the family orchard when they’d run into each other at the grocery store, and Nen had been curious enough to take her up on the invitation to come see it. It felt warmer than last time she had been up on Lacey’s property, the air vaguely smoky, the horizon hazy. Only a few of the trees held ripe fruit, or nearly ripe, but close up, in the orchard, the air carried the honey scent of peaches.

“Peaches are one of the fruits that need enough cold over the winter to bloom in the spring. Not just cold enough, but cold for long enough,” Lacey explained.

“I think you told me that. So a mild winter . . .”

“Not great. If winter’s too mild, they bloom early. Each tree needs a certain number of chilling hours, meaning days between freezing and forty-five degrees. Once enough chilling hours have been clocked, the tree marks warming temperatures with the change of seasons, and dormancy breaks.”

“Is that when it blooms?”

“Before. It’s when the buds lose their protective shell and the fruitlets form. A freeze anywhere along that process can be a disaster—the further along, the worse the damage.”

“I don’t remember you knowing so much about trees and farming and everything,” Nen said, but then she thought, she’d never asked. They hadn’t been that close, and only a certain kind of friend asks what you want to be when you grow up.

“No,” Lacey said simply, as if she were having the same thought. “The orchard needs more attention,” she added. She walked fast, when she wasn’t pointing out something specific, and spoke

in bursts, as if saving her breath. “I still want to finish school. And now my parents are going a little nuts with the whole gravesite thing.”

Nen looked around. “Where’s the gravesite?”

“Higher up, closer to the old pickup.”

“Your great-aunt planted all these?” It wasn’t a huge orchard, perhaps a hundred trees. Lacey had told Nen the great-aunt was her grandma’s baby sister. Trying to maintain the orchard was also something she was doing for her grandmother, in her memory.

“Not these exact trees. Peaches have a fruiting life of about twelve years. She established the pattern, with early and late-ripening varieties to extend the harvest. She wasn’t just maximizing yield, bushel after bushel in one giant truckload of bruising perfection. We do have a couple of miracle trees, sixty years old and as much fruit as ever. I’m learning to graft, to see if we can keep it going.”

“Do you know how many trees you have?” Nen should have asked more questions before, but she could make up for it now. And the last time she was out here, Lacey had warned her off; they had both been so happy, able to breathe easy at not being badgered about their plans.

“They’re planted eighty to a hundred per acre,” Lacey said. “We have just over an acre here. Maybe an acre and a half.”

“What does that mean in peaches?” Nen bent to pull out the cheat grass seed stabbing into her ankle; like any sock pricker, it was impossible to find.

“We get about three tons per acre, four or five bushels a tree. At two or three peaches to the pound, fifty pounds to the bushel—that’s a hundred, hundred and fifty peaches. Works out to two or three hundred bushels per acre. Next question?”

Nen straightened up. “Sorry, I’m not trying to grill you.”

“No, I know. I spend a lot of time talking it up, you know?”

“Yeah, well, it’s your baby.”

Lacey snorted. “More like a middle-aged toddler I’m trying to adopt.”

Nen laughed. “Very funny.” She waited a moment, then asked another question. “How many peaches in a ton? I can’t even think in tons.”

“About 650 peaches to the ton, give or take.”

“Doesn’t seem like all that many.”

“Peaches produce less per tree than other temperate fruits—like, apples or pears; I don’t know about tropical.” Lacey reached up, cupped a peach in her hand, testing two or three with a gentle tug before she found the one she wanted and pulled it off the tree. She rubbed the fuzz off against the heel of her hand before offering it to Nen. “Try this one.”

Nen took a bite. Another. She felt the juice start to dribble down her wrist and leaned forward, holding the fruit away from her shirt. “God, that’s good.”

Lacey beamed, all agro-scientific dispassion dropping away. “Right?”

Nen wanted to ask for another, but didn’t want to be greedy. The peach left her fingers tacky. She felt the sun on her forearms, raised a hand to shade her eyes, felt the stickiness of peach juice on her face. “Is that a hawk?” Nen pointed.

Lacey didn’t even lift her binoculars. “Turkey vulture. See that tippyness to the wings, like they’re teetering back and forth, balancing in the air?”

Nen pointed lower. “That’s the hawk?”

“That’s another vulture.” Lacey pointed again. “See?”

Nen squinted. “Sort of. No, yeah. I see what you mean. I was never good at birds.” She stepped closer to a tree, looked up through a lattice of branches. “When do you prune?”

“February—after the last cold snap. Which can be hard to predict. Better a little late than too early, but there’s a limit. You want to open the tree up to light, make sure it’s not carrying more fruit than it can ripen. This many trees, takes a crew to get it done on time, but that gets expensive.”

Lacey turned uphill, started walking again. Her foot caught and she stretched to pick up a pole saw hidden in the grass. When she bent over, her braid swung forward, almost touching the ground.

“I wish people wouldn’t leave tools out.”

“You want me to carry that?” Nen offered.

Lacey propped the saw against a tree trunk. “I’ll get it on the way down.”

Nen wondered how she’d remember which tree to visit, but decided she must have a system.

Nen had discounted Lacey without meaning to. Now she found herself eager to sustain the connection. Felt herself grabbing out, like a flailing swimmer after a lifeguard’s pole, and hoped she didn’t seem too desperate. “You’re lucky to have something you want to do,” Nen said.

Lacey flipped her braid back. “Yeah,” she said. “Probably. You always—”

Nen interrupted. “I feel like an aspect of myself is missing. Does that make sense? Something I used to understand or feel or believe, but it’s not there anymore.” She had explained aspect to her mother, grammatically. Now she tried with Lacey.

Lacey seemed to be weighing her response; what she came up with wasn’t really an answer. “The peaches are doing so-so, but the orchard needs someone to step in and really pay attention.”

Nen was relieved. She had admitted her fear, now she could absorb the details of Lacey’s life without having to decide anything. Full points for effort. “Can you make a living?” she asked.

Lacey broke the twig she was holding in half, then in half again. “Maybe we need to focus on growing enough for us, or for us and the neighbors. Raise a few chickens, plant potatoes, beans.”

Nen thought of the irrigation option Lacey had mentioned at the grocery store. “How many peaches do you have to harvest to make a profit?”

“Depends what you sell the fruit for, and your costs, obviously. Some of these old varieties don’t ship well. I don’t have the energy to become an heirloom fruit celebrity. Or the charisma.”

“I probably can’t help you with that,” Nen said.

“No,” Lacey agreed, too quickly. “I saw your cougar interview.”

Nen bristled. “Meaning what?” She’d been thinking the same thing, but it rankled to be reminded others had seen it as well. She felt an ache in her left forearm, the one she’d broken, and rubbed at it, following the tendons with her thumb.

Lacey shrugged. “No criticism. Just meaning, I could tell it didn’t go the way you wanted.”

Nen kicked at the ground. Lacey raised her binoculars, lowered them again.

“So where’s the famous graveyard?” Nen asked.

“Gravesite,” Lacey corrected. “There’s just the one stone.”

The stone stood at the edge of the field, beyond the old truck, where the woods proper began behind a fence-line row of wild plum. It was a modern, recent stone, a solid remembrance, not the thin, eroding relic Nen had conjured. The marker rose perpendicular from a chunky base, memory made present and heavysset and hard to move. The carving was simple—name, dates, and one incised coil centered above the letters, an unspooling scroll. No verse, no gentle hopes for the sweet hereafter. No praise for what, in life, she might have been—mother, sister, wife. Nen read the name aloud: “Angelica Autumn Pennack. What kind of name is that?”

“We’re not sure. My mother’s been trying to research her.”

“Historic? Hallowed?” Nen prompted.

“Poor,” Lacey answered. “No money for an official cemetery. We think the family wanted to keep her close, but in the end, they couldn’t afford to keep the land.”

“Expensive stone. Not that I know anything about it. But it looks like money was spent.” Nen traced the carved scroll with a finger. Unlike the polished face of the marker, the roughness of the scraped groove was almost warm, as if it were the heart of the stone. Nen jerked her hand back at the thought; she’d been caught touching the dead.

“It may have been more a matter of not wanting to waste money on a gravesite,” Lacey said.

“Do you pay a church to be buried in its cemetery?”

“I have no idea.” Lacey sounded weary.

Nen looked at her sympathetically. “You’ve been hearing about this historic grave for months.”

Lacey nodded. “I see their point,” she said. “Sometimes. But it also seems crazy, even a little mean. Trying to keep people off our land with this whole hallowed ground declaration. Making it out to be more than it is. Mostly we’ve gathered information. But then my mother started trying to register it as historic. It’s not *that* long ago, but records are spotty.”

“And I suppose there was a fire in the county courthouse, property records burnt.”

Lacey turned to Nen. “How did you know?”

Nen stepped back. “I was joking.”

“Not a joke.” Lacey picked up another stick. She seemed to need something in her hands.

“So, what’s the connection? Why’s the grave such a big deal?” Nen asked.

“It’s—this sounds kind of pathetic. It’s land ownership. My family owns the land she’s buried on. So it’s ours to take care of.”

“Do you know anything about her?”

Lacey shook her head. “My great-grandparents bought the land, back in 1932. And yeah, that was the Depression—I don’t know how they had money. Maybe land was cheap. Maybe it was someone’s failed homestead. There was homesteading here into the 1910s, at least. Anyway, the grave was on the land, with a simple marker. Later, my grandmother’s younger sister got the peach orchard. She never married.”

“So your family’s been, I don’t know, custodian all this time?” Custodian wasn’t the best word—it inevitably suggested school janitor, which didn’t seem right for a grave. But why did it matter so much? The person was no more or less dead, no matter what happened to their grave.

“Custodian,” Lacey echoed. “That’s about right. Cut back the grass now and again, make sure it doesn’t get lost in the underbrush. Now my parents are trying to figure out how to protect it more permanently. From development, mainly. From having to sell.” Lacey paused. “Also from some kind of occupation. That, too.”

“Occupation?”

“Well, you know. People moving in.”

“Homeless people or immigrants or—”

“You saw all that stuff around the old pickup. It’s a fire hazard, if nothing else. People need a real place to sleep. A shelter. An actual house.”

Nen thought of her mother, of the blue cooler on the deck. She sucked in her cheeks, not sure how much she wanted to say. “People definitely need shelter,” she said at last, which was temporizing and worthless—she knew that—but also true. She had known Lacey for years, and yet hadn’t known her well—had orbited the edges of the same circles, but hadn’t been inside her house, no long, meandering heart-to-hearts over the phone after school. Lacey, meanwhile, had been pulled into her parents’ efforts to stave off development by any means they could think of. “Can you just bury someone on your land like that? I mean, today?” Nen almost wondered aloud how many neighbors had someone buried in the yard, then thought better of it.

“It has to be private. You can’t sell plots or the right to scatter ashes unless the land is formally designated burial ground, and you have to have written permission—county commission or city council or whoever’s in charge. Depends where you live. You’re supposed to keep records, but who’s going to check? Plus you agree to tell the buyer if you sell—full disclosure, all that. No one wants to stumble on an unmarked grave. And you’re supposed to consider the right of future access—a new owner doesn’t have to allow that unless they bought the land with an easement or some other arrangement.” Lacey shook her head, as if surprised at the length of her speech.

“You’ve done your research,” Nen said. Her father’s ashes were scattered on public land, but that didn’t necessarily guarantee access, either.

“Yeah, well . . .” Lacey trailed off.

Nen wanted to say something reassuring, but wasn’t sure if silence or comment would be most welcome. “So someone could try to hold onto a farm that way,” she said.

“By burying someone?”

“There’s the spooky factor. No one wants a grave in their front yard.”

“True. I mean, that is part of what my mother’s going for.”

“You’d need a body,” Nen said. “Like a murder mystery.”

“We didn’t kill anyone! It’s not some wild joke.” Lucy smacked a fist against her palm.

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking.”

“Because that’s exactly what people thought when my grandparents put in the new stone. Cost a fortune, but my grandma insisted, it was the right thing to do.”

“People thought they killed someone?” Nen knew she sounded too eager, caught up in the story. Still, Lacey seemed angrier than was warranted. There was no tactful way to ask, but tact didn’t seem to be her strong suit lately. Nen started again. “Are you afraid your mother might—”

“Conveniently find a body?” Lacey finished. “Nothing grisly. She’s not a bad person. But she might, you know, fake it. Mark an empty grave, one that’s even more *historic*.”

“Which would make it harder to develop.” The town of Bentondale was cradled between hill farms and orchards on one side, creeping development on the other, spreading up the slopes toward grassy hills and then forest.

“Exactly. It’s legally considered a historic grave only if at least one person buried there died before 1909.”

“That’s a long time ago. You think they ever move the date forward?”

“It’s probably not the most pressing item on the agenda.”

“Probably not.” Nen looked into the woods again, listened. *Tap tap tap*. Rustle, hop. *Tap tap tap tap tap tap tap tap tap tap*. “What’s that noise?”

“Woodpecker.” Lacey pointed to a snag that broke the line of trees flanking the grave. She handed Nen the binoculars. It took a moment to find the bird, arcing a twisting, up-close blur until she got the lenses focused, found the right tree. “My mother calls them flying migraines—that ice pick feeling between the eyes, bang bang bang bang bang,” Lacey added.

They turned from the gravesite to the old pickup. They’d seen the bedrolls last time, but now they saw the charred ring of a small campfire, a pile of emptied cans, crushed and stacked like logs. Was the fire ring there before? Nen couldn’t remember.

Squatting, Lacey stirred the coals with her stick. No glow of embers, but a smoke-like puff that might have been ashes in the wind. She straightened up, kicked at the circling stones to loosen them, then picked up one of the stones, pitched it as hard as she could toward the woods. Her softball arm hadn’t left her. She threw another and then another, hitting all the compass points, before filling in the outline of an imaginary circle.

Nen picked up a stone of her own, threw it as hard as she could. It felt good, so she threw another. And then Lacey was facing her, the last stone in her hand, not even seeming to see her. Nen sat down hard. They weren’t large, any of them. Not enough to keep logs in place, just sticks and paper. But she didn’t want to take any size stone to the head.

Lacey seemed to come to when Nen sat down. She looked at the stone in her hand, then let it drop. “Fuck. I’m sorry. I’m as bad as anyone, wanting to sweep it all clear.”

Nen gave her time, sitting on the ground, legs stretched out in front of her. Lacey started to laugh. “Look at us,” she said. Nen laughed with her, though she wasn’t sure why. Nervous laughter

more than anything, release and relief, then quiet. “I don’t think my mother hates outsiders, at least she didn’t used to,” Lacey said. “But she’s terrified of fire. You can’t deed out fire.”

“What about the NATIVE SPECIES stickers?”

“That’s my grandpa’s thing.”

Nen wondered if the toy lion she had found had been reclaimed. She decided not to say too much about her mother leaving out food, how they’d sat on the deck, waiting for people to come. “Sorry I canceled on you before. I got sucked in to my mother’s Lost Elizabethan extravaganza.”

Lacey waved her off. “Not a problem.” She used another stick to scatter what remained of the ashes. Nen watched them blow away, waited for Lacey to say more. She wanted something in her hands, too, but she couldn’t go after the fire stones. She folded her arms across her chest.

“So, I get why they’re worried,” Lacey said. “It’s a hazard having people out here, people you don’t know, who don’t have any particular reason to protect the place, or maybe don’t know how.”

“They’re not—”

“I’m not saying they’re stupid. But if I were sort of quasi-camping when I had no place to go—like, it’s not a vacation—I wouldn’t be obsessing about fire danger. I’d just want a place to sleep.”

“Except the biggest danger is to people who might be caught in the flames,” Nen pointed out.

“No, you’re right. I know that. But also. . . I’m not sure they have room to take the long view, where as landowners, we have to—we’re not making money in the short run. But reclassifying the burial? The evidence is sketchy. Especially that newer gravestone—we can’t prove those are the real dates.” Lacey took another deep breath, sat down on the ground beside Nen, a few feet away.

Nen looked behind her, at the Akers’ former property where the imagined subdivision had been abandoned. It wasn’t quite visible from where she sat, but she remembered the stubby, unbuilt streets. That scraped-over field wasn’t good for anything anymore, not farming, not wildland, not even a subdivision, unless the lost, deserted look could be erased, the stink of failure and ruin

replaced with a slick new sheen. Lacey's parents couldn't afford to buy that stretch, not once the developers got interested, but then development stalled. Now they worried momentum might pick up again, some other buyer come in.

"It's not one size fits all with my parents, it's every size will fit something," Lacey said. "They've tried it all, or they will have. And then I think, on the flip side, if we protect the trees, we *do* protect the people trying to find shelter, and maybe that's okay. But I find a fire ring like that and I change my mind again. So many fires started by illegal camping."

"And legal camping," Nen said. "Cigarette butts, chainsaws. Cars parked on dry grass."

"I keep wondering about irrigation," Lacey said. "If that would be an option, get new trees established. Since they're expanding the reservoir."

"No," Nen said firmly, "don't do that."

"Why not?"

"Because . . ." She'd put most of the scratch pad together, but pieces were still missing. It was a lot to explain, and hard to know where to begin. "I don't know if you know, or if you remember, but back at the beginning of the summer, I—"

"Entertained a cougar in your living room for tea," Lacey said, smiling broadly.

Nen winced. "Yeah, that, too." She had been feeling close to Lacey—now Lacey was going to make it difficult? Maybe she shouldn't bother. But she'd had that *ab ba!* revelation hanging on the edge of awareness; now it was front and center where she could see and understand it. If she didn't explain now—as much to herself as to Lacey—it might slip away again.

She forged on. "Before that, I passed out in the street, near my mom's shop, and woke up in the hospital. But before *that*, I was supposed to have an informational interview with the new director down at the water authority, getting a feel for what jobs there might be—nonprofits, pollution reduction, that type of thing. When I set up the interview, he sent me this whole batch of

references—FYI stuff, things that might interest me, context for his own work, I don't know. So of course I read through it all, or most of it.”

“Always the A student,” Lacey interjected.

“Yeah,” Nen said shortly, “exactly. And I was pretty sure I'd read one of the articles before, during my internship. Only that must have been an earlier draft, even a different paper, because the numbers were way different, so far as I could remember them. The other version was alarming, but this one was more in the *trust us, it's safe* line. Only then I couldn't find the other version to check. I remembered it, but I didn't *have* it. So I wanted to ask about that. At the interview.”

Nen paused. She'd made a scratch pad from that earlier printout, never suspecting it might be valuable. She had reconstructed much of it, painstakingly piecing notepad sheets together, disappointed to find no second pad assembled from the same stack. Now she saw herself, clear as clear, a shimmering figure she might reach out and touch, if she dared to move and break the spell, right there beside the newly-erased fire ring. There was a piece of paper in her hand, one of her endless to-do lists. She saw herself flip the paper over, scan the back, and then step into the puddle. As if that had been the final straw, what she'd been waiting for. That last step had been a blank, a lost moment; now it was a movie, a hologram. Maybe she was dehydrated. She should have brought a water bottle, hot as the day was.

Lacey was nodding encouragement—*go on, go on*—but her attention was starting to wander. She scratched at the last of the ashes with the end of a stick, scanned the sky once more, then fiddled with her binoculars, trying to get the lens cap to stay.

“And then,” Nen continued, as if Lacey had been watching the memory show right along with her, no break in the action, “I found the information, and I knew I didn't need to ask—there was no point. There was never going to be a straight answer. Even the supposedly good guys were jerking us around. And then I woke up in the hospital.”

Lacey drew her brows together, comprehending and kind but also dubious. “I don’t see the connection,” she said finally. “What does that whole article thing have to do with irrigation?”

“It was about reservoir expansion. Not specifically the one close to us,” Nen waved in the general direction of the reservoir where she had swum so often, “but the underlying structures. Potential contamination levels with greater runoff, higher concentrations. It was pretty technical, so it was easy to bury the bad stuff. In a nutshell, plenty of poison but let’s pretend it’s okay.”

“So, not necessarily water I’d want to pour on my peach trees.”

“At least not until we know more, see what happens with that expansion.”

“Which we might not be able to get good information about.” Lacey looked up, then scrambled to her feet, whatever else she’d been about to say forgotten. “Do you smell smoke?”

Nen stood, then paused to inhale more deeply. “Maybe?”

Lacey sniffed again. “No burn season this year, obviously. Shouldn’t be anyone burning brush. I’ll call it in when we get back to the house. Just in case.”

By the time they returned to the house, there was no need to call. They heard sirens in the distance. No plume of smoke that they could see, but the smell was stronger. The fire helicopter was already circling, preparing a water dump. The bucket dangled from its belly, dark, heavy, a tail or an anchor. Tippy as a turkey vulture, just this side of the horizon. Nen knew the bucket must be huge, but it looked tiny, a teacup to douse an inferno.

“I better get home,” Nen said. Something felt wrong.

Wrestling the needle through doubled cloth, Nen jabbed her finger and yelped aloud, letting go of the catnip pillow she was trying to finish. A fat drop of blood beaded on the floor; she blew out an angry puff of air and bent to retrieve the toy. She wasn't good at this. She almost wiped up the blood with her sock, decided to leave it for later.

She had been thinking about something she should have asked Lucy or Martina when they spoke in the park, a possibility tickling at the edge of awareness. That's why she jabbed her finger—that plus her lack of sewing ability. Martina had described Nen as appearing out of nowhere, and she seemed to mean it, even though she had a whole explanation about her own distraction. But it was something else. "Water always needs somewhere to go," Martina had said. That was it. Something had to be done, not just about the buildings in town with their shaky stability, but up and downstream. They needed to give the water somewhere to go.

Last week, she'd shopped at New and Vintage again, where pants seemed to come in two varieties—too long or too short. "Those will be easy to hem," the clerk had said when Nen carried her selection up to the counter. The woman had no idea how rudimentary Nen's skills were. She'd sent her home with one of the envelopes kept at the ready behind the counter, each with a different color thread, two needles, a neutral button. Nen briefly considered cuffing each leg a few times and sewing the fabric in place, but the clerk read her mind. "The hard skim's the cutting, right?" she said mildly. "Measure twice, all that. But better than have all that fabric wadded up." She looked at Nen again, as if to suggest maybe she should keep shopping, but Nen had tried on everything in her size; it was this pair or nothing.

"I love the color," Nen said.

"Oh!" the clerk exclaimed, placing Nen at last. "You bought the velvet dress at Fishtide."

"That's me. Nen." If she was going to be recognized, she might as well have a name.

“Nen, glad to meet you. I’m Carol.” The clerk smiled dreamily. “That dress was beautiful.”

“I love it,” Nen agreed. “I’ll probably never have another chance to wear it.”

Carol tilted her head to one side. “You could wear it to Promenade.”

Nen couldn’t tell if she was teasing. “It’s not too dressy?”

“Oh, no. Lots of people try out a new outfit. It’s almost like new year’s, a chance to dress up, bumble along in the public eye. It’s hope—something always blooms, something you didn’t expect.”

“Sounds lovely.” She held Carol’s gaze for a moment, cupping the warm image of hopeful blooms. But, like hope, the image was fleeting. “Might be cold for sleeveless velvet,” Nen said.

“Well, it’s blue,” Carol said reasonably.

“I like blue.”

Carol began to fold Nen’s purchase with exaggerated care. “Lucky you.”

Her tone set Nen’s teeth on edge. “What’s *your* favorite color?” Nen asked.

“I like orange,” Carol said. “But, obviously, not for Promenade.”

“Obviously.” Something in the way Carol kept smoothing the fabric in front of her, not ushering Nen out, let her push a little more. “Okay, I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Nen admitted.

Carol looked at her again, then gave a shrug—everyone was ignorant about something. “It’s not a law. But just about everyone wears blue or black or white. I thought you came in special.”

“I just needed pants,” Nen said. She hadn’t explored the tradition in detail. She knew it was an early spring ritual, a turning of the year’s tide if not the ocean’s. She might have expected that, as with Fishtide, there was a dress code. “Is it always by the river? Do people ever fall in?” she asked.

Carol laughed. “It’s not *in* the water. They do go through Riverwalk Park, if that’s what you mean.” She finished wrapping Nen’s purchase. “Think about the dress. You’d look amazing.”

“Thank you.” Nen tried to imagine herself in the dress at the park, then shook the image aside—she’d decide later. “With these pants, I guess I have options.”

She borrowed scissors from Mrs. Zinfeld, kept them longer than she should have as she put off the chore. Now the hemming was done. Fussy stitches, nothing that would bear inspection, but enough fabric leftover to sew something for the cats. Nen picked the toy up off the floor, decided it was finished—the cats would disembowel it soon enough—and stood to wash her hands at the sink. The water stung her finger where she'd jabbed it. She put the finger in her mouth—quick comfort—and tasted blood and salt together.

Nen dried her hands and stuck a hat on her head to cross the yard rather than hear Mrs. Zinfeld's lecture if she showed up bareheaded. Lucy hadn't sworn her to secrecy, but Nen had yet to find the right moment to ask Mrs. Zinfeld about all she'd seen on the underground tour, not to mention Lucy's smuggled documents. Maybe now she'd found her pretext.

"The tap water's salty again," Nen said when Mrs. Zinfeld opened the door. Knowing she'd been abrupt, she added, "Sorry—hello. I guess it surprised me, after a week or more of sweet. What's your water like?"

"Come in, dear," Mrs. Zinfeld said, always gracious. "I think our water's fine, but let's check."

They didn't make it to the kitchen, waylaid by cats. Fizz circled Nen's feet so closely, she could hardly cross the room; Misty observed from the bookcase. "Where's Mar—" Nen began, but the third cat appeared from the hallway before she could finish.

"They do like you," Mrs. Zinfeld said. "Even my shy Misty."

Nen felt silly, but she was flattered all the same. "I brought you girls something," she said, bending over to wave the packed pillow a few inches above the ground. Two shakes and Fizz was pulling it from Nen's hands, pushing it across the floor with her nose, flopping onto her back, toy clutched in her front paws as she beat at it with her hind feet. The other cats monitored the game, waiting for an opening. "There wasn't enough fabric for two, the way I sew."

Mrs. Zinfeld took the scissors from Nen. "So thoughtful of you. I do love watching cats play."

They watched together. The animals were batting at the catnip and at each other, nipping and racing. No one was ready to cede the field. "Pretty bloodthirsty," Nen said.

"I *am* glad I keep them indoors."

"Lucky birds," Nen agreed. "Do you want me to fill the feeders?"

"Thank you, that's kind. But Aria and I took care of the feeders this morning."

"The birds have been busy," Aria Moss said then.

"*Aah!*" Nen felt rather than heard herself gasp in surprise. She had not seen Aria, spooky silent on the sofa. "You startled me!"

"Not intended," Aria said gravely. "I was captivated by our little carnivores as much as anyone. You mentioned the marsh the other day," Aria added, looking at Nen. Her tone was level, as if she were continuing a long conversation. "There was a farm out there for years. The old Dunbar farm. They diked the land, keeping out the tides as best they could. Did you know the swifts roost there? They've begun to arrive."

"Swifts? Are those birds?" Nen tried to remember what she might have said. She had heard the old farm was nearly sold for yet more infill. Instead, it had become a reserve.

"They migrate, spring and fall. They're early this year. Aerial feeders, never touch ground."

"Really?" Nen tried to imagine a bird in constant flight.

"They sleep vertical, clinging to the inside wall of a chimney or a hollow tree," Aria explained.

Mrs. Zinfeld was nodding. "Huge flocks of them. They use the old barn silo."

"How many birds are there?" Nen asked.

"The bigger roosting sites get as many as ten or twelve thousand," Aria said.

"All at once? In a night?"

"Twelve thousand is probably the upper end," Mrs. Zinfeld said.

“Wild.” Nen tried to imagine so many birds in one place. She turned to Aria. “You’re working on a book about birding, aren’t you?”

“Birds and birders, both eminently watchable,” Mrs. Zinfeld said.

Aria purred. “So much variety. Specificity. Always the unexpected.”

“And grace,” Mrs. Zinfeld said.

“Yes. Especially grace,” Aria agreed. Nen watched them bat the words back and forth, still off balance from that startling a few moments ago. Could she really have overlooked Aria on the sofa? Tall, striking, all those gray braids—she was hard to miss. “They’ve completed the boardwalk, out past the old dike. It was a real victory, making that a refuge,” Aria went on. “Have you seen the estuary? The marsh?” she asked Nen.

“Not up close. You called it the Dunbar farm. What did they grow?”

“They raised dairy cattle. The diked fields were fertile, but there was always the danger of flood.”

“There’s been a good deal of work,” Mrs. Zinfeld said. “Scraping out contaminated sediment to remove pollutants, free the channel. The dikes are a conundrum in themselves, an ambivalence, both bulwark and passage.”

“Air’s cleaner, now people don’t have cars. But you have to make a point to get out there. People don’t learn to love it, don’t know what we’re trying to save,” Aria said.

“Distances are longer, now we don’t drive,” Mrs. Zinfeld suggested. Nen didn’t think that was it. They had buses. And people walked—Nen was continually surprised at how far and how easily. Walked for miles and didn’t object, as long as they had their hats.

“Out at the marsh, when the tide touches it, you can smell the salt in the air. Over the mud,” Aria said. This time Mrs. Zinfeld didn’t question her about the smell of salt. “I’ll take you sometime,” Aria added.

“Let’s go now,” Nen said quickly.

“Today?” Aria looked taken aback.

“Why not?” Nen didn’t know when the invitation would come again. If it was a pro forma suggestion, better to find out. Why had she never gone on her own? She’d thought about it, but indistinctly. Today it seemed more urgent. *This was all tidal marsh once*, Nen had reminded Lucy, but Lucy heard only the echo of *once upon a time* and dismissed Nen’s surprise that people didn’t take it seriously. Martina had mentioned the place as a kind of waystation for people new to the area—sweepers, especially.

“Very well.” Aria made no move to leave. When Mrs. Zinfeld lifted the teapot, she accepted a second cup. The cats played at her feet. Nen felt she’d misread the atmosphere again. Her foot began to tap and she forced herself to be still, to wait a little longer.

“Oh! We’ve forgotten about the saltwater out of the tap,” Mrs. Zinfeld said then.

“Right.” Nen had nearly forgotten, too.

Mrs. Zinfeld left the room, returned with a glass of water. “What do you think?” she asked, offering the glass to Nen.

Nen sniffed, took a sip. “Tastes fine,” she said.

“That’s what I thought.”

“Fluke?” Aria suggested.

Nen wasn’t ready to dismiss the threat so easily, but she had nothing more persuasive than a hunch. The saltwater coming and going didn’t make sense. “Hard to ever find the leak, or whatever it is, when there isn’t a pattern,” she said.

“True.” Mrs. Zinfeld stared out the front window.

Nen wished she had the doc-fob, but Lucy had taken it after Martina’s revelation. She could tell Mrs. Zinfeld about it, explain what she’d learned, though it might seem like more unfounded

accusations against an old friend. Nen didn't know how close Mrs. Zinfeld was to Merlin Wicket, how much was friendship and how much convenience, shared history and work.

"I have something to show you," Aria said then. "Nen might like to see it as well." She pulled a folded sheet of paper out of an inside pocket, smoothed it on her lap before handing it to Mrs. Zinfeld. Nen saw it was one of the wanted posters. She wasn't sure if Aria's taking it down was a mark of disapproval or only a wish to share.

Mrs. Zinfeld scanned the poster quickly, chuckled, then grew serious. "He won't have appreciated the public airing of his business. Merlin places great store in his persona—Merlin Wicket, Croquet Champion. Merlin Wicket, Land Speculator does not sound quite so . . . debonaire. It does explain the note."

"What note?" Aria asked.

"A scrawl at the bottom of his thank you note after Fishtide. The man's manners remain impeccable, even when he tries to be menacing."

"And?" Nen prompted, when it was clear Aria wasn't going to press for details.

"And." Mrs. Zinfeld waved the matter away. "I hardly remember—he hoped I hadn't been troubled by the recent rash of rude graffiti, or he hoped I wasn't behind it. You get the idea."

Nen didn't, not really, but Mrs. Zinfeld showed no interest in further discussion. "Field trip, then?" Nen said, turning. "Will you come? Out to the estuary, to see the swifts?"

Mrs. Zinfeld paused. "I don't think so."

"Eleanor prefers her garden," Aria said. For a moment, Nen didn't know who she meant, used to thinking of her always as Mrs. Zinfeld.

"I thought she—you," Nen corrected herself, addressed Mrs. Zinfeld, "I thought you loved birding."

"I do." Mrs. Zinfeld put a hand to her chest. Nen thought she wasn't even aware of the gesture.

“Eleanor has always had an uneasy relationship with the wild,” Aria said, her tone affectionate yet sharp. “She doesn’t really like to be outside, not in wild environments.”

“It’s a restoration project—doesn’t that imply the opposite of wild?” Nen asked.

“No so much opposite as movement towards,” Aria said.

“Not everyone can wade through waist-deep drifts in search of the elusive snow egret,” Mrs. Zinfeld said.

“No snow likely today,” Aria countered.

“No,” Mrs. Zinfeld conceded. “Not likely at all. But the cats have a nobby new toy—for which thank you, Nen—and I always like to watch them in the first bloom of excitement.”

Really? Nen thought. That’s her excuse? The animals were already starting to flag. Fizz had the pillow between her front paws—she had wrested it away from Martha; Misty was curled up on a chair, ears alert but eyes closed. It worried Nen that Mrs. Zinfeld declined to accompany them. She remembered the heavy Fishtide clear-out bag and Mrs. Zinfeld stumbling on the front steps. Maybe she didn’t want to say didn’t feel well. Maybe she was worried about her balance after dark. Nen suspected Mrs. Zinfeld was staying home more from uncertainty about her own stamina than a preference for a quiet afternoon, but with Aria in the room, she didn’t feel she could ask.

“It’s early in the day for roosting, isn’t it? Doesn’t that happen at dusk?” Nen asked instead. Now that it came to it, she was reluctant to leave Mrs. Zinfeld behind.

“We’re not out there yet,” Aria said. She was gathering her things—bag, jacket, hat. Simply dressed as ever, ready for anything. “You might want a jacket,” Aria suggested, making Nen feel like a young girl taken in hand. “I’ll meet you out front. Loan us your binoculars, would you Eleanor?”

Mrs. Zinfeld pointed to an elegant cherrywood dresser. “Top drawer on the left.”

“Are you sure you won’t come?” Nen pressed again.

“Go, go!” Mrs. Zinfeld insisted.

They left her in the care of her cats, happily buzzed on catnip and boisterous play.

“Shouldn’t we be heading downstream?” Nen asked as they set out—through the neighborhood, rather than toward the estuary. The air was cool but not biting.

“If we catch the bus at the A stop, across the bridge, we’re more likely to get seats,” Aria answered. “Taking it back through the center of town adds only a few minutes to the ride.”

As they walked, Nen relaxed into Aria’s company. The streets were familiar by now, a route she’d walked often. Nearing the bridge, Nen confessed, “Sometimes I walk this way just to visit the lions.” There was something friendly in the lions’ faces, open to persuasion, to new acquaintance. Nen had grown fond of their big eyes, raised brows, a vertical furrow above the nose. Their posture was not the full haunches settle of the typical library steps guardian, instead almost a dog’s pose, hindquarters rising, ready to stand.

“I do that, too,” Aria said. A couple passed, hand-in-hand, then a man pushing a double stroller. Otherwise, the pedestrian lane was empty. It was early afternoon, the middle of the week. Nen no longer had a job to go to, but other people were evidently shut up in offices or busy at school.

Nen touched the stone, soft as sandstone, mottled like granite. There had been more mane once, Nen was sure, ringlets worn away by hands or rain or wind. “Do you know what they’re made of?”

“Probably marble. I know they’re ancient, brought from somewhere, and somewhere else before that—Greece, or maybe India? Spoils of war.”

“What war?” Nen had imagined them aging in place, stone slowly wearing away. She remembered the first time she had seen the bridge, the way the river below had seemed contained, cinched in compared to its wider, spreading aspect opposite the downtown towers. She had paused then, too, on her way to meet Mrs. Zinfeld and her garage apartment. “When was the bridge built?”

Aria laughed. “Before my time. But this was always a narrow point in the river. You can see, the banks are solid.”

Nen leaned out to look at the water, though she knew the migrating swifts observed a timetable of their own and would not wait. The water moved too quickly to hold a clear reflection. Hints and flashes of green from shrubs on the bank did not resolve into branches or leaves. Flecked onto the infinite angles of the faintly choppy surface, the fragmented lion was indistinguishable from so many scattered bits of sky, overcast and whitish like the aging stone.

“It always seems, if you squint a skim more, it might all come clear, doesn’t it?” Aria said quietly.

“Like you can see through to something else,” Nen agreed, never turning from the river, then felt her face redden. “That probably sounds stupid.”

Aria shook her head. “Reflections can be seductive.”

“And beautiful. They let you imagine.” Nen glanced down, thinking she might find a leaf to drop in the water, watch it bob and float. That felt like something she had done before—drop a stick off one side of the bridge, run back across to watch it reappear. The pavement looked freshly swept, like every other sidewalk in North Benton. Nen leaned a bit farther out.

“Watch it!” She felt a hand on her sleeve and shook it off angrily, turned to find it was Cole who had come to her rescue. Always the older brother on the lookout for danger. “Hey!” he said cheerfully. “Fancy meeting—” Then he seemed to remember the last time they’d seen each other.

Nen was startled again—that made twice in one day—but she caught her breath and nodded. “I was watching the water.” She remembered Cole often went for a run on his lunch hour. Even now, he looked crisp. Breathing hard but not winded. His exercise clothes fit perfectly, his forehead was bright but not beaded with sweat. Thankfully, he was not one of those joggers who kept bouncing in place while waiting at street corners.

Nen felt her anger and hurt at being fired, a rising pressure in her throat. She looked for Aria, thinking to introduce her, or maybe for backup, but Aria had slipped to the upstream side of the bridge. “Thanks for the plant,” Nen said.

Something shifted in Cole’s expression, something generous, and Nen was glad she hadn’t condemned it as an ugly office plant—the barest signs of green life, but so much better than nothing. “I hoped you’d like it. I’m sorry about . . . It wasn’t my idea that you were let go.”

“Fired,” Nen corrected automatically, wondering how much he knew, how much notice he’d had. And how much Lucy had told him, or inadvertently revealed. He wasn’t stupid.

“Or fired. That either.” Cole braced a foot against the bridge railing while he tightened his shoelace. “What happened with you and Wicket?”

“He . . .” Cole seemed friendly enough, yet Nen didn’t know how far she could trust him. “I was told I was no longer needed. Job completed, thanks so much.”

“So, a short-term contract thing. More than a firing.”

“If you say so.” She didn’t have the energy to argue the point.

Cole finished fussing with his laces, put his weight on one foot and then the other, testing the tension in each shoe. Aria kept her distance, seemingly absorbed in an inspection of the houses that lined the far bank.

“You need to be careful where you lean,” Cole said. “You don’t want to fall in.”

“I wasn’t going to fall,” Nen said. “And anyway, I can swim.”

“No clapping way!” He looked as shocked as if she’d confessed to a crime.

Nen considered. “I think I can,” she said. She couldn’t remember having done it, but felt certain she could. And they had talked about swimming, at the office with Lucy, talked about how sensible it would be if people knew how. Could she have been so sure if she couldn’t swim herself?

Cole didn't pursue the issue. He said, "Those lions aren't as stable as you might think. They're cosmetic seams—all that mortar around the base and whatnot."

"Here, too?" Everywhere she looked, another carefully maintained surface was telling its own particular lie.

"How do you mean?" Cole sounded worried.

Nen backtracked. "You're saying the bridge is pretty, but not necessarily safe?"

"I'm sure the bridge is solid enough—look how many people use it. But the lions are a decoration pasted on. Doesn't stop people from climbing."

"The lions?" Nen was horrified. Not at the danger. It seemed like sacrilege, bodies clambering over and across those thoughtful faces, smearing them with sweaty fingers, dirty shoes.

"Kids. Guys, mostly. Around graduation, that sort of thing. Like a rite of passage, shinny up to the top." Cole tapped his watch. "I should get back."

"At least you don't have a hover trailer stalking you."

Cole let that pass. "Take care," he said cheerfully. He jogged backward for a few steps, waving goodbye.

Nen looked at the water once more, and then Aria was beside her again. She was quiet for a time, her eyes trained on the horizon. Nen wondered why she had kept so carefully apart, but Aria retained a distance even now. She leaned on her forearms, fingers laced in front of her. "Would you kill off your present self to have your old self back?" Aria asked at last. She spoke so softly, she almost seemed to be talking to herself.

Nen thought she must have heard wrong. "What?"

Aria turned to Nen as if she hadn't spoken, eyes wide and questioning, a parody of innocence. "Begging your leave?"

Nen frowned. "I thought you—never mind. Did you find an apartment?"

Aria shook her head. “I may not be here that long after all. I find settling down doesn’t settle me.” Again her voice was cool, calming.

“A rolling stone . . .”

“Crushes the moss. I know.”

That didn’t sound right, but Nen said only, “Sorry. None of my business.” Then she had another thought. “What about your book?”

Aria clicked her tongue, as if Nen had raised a point she hadn’t considered. “There’s that. But I can work on it anywhere.” She cocked her head, raised an eyebrow. “On to our friends the swifts?”

“Yes.” Nen looked at the water again, then at Aria. “Let’s go.”

The bus stop was on the far side of the bridge. They didn't wait long, and as Aria had promised, they easily found seats. The encounter with Cole fresh in her mind, Nen strained to get a better look at the lions from the bus window, but saw no evidence to back up Cole's claim that they might as well have been taped onto the parapet. The bus smelled of lemon antiseptic and spilled coffee. As it carried them back across town, it became more crowded. Nen was surprised—she thought people didn't go out to the marsh. Hadn't they been talking about that?

"There's a transit hub out there," Aria explained. "A transfer point. All the routes going south—the bigger buses they don't want roaring through the center of town."

Soon after recrossing the bridge, they passed the remaining downtown towers. The West Building site was hard to see behind the hurricane fence that had gone up once the site was cleared, bricks and other usable debris carted away. Nen wanted to ask—had the Zinfelds stood to gain along with Merlin Wicket?—then shook herself, unwilling to contemplate Mrs. Zinfeld knowingly profiting from putting others at risk. Still, sooner or later, Mrs. Zinfeld had to do more than cluck disapprovingly at Wicket's misrepresentations—if that's what they were. Now would be a perfect time. If Wicket had nothing to lose, maybe it was just as well for him if the site was further damaged. Washed away and out to sea, an act of a vengeful god not to be countered, only indemnified.

The ride took most of an hour, all the way to the end of the line. The molded blue seats were hard but not uncomfortable. Nen enjoyed looking out the window, connecting places she saw regularly to areas she'd never visited. Aria pointed out landmarks as the scenery shifted from the built edges of town—sparse neighborhoods, battered warehouses—to scattered birches and wind-gnarled scrub—salal, manzanita, grasses. Neither wild nor urban. Gently used, or not so gently.

When the bus shuddered to a halt, springs whining, Nen and Aria stepped down into a transit bay shaded by a metal overhang. Passengers dispersed quickly into the terminal or to buses waiting

farther down the platform. Inside, a few stores and small restaurants offered snacks, magazines, convenience items, the grubby concrete walls grayed with wear. The hall echoed with the rumble of long-haul buses, bigger-engined and louder than the silent vehicles that ran around town. Nen and Aria crossed the terminal quickly, emerging onto a paved plaza on the other side.

Outside, it was quiet, as if all the activity were behind them, the buses coming and going. Opposite the terminal, an interpretive sign marked the entrance to the marsh reserve. Not so much entrance as starting point, the border between transit bustle and marshland stark, but unenforced. Woodchips, encroaching grass. No fence. Drawing closer, Nen began to hear birdsong, chirps and twitters she couldn't place. It was still early in the year, the vegetation more brown than green.

The three-panel sign looked new and well-maintained, designed to inform and to welcome—*What is an estuary? What might you see?* One panel described the estuary, another the old dikes and the project of wetland restoration, a third the birds and other creatures a visitor was likely to encounter. Nen and Aria paused, hoping to learn something more about the swifts or the restoration. Nen read aloud, *“From the Latin aestuarium,”* then turned to Aria. *“That sounds so formal. Denoting the tidal portion of the shore, or the tidal mouth of a large river, where the tide meets the stream.”*

“The tidal strip of shore,” Aria echoed. “Solid and shifting at once. Migratory, even.”

“How do you mean? Like a bird?”

Aria pointed at the sign, underscoring a line with her finger. “A river flows in only one direction; an estuary experiences a back and forth flow.”

“Right.” Nen kept reading, silently now, grateful for the sign's gentle, didactic tone.

She learned that restoration was complex. The shore might be stabilized with rip-rap or sandbags, but the precise attributes of the prior system remained unknown. Sheltered from the full force of open-water storms and ocean waves, an estuary could create more organic matter in a year than comparable areas of other ecosystems; once damaged or filled, it was less able to perform its

functions. The goal of this restoration was to protect upstream areas and existing construction by holding floodwater safely in check, then letting it go gradually; to allow for more free spreading of a high tide, for flooding where it was a natural fluctuation, not really a flood. “Meaning water can flow on by and into basements and streets and everywhere else it isn’t wanted,” Nen said aloud.

She read further: a dike was an embankment built to prevent flooding, or an earthwork built to mark a boundary or serve as a defense. The term might also refer to a watercourse or a ditch, so that the same word was used to denote the barrier as the substance being protected against—build up to keep water out; dig down to give water a way to go.

“That’s what Mrs. Zinfeld meant,” Nen said softly.

“About what?” Aria asked.

“About the dike conundrum—both bulwark and passage.”

“Is that important?”

“It’s interesting,” Nen said, smarting a little. She dug in, ready to study the sign in detail, determined to commit the material to memory. A line of small print, near the bottom, noted the financial support of Adam and Eleanor Zinfeld, whose love of birding had helped to motivate the establishment of the reserve. “Mrs. Zinfeld never told me about this.”

“I believe that’s why Eleanor chose not to join us.” Aria had an air of decision, of having known what was coming. “If she had her way, all philanthropy would be anonymous.”

Nen was nonplussed. “If she wanted to keep it quiet, she didn’t need to put her name out there.”

“I expect that was Adam’s doing. He was a generous man, but he lapped up the spotlight.”

“I thought Mr. Zinfeld died years ago. This sign looks new.” Nen thought another moment. “I think she wasn’t feeling well. I don’t think it was a secret lady bountiful act.” She felt her shoulders tightening, willed them back down. Aria had known Mrs. Zinfeld much longer than she had.

Aria looked at the sky. “We just have time for the boardwalk before dusk,” she said.

They walked perhaps half a mile along a swept gravel path on top of the old dike. It could have been done in ballet flats, bare feet. Aria pulled a small, hinged tin from her pocket as they set out, offered Nen a mint. Sharp, sweet wintergreen. “Boxberry, deerberry, ground berry, spiceberry, wintergreen,” Aria recited. “So many names. We used to pick it in the woods when I was a girl.”

They seemed naturally to fall into step, the same brisk but measured pace. Nen felt her muscles loosening. Taller than Nen, Aria was at once sturdy and flowing, with a musical sway to her movements even as she kept her shoulders back, spine straight. Had she been counseled as a child, keep your posture and it will keep you? Her silver hair, in its three braids, hung past her waist.

The reserve was a mix of the natural and the constructed. Because it had been farmed so long, even the seemingly untouched parts were largely artificial attempts to return to a state before years of draining, building, filling. Willowy shrubs grew in tall yellow clumps along one side of the path. Catkins dangled, powdery and fragile. From a little distance, they glowed, soft and ruffley. Nen had read that native pick reeds had been reintroduced, along with those willows. She smelled flowers and muck—polleny, weedy, an uncertain mix of new growth and rot. Bending close, she saw snails tiny as seed pearls lining a grass stem. It was warmer than when she’d sat with Lucy in the park, less wind, but she was glad she’d stopped for a jacket.

“Oh!” Nen jumped back, caught herself in time to see the narrow, blue-striped snake now stilled as well. She had almost stepped on it. After a moment, it slid into the grass.

“*So* blue!” Aria breathed.

“Do you know the name of it?”

“Blue Zephyrus, I think. A kind of blue racer.”

“Sweet,” Nen said. “Sounds like a brand name. Bicycle, maybe?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Should be. Some kind of sports equipment. Sweet Zephyrus, all in blue.”

“On your left!” A jogger in bright pink high-tops and sagging black tights dodged around them.

Nen stepped aside. “Where’d he come from?”

“Runners everywhere,” Aria said. The jogger veered inland at a trail junction. Nen and Aria continued straight, toward the boardwalk.

“I thought the preserve would be bigger.” Nen had imagined hundreds of acres, not this close and circumscribed redoubt. “More land, more restored. More everything. People talk about it—”

“Like the next nobby solution,” Aria finished for her.

The creaky boardwalk contrasted with the flashy entrance sign. Channel on the left, mudflats to the right. Here and there, lighter wood betrayed replacement planks. Planks stained green with algae would be slick if it rained. At the edge of the boardwalk—more than at the entrance to the reserve—Nen began to feel a shift, a slipping across, a permeable line. It wasn’t breathtaking, but it seeped into her awareness. Took her in, and by surprise. It was tidal, rising slowly.

Stepping onto that first board would make something permanent. Nen looked down at her feet, at the scattered gravel on the dike, the frill of driftwood bits and tangled, muddied grasses below the bank. Her knees wobbled, almost as if someone had shoved her. The high water line was much too high. Nen grabbed for Aria’s arm as if it were a railing, jerked her back to make her look.

“This is too high. It shouldn’t be this far in,” Nen said, pointing at the sludged debris against the dike rim, a hem of chips and seeds.

Aria let Nen’s outburst subside before she answered. “It does look high,” she allowed.

“Do you know how recent this is?” Nen crouched, stirred at debris on the ground, rubbed a driftwood twig between finger and thumb.

Aria shook her head. “Last year’s tides came near to disaster. I remember hearing from people at home. I was . . . traveling at the time.”

“What do you know about today’s tides?”

Aria looked out over the water, across the mud. “Still going out, I expect.”

“It’s not good,” Nen said. She tossed the twig away and straightened up. Worry nagged at her. “It’s almost time for this year’s king tides,” she said. Its settled position on the calendar had obscured the origin of the Fishtide holiday. That tide immemorial was understood to be impossible of repetition, a parting of the seas. Now, after decades of water management and reclamation, any grave predictions met with the skepticism reserved for wild-eyed prophets and cranks. But at the dress shop, Carol had said Promenade was growing more popular; there might be more people on the riverbank than ever. Far more than it could support.

“An estuary acts like a sponge during a flood. It can soak up huge amounts of water,” Aria said.

“Maybe. But if there’s a truly high tide, the marsh can only help so much. Especially if there’s wind, or if the river’s full of rain.”

Nen had a sudden feeling she needed to get back to town, as if the water were rising right that minute. As if she could outrun a flood. The feeling burst over her like a night sweat, a premonition gone before she could pause to look at it head on. Who would she warn? About what? Could she stand on the lion bridge and scream out the danger until someone dragged her away? Aria seemed untroubled. And the air Nen was breathing in against her panic was delicious—she didn’t want to be anywhere else. Nor did she want to look stupid, one of those wild-eyed cranks.

A fish jumped at the shallow edge of the channel. Nen counted the ripples it left behind as they expanded. “Right,” she said finally, gathering herself. “We’re walking, aren’t we?”

“We are.” Aria pried the hinged lid open again and offered Nen the tin. Nen took another candy gratefully, then followed Aria onto the boardwalk, scanning for signs of water out of place as the mint dissolved on her tongue.

Aria was in her element, eyes sparkling, braids swinging when she turned her head. She pointed to a cloud of birds flying fast together, banking and swooping away from invisible barriers to swerve like a single bird. “Lesser sandpipers,” Aria said. “Or dunlins.”

“You can tell from here?” Aria hadn’t even lifted the binoculars borrowed from Mrs. Zinfeld.

“With dunlins, it’s the black belly,” Aria said. “Quite distinctive.”

Clouds of birds flew low to the mudflats. Full, continuous *cheep*—multiple notes the same and yet identifiable, distinct, though any single chirp would have been inaudible alone above the sand. Time slowed. Nen could have kept walking indefinitely, watching the birds, their patterns and flight. Remnants of last summer’s plants floated in standing water, burst lily pads and leaf litter. If she had thought the river opposite the Zinfeld tower was wide, here it was truly lake-like, flat and unfurrowed, mirroring sky in the shallows. Clearer than anything she’d seen off the lion bridge, but nothing remarkable—popcorn clouds slipped and distorted by the least little wind.

The place was absorbing, in constant motion, yet calm. And still the restless doubt, even as she breathed in wonder. Human time, the time of human construction, seemed disproportionate to the lapping of mud and water. People could never make changes fast enough to reverse the effects of their last round of changes, decades of poorly thought-out shifts, obliterations. “Is there even time for this kind of restoration to work?” Nen asked aloud.

She was asking the air, but Aria answered. “It seems we have to try. Though we might not be quick enough on our feet, or smart enough, to get out ahead of our mistakes.”

Nen lost track of how long they’d been walking. Aria, wrapped in her own thoughts, was easy company. Nen thought she would be comfortable to travel with and opened her mouth to ask if she’d always done her globetrotting alone, then thought better of it.

“What did you want to be when you grew up?” Aria asked then, seemingly out of nowhere.

Nen considered the question. “I have no idea,” she said at last.

Aria looked at her. “None at all?”

Nen made a show of thinking some more, but it was a blank—she knew what she didn’t know.

“No,” she said.

“Then be this. Do this.” Aria waved an arm to take in the water, the boardwalk, the opposite shore. She sounded certain enough for both of them, as if Nen had asked the question and she’d been considering it for some time, had hit upon the single right solution at last. “If you have no prior dream—possible or impossible—to weigh you down, you can move forward in peace.”

“What do you mean? What is ‘this?’” Nen’s voice was a squeak in her own ears. She looked down at the silvered wood, the mud at the edge of the water, the depressions left by webbed feet or sinking plant matter reflecting the sky.

“You don’t have to keep worrying at it,” Aria said. It seemed presumptuous to Nen, to assume she was worrying at it—whatever *it* was. Like a dog with a bone. “Care and abundance,” Aria added, raising her hand in a kind of salute.

“Right.” Nen picked up her pace. A family had passed them earlier, on the return leg of their walk, but now she and Aria were alone. Aria let Nen get a step or two ahead, then fell in behind her. Neither spoke until they reached a viewing platform at the very end, close to a mile from the start.

Aria looked at the sky then. “We should head back, if we want to catch the swifts.”

“And the bus,” Nen agreed. A board creaked under her step. She realized she’d barely thought of Mrs. Zinfeld since the entrance sign.

Retracing their steps, they left the boardwalk and returned to the firmer ground of the dike. At the junction, they took the path the jogger had taken, toward the homesite of the old farm. The farmhouse had been torn or had fallen down, but twin barns remained. Nen caught glimpses of gambrel roofs through the trees. Martina had mentioned the barns as a waystation, before

restoration meant the place was more for nature than for people. Not a large number of people at any one time, but a safe place to pause.

“And the house? Other outbuildings?” Nen asked Aria.

“Long gone. A storm, I think, after it had already been abandoned.”

Nen followed the swooping, scalloped flight of a woodpecker, pleased with herself for recognizing it even before it landed on a snag and revealed its red crest. A train whistled in the distance. They were nearly to the barn when Nen scratched the back of her neck, then stopped on the path. She remembered a slip at her throat, more tickle than sound, the echo of a soft metallic *pling*. Her necklace must have fallen on the boardwalk. “I’ll be right back,” she blurted. “I think I lost something.” She didn’t wait for Aria’s reply.

Nen skipped and stumbled in the deepening shadows. Once on the boardwalk, she forced herself to move slowly. How far back had she heard that tiny *pling*? She started to pick up her pace—it was close to dusk, Aria wouldn’t want to miss the swifts, it was just a stupid necklace, not even real gold—and tried again to take her time. *Haste makes waste*. She looked down, tried to proceed methodically. Step, eyes to the left across the planks, sweep back to the right. Step, sweep; step, sweep. She panted softly with the effort of going so slowly. And there it was. She didn’t have a light, but some last glimmer of sunset, or maybe the first star, glinted across metal on the wood. Nen bent to reach for it.

She only heard the sound, never felt the weightless metal through her shoe; looked down to see its soft flashing arc through the air. Slow motion, as if she could lunge for it, arms outstretched, hands cupped upward. Time stood still for half a second, long enough for the last sunbeam to catch the gold, to taunt her; long enough to come to her senses and stagger upright in time to watch the chain settle on the mud and begin to sink, almost as soon as it landed, leaving a mark like a strand of hair: thin bubbles, then nothing, then gone.

In her haste, she had kicked it off the edge.

The charm was light; at first it floated on the mud. But she had no chance of retrieving it. The mud was deep. Nen knew it would never take her weight. She stared at the charm for much too long, tracking every increment of sinking, then turned around to catch up with Aria. *Easy come, easy go*. Her eyes stung, she heard her own harsh breathing, felt her chest burn with a hurt fury directed inward. Would it have made any difference if she had noticed the moment the necklace fell? If that small remembered *pling* had registered as an alarm? Would she have been able to pick it up then? And why had she come out here at all, why not stay safe at home with Mrs. Zinfeld and her cats?

She hardly noticed the return path, making her way by memory or feel, vision blurred by angry tears. Aria was waiting where she'd left her, hands clasped behind her back, looking up into the trees. She turned at the sound of Nen's footsteps, seemed to recognize something in Nen's face. "All nobby?" Aria asked gently.

"I thought I lost something." Nen tried to maintain her pace toward the barns.

Aria touched her arm. "Did you find it?"

"It's just a necklace." Nen scrubbed at her eyes with the back of her hand. "It's not important."

"But you cared about it."

Nen kicked at the ground, scraped the toe of her shoe across the dirt. "Old self," she mumbled.

Aria turned. "Yes?" She looked up at the sky, said something Nen didn't quite hear.

"We'll miss the swifts," Nen said. She turned down the path, leading this time.

Around a bend, through a small stand of trees, and they were at the barns. The white paint was streaked, smeared green with moss; slate gray roofs blended into the dusk. A door hung canted off its rail on one barn; it was missing entirely on the other, a gaping tooth. Nen poked her head through the open doorway, breathed in the old barn smell of diesel fuel, dry wood, dust. She could make out a pile of tools, some rusted, some new—loppers, hand-trowels. She saw spades and rakes

propped against a wall, the crumpled, zebra-striped tarps found on any work site. A wicker basket held stiff leather gloves, dried and bent like discarded, lifeless hands. Signs from an abandoned trail route were stacked like sheets of paper for a giant book. It was still a working farm, but now the work was restoration—simplification, revision, repair.

Nen turned to Aria. “After they stopped farming, Martina told me people used to camp out here. Almost organized like an unofficial boardinghouse. Now there’s just the barn for them to use.”

“Or not even the barn.” Aria gestured at what looked like a blanket roll extended in the lee of the nearest wall. A man sat up, clear eyes and matted black hair. He looked at them questioningly, then down at his lap. He rotated his head slowly, stretching his neck.

“Good evening,” he said.

Aria set her tin of mints beside him on the ground. “We didn’t bring food,” she said. The man nodded thanks. Nen felt her own pockets, knew she had nothing to offer.

“It’s quieter once the birds go to bed, and the birders,” the man said. He pulled his blankets closer and rolled onto his side, away from them.

Aria caught Nen’s eye, tilted her head toward the open space around the silo, motioned for Nen to follow. They could see the swifts massed and swirling in the air.

Nen and Aria joined the birdwatchers already gathered, waiting. The jogger they’d seen earlier was among them, and three small boys in matching plaid jackets. Nen thought she recognized a woman from the underground tour, couldn’t be sure. She saw a woman in a knit yellow vest, another in a red sweater. The group—twelve people? twenty?—made a small flock, nowhere near as synchronized as the sandpipers she’d watched from the boardwalk, but shifting and fidgeting one against another into some kind of concert. A hush settled over the group.

“What time is the last bus?” someone whispered.

“Plenty of time,” came the answer.

Knit vest shushed them. “Swifts are early this year. We nearly missed them.”

“Everything’s early anymore, or late,” red sweater agreed. “Nothing marches according to plan.”

The birds circled, oblivious to their audience. First one or two, circling above the trees, then more and more. Thousands of birds, black squiggles against the sky. Aria offered Nen the binoculars. Nen enjoyed seeing the birds closer up, but it was hard to follow just one, keep it in focus, when there were so many circling at once.

A bird dropped into the silo. Then another. And then it was as if the surface tension of the swirling flock had broken. The swifts drained into the silo, pouring themselves like water through a funnel. And then they were gone, the late dusk sky the color of washed-out gray velvet. No collisions, no fuss, right as rain. Blink and you missed it.

It was fast, and yet the moment stretched. Nen felt herself pulled, as if the gravitational force of the flock’s rotation would pull the observers along with the birds, into the silo to cling to the walls by their nails, by their teeth, all the long night warm and protected and still on the edge of falling, dozing suspended above the abyss.

“Astonishing,” Aria breathed. “Every time. How do they know? That sense of home, those indelible, generational patterns . . . what if we could join them, find the same rhythm, security and danger linked?”

Nen wasn’t watching any longer—there was nothing to see—but she couldn’t pull her eyes away from the silo. Aria squeezed her hand. Fleeting, a wing’s brush, a feather.

“Time to go,” knit vest announced.

The birders left in a close-packed bunch, red sweater in the lead. Nen and Aria lingered. Nen was reluctant to leave the place, its sense of clarity and belonging, even as she felt the call to return to town. She couldn’t sort out her feelings, panic and quiet muddled, and then she remembered the lost necklace—momentarily forgotten—and was angry and sad all over again.

The hydraulic wheeze of a bus door opening broke the quiet. “Clap!” Aria swore. Nen knew they’d better run for it. Lucky for them, the night’s last departure left from the back of the terminal. Still, they were farther from the entrance than they had realized.

Aria ran faster. “Wait!” she called out, gasping her way onto the bus as the door was closing.

“No trouble,” the driver said mildly, opening the door wide. “Glad you caught us.” Brakes hissed. Nen heaved herself aboard and into the seat Aria had saved. The other birders clustered near the back, sated with the familiar yet always magical event.

Nen saw herself reflected in the bus window—blued-fluorescent light within, black beyond. She thought about the swifts, their risky yet confident plunge into the silo, and a prior conversation with Jick, when he had said well-meant but blinkered projects often made a place for one group only by dislodging others. First the evaporation fields, now the estuary. Those migrating birds counted on the silo. Knock it down to achieve some state of nature, then where would they go? And the man sleeping on the ground. The jogger must have passed him, but the other birdwatchers might have taken the more direct path from the reserve entrance and never known he was there.

She reached into her pocket—she was in the habit of carrying the list with her, superfluous though it was—and came up with a tight wad of pulp. Forgetting she had taken it along to show to Lucy, she must have put it through the wash. Nen looked at the mess in her palm, started to pick it apart, then shoved it back. She knew what it said. She ran over it in her mind, lips moving, as if she were murmuring a spell. But there had been other writing on the back, fragments of a longer text she could never get a handle on, and now that was lost.

1. shops on Third
2. 2mi at the lake; buoys?
3. check fellowship deadline
4. Market—Raspberries? Other fruit?
5. DEQ-NW report %s are off

They had surely walked more than two miles today. But there was no lake, no buoys. She had tried to decode the list, had copied it, rearranged it, asked people, openly or indirectly, what the various items might mean. If it was a private message from some great beyond, she wasn't prepared to decipher it. And yet she was more like the birds finding shelter in the silo than like the man at the barn door with Aria's tin of mints beside him on the ground. Like the swifts, Nen had somewhere to go. As her worry returned, the sense that she was missing something, her hand rose automatically to her throat. She tried to remember if the necklace had been a special gift or a vacation souvenir or a birthday present, but she could recall no time before, no first wearing.

She thought about Martina, what she'd said about her gran's inheritance, the promise that was maybe nothing more than family myth. Then she thought of Wicket, another grain of sand in her shoe, another question she now understood she had to ask. It was all braided together. Sorrow and fear, and a strange sense of lifting, one she wasn't yet ready to trust. It was fully dark by the time they got back into town.

"I'm not sure I have a past self. Like you said back on the bridge," Nen said as they stepped down off the bus.

"We all do," Aria answered. "One way or another."

Forest for the Trees

Nen remembered the doctor's words, overheard at the hospital: *just until she's out of the woods*. As if that were possible, as if they could know. As if the woods had a border, a line easily seen and traversed.

She was still in the woods, if they could be called that—past woods, former forest. A relic, a boneyard. She turned around, a full circle in place. Everywhere she looked, what had been woods was now an eerie grove of black, abandoned poles. Some were straight—ramrods, masts—others twisted, arched. Some might have been deformed by heat; others had grown that way, not deformed so much as formed, now blighted. Afternoon sun glowed against red-gold wood where hot bark had burst off the trunks. The black she had expected, not the orange. It was a live color, an interruption, orange full-on where bark had fallen away. The cambium cell layer, the in-between of bark and wood. From the medieval Latin, meaning to change or exchange. She'd learned that once.

The trail began wide, narrowed as the slope grew steeper. It was a popular day hike, access to the hills and the networked trails beyond, a chance to see tall trees without much effort, a short drive from town. At first the trees were untouched, straight and lichen-draped. Almost cool, the air was musty with decomposing needles. Then she was onto the slope the fire had torn through, a year ago now, maybe two. Here there was a border, an *out of the woods*: the flames had licked only so far. The wind must have turned. Maybe the fire had been moving so fast it simply continued uphill without spreading, a runner pointed at the finish line, never looking side to side.

Nen wasn't looking side to side either. She was running uphill. Her arches ached. She'd tied her shoes too tight, but didn't stop to redo the laces. The trailhead had been nearly empty, though hers wasn't the only car. She saw no one on the trail itself. No sign of campers, longer term occupants. As soon as she heard rumors of families in the woods, this was the place she imagined. She had forgotten how recently these woods had burnt.

Nen had headed home from Lacey's earlier that afternoon worried about the fire they'd seen in the distance, the hovering smoke. She'd stumbled into the house, gravestones and fire helicopters jumbled in her mind and that smell—surely she smelled smoke—and the blurred and dulled and crumbled full horizon. Her mother had been dusting the jade plant.

"I'll do that," Nen had said. Margaret turned sharply at what must have seemed an aggrieved, defensive tone. "I know you have things to do," Nen added, tamping down her rush and worry. "I did the plants two days ago."

"I don't mind. Keeps my hands busy while I wait on the oven timer and a book order call." Margaret stroked each leaf with a soft cloth. The huge plant was almost a tree—she'd be able to keep hands and eyes busy for hours. The pot was an old one, glazed in deep cream and blue, with fluffy pink chrysanthemums garlanding the widest part.

"Where's—? Did—?"

"Take your time," Margaret said, looking up. "Where have you been?"

Nen leaned against the wall to catch her breath. "Up at Lacey's. We saw the fire helicopter."

Margaret nodded. "Wildfire. I saw on the news."

"From up there, it was hard to tell how close the fire was."

"Not too close."

"Are you sure?" Nen looked out the window. All she could see was the steep rise of grassy hillside, the neighbors' roofs.

"Pretty sure. Fire's never come our way before." Nen rolled her eyes but didn't contradict.

"How's Lacey doing?" Margaret asked.

"Good. She showed me her peach orchard, then this gravesite her mom's trying to protect."

"I heard about that. The gravesite's historic, right?" Margaret was always interested in local controversies, preservation politics.

“Or her folks want to keep starter-palace developers away from their trees,” Nen said. “Which isn’t a bad thing, either.”

“No,” Margaret agreed.

“But futile. I mean, protection is pointless. Nonexistent.”

“That’s a bit harsh.” Margaret kept dusting the jade plant, leaf by leaf. No cat hair, no speck of lint was going to impede the fat leaves’ access to light.

“Is it? We looked for a place to scatter Dad’s ashes that we could go back to, that would always be public. We never contemplated the possibility the forest might burn, the place cease to exist.” Margaret had said she didn’t want to visit after the fire. Douglas was similarly adamant.

Margaret swallowed. “It’s been a few years since the Polk Lake burn,” she said. “I thought I’d feel worse, seeing it burnt, than not seeing it at all. But maybe it’s time to go back.”

“Yeah, maybe. It’s just more ashes, right? Ashes to ashes—people and trees.”

Margaret’s face crumpled. Nen felt instantly remorseful. She put her arms around her mother, felt her sag against her. “It doesn’t seem like you, to talk that way,” Margaret said, throat full.

“Yeah, no.” A bell sounded from the kitchen. Nen pulled away. “Is that your bread?”

“It can wait a minute. I set it to go off early.”

“Maybe I’m not like you think,” Nen said. “Or like I think. Do I have to be a certain way?” She moved to the back window, looked out. “Did they pick up the lion? Did they take it back?”

Margaret was surprised. “The toy? I haven’t checked.” She squeezed her dust cloth.

“How could you not check?”

“I just—”

Nen didn’t let her finish. “The radio says they think the fire’s human caused. Wherever it is. An illegal campfire out of control.” She slid open the door to the deck, nearly tripped over the sturdy blue cooler. Nen had left the lion propped on top, keeping watch. Now it wasn’t there.

She could hardly bring herself to lift the lid. If the lion was there, it suggested the family wasn't able to claim it; if it was gone, that was no guarantee they were out of danger, safe and sound.

The lion lay on its side, overlooked or forgotten, its mane darkened by melting ice. They'd taken the ice or the cold water in bags, whatever was left. Nen knew her mother used bagged ice for just that reason.

Nen picked up the toy, patted the damp fur. Margaret had followed her outside. "Did they take the food?"

"Yes." Of course they had taken the food.

Margaret seemed relieved. Maybe the girl wasn't with them. Maybe they had bigger fish to fry—like whatever they were cooking on that illegal campfire, now burning out of control. It was a ridiculous leap, but Nen couldn't unthink it. The girl would want to keep the lion safe, but the family wouldn't deliberately head back into fire. They were careful people—as careful as they could be.

Nen stood on one foot, then the other. She couldn't be still. "Why did they leave the lion? It seems like a message."

"Maybe they forgot, or she had her hands full. Children drop toys."

Nen wasn't convinced. Sure, adults got their hands full, decided a kid's toy wasn't crucial. But that was a special lion, and not something they'd expect with the cooler, which would make it more memorable, not less. And families sometimes moved heaven and earth to rescue a beloved toy.

"Dolores told me they've been living with her brother's family. I don't think she had any reason to think they were facing more danger than usual," Margaret said, as if reading Nen's earlier thought.

"You're saying it's always dangerous." Nen closed the cooler, sat down on the lid. "Why was she in the hospital? Is that where you met her?"

"No. The foodbank, remember?"

"So at the hospital . . ." There was just that lion edging around the corner, along with the girl.

“I didn’t know the girl, or who she belonged to. There were curtains around the beds. I didn’t peek.”

“Weren’t you curious?”

“I was worried about you.”

Nen tried to absorb her mother’s concern, but it was too much. “We should look for them.”

“Look where?”

“Where you said they were camping.”

“I never said. I don’t *know* where.” Margaret looked helpless, diminished. “You need to— I want to—” She kept cutting herself off.

“I have to go look,” Nen said, standing up.

The droning pulse of the smoke alarm rose from inside the house. Margaret groaned. “Oh, shit! My bread!”

Nen waited another moment, then left. Her mother didn’t try to stop her.

Now she heard it again, *just until she’s out of the woods*. What if she didn’t make it out of the woods? What if none of them did? What if these were the only woods they had, and so they were all out of the woods, permanently: out of woods. Forest’s End, like Land’s End on the old maps—where was that? A cape in Cornwall, the southwest tip of England: beyond this spot, there is no more; you are at sea. With forest’s end it would be the start of—what? An unforest, a clearing. But a clearing exists because it is a clearing in the woods. Without enclosure, it is simply open space.

Her body ran straight up the trail. Her mind ran in circles . . . *possibility possible posthumous position posterity posterior pencil-neck pathos pathetic pathway pathfinder portion potion potential penultimate paperwhite papyrus poison pen perish pentagram passion pastime poultice poultry potluck partridge*. . . The security blanket

of the alliteration game—the family pass-the-time-in-the-car game, help-you-get-to-sleep game—was not enough to blunt her anxiety as she ran between those crabbed orange trunks.

She made it halfway up the trail before she ran out of words, out of breath, doubled over, hands braced on her thighs, chest heaving. She felt the acrid scrape of smoke in her throat as if the fire that had warped these trunks were still burning, a searing weight that made it harder to breathe with every breath she took. Rather than catch her breath, it was as if she were losing it, again and again, gnarled and spent and still only halfway there. Wherever *there* was.

The arches of former trunks, their supple turns grown stiff, twisted out of and back to the ground, caught in the act. A tentacled stump rose behind her, all black shadow, arc and curve. Silver trunks, almost polished. Green demanding on the forest floor, hints of moss and scattered daisies, stems of fireweed, bear grass. She saw a hawk overhead, the red tail Lacey had helped her to identify, which meant there must be mice as well, voles, life on the ground. The afternoon light was gold again—light to be gathered in baskets: this must be the end of the rainbow.

Only if the end of the rainbow was destruction, gold in the act of being melted down; find it and your eyes are seared forever. End of the rainbow or end of the world.

Keep running. Still panicked, still searching. Yet in that tiny clearing in the forest of attention and fear, Nen could almost breathe; could see, even in the stark and hideous destruction, a flash of beauty, a shimmer of wing. That orange underbark.

Nen came upright, looked around. Ordinarily, the woods were full of quiet sound: rush of wind in the branches, insects buzzing, water dripping or burbling. Now everything sounded like fire heard at a distance, roaring flames or helicopter rotors overhead. The whole world felt loud. That, too, could have been her blood pounding in her ears, her outside in, reversed, rehashed, still heaving.

She had an image of the little girl with the lion in the woods. Wrong, of course, because the lion was back in the blue cooler on the deck or inside with her mother. Wrong because these were the

shadowed trunks of her dream, when she had looked for the girl, hadn't found her, had awakened just before the cougar pounced, her mouth furred with fear and her breath scarce and labored. She had followed her own nightmare into the forest as if it were a map, and she would never quite believe that image wasn't real. It was the girl and the lion in the woods, the woods she was in now, the bent trunks and narrowing trail.

Narrowing trail and narrowing windpipe. It was getting harder and harder to breathe. She hadn't gained much elevation. The air didn't feel smoky. It was mountain thin as ever, forest sharp with needles and humus underfoot and a crackle of cold even in the summer heat. But she'd been running, uphill, and with the balsam cedar the air also held hints of smoke, one thread among many, smoke and the soggy ash of last year's burn or the year before that. She couldn't tell if the air was smokier than it had been, if the heat she felt was anything more than the effect of her own exertion. Her broken arm—supposedly long healed—throbbed.

Years ago, Nen had studied lifesaving with the head of the county search and rescue team. She remembered the instructor's voice, the look in her eyes—*there will be a time when you have to turn back*—and knew the instructor had been reliving a specific turn. That had been the harshest lesson: you can't always save someone; sometimes you shouldn't try. The lifeguard's mantra: *reach, throw, row, go*.

Or was it *don't go*? That was the sticking point—when to go for help, not into the water. And then, when that called-for help should admit defeat, recognize a lost cause. A jammed oarlock, sprained finger—so many things could go wrong. Once at the lake Nen had been too slow, had been chastised for clumsy delay. She still felt the slick mannequin plastic under her hands. She had gotten her lifesaving certification to have another part-time option, another card up her sleeve. Her mother had lately lamented all those summer hours of training, gone to waste.

She had hiked this trail two dozen times, more even. Nothing was familiar since the fire. Nen used a stick to draw a line in the dirt, mark how far she'd come, in case someone came after. She

broke off a charred bit from a carbonized trunk to scratch her initials on a rock, plus the time for good measure. Delaying the inevitable—she was doing no good here.

She imagined a family huddled as flames leapt past them, imagined a girl dragging her toy lion through the ashes. Rain and more rain; mudslides and the intrusive strobe of searchlights. All the standard disaster clichés, terrors far beyond her ability to address, bundled and jumbled and flashing through her mind as if she'd been tied to a theater seat, strapped in for the show. Impossible to go forward, unimaginable to go back. Frozen in place and shivering on a hot day, drenched by imaginary rain. She was thinking fast and slowly at once. Fast because the images jumped from one to the next, her thoughts darted from one possibility to another, each more dreadful than the last. Slowly because the connections tangled and raveled as she tried to follow them, any chain she might knit together fell apart in the next instant. She would find the family. She would never find the family. She would be responsible for their deaths. She would carry the girl to safety. She would find her way home. She would die in the woods.

It was all true. It was all happening now.

Nen leaned against a tree, blackening her palms, smudging her clothes. She forced herself to breathe and, finally, to acknowledge that she was out of her depth. Paused and hunkered and waited and watched. Wasting more time. Her arm throbbed. Her stomach tightened. She coughed, tasted acid—bile mixed with smoke and forest and decay.

She told herself she was heading back and yet headed up the trail another hundred yards before she stopped again. There was no good reason to stay in the woods. She tried to convince herself otherwise, but it *was* smokier. She thought she heard helicopters in the distance. Her mother had never said *these* woods. Nen had assumed. Because she loved this place and it felt safe. Because she knew it was unsafe, knew it had burned. Because, she now admitted, when told people were camping illegally and largely undetected, she, too, had lurched toward keeping her own for herself.

These were not the woods where her father's ashes were scattered. She didn't expect them to be. But they were important, familiar, a refuge of long standing.

She should have known better. She did know better. Knew there wasn't somewhere else, somewhere safe, no fire, no flood, where the forest hadn't burnt, where she would surely find them. That had been in the dream, too: the sense that she had tried to do something necessary, had failed to do something—had failed in trying, or the other way around. In the dream, she didn't know what she had tried to do. That seemed clear enough, now; the failure was clear as well. Maybe there was no one to save. Maybe she was simply unable to save them. She didn't have enough to go on—had nothing to go on—and yet she had gone anyway.

It had been foolhardy to head out here, though it had felt necessary. She had seen the burnt forest once and it had haunted her and she wanted to see it again. She knew she was not yet out of the woods. She could hear the doctor's words, see her mother's frightened face when she'd come back into the room, and then the girl, the curve of her lion tucked under her arm.

If only she had the ruby in her pocket, to warn of threat or danger. Did she have to carry the stone with her to enjoy its protective effects, or was owning it enough? She imagined it pulsing, glowing, subsiding. Warmth spread across her palm, and then she thought, if I'm hallucinating myself into possession of a magic gemstone, it is *definitely* time to turn back.

"They're not here. Or if they are, I won't find them." She said it aloud. And then she turned back at last. Slowly, feet dragging.

"Go, go, go," she mumbled, forcing herself up to a jog. *Reach, throw, row, go.* The lifesaving instructor had a stutter, so Nen always heard that clip and hesitation along with her teacher's voice in her head. *Sometimes, you have to t-t-t-turn b-b-b-back.* There was nothing indecisive in the way she said it—her tone was certain, her authority firm. Only the sounds resisted, a hitch of sorrow that wouldn't be suppressed.

The hike out usually felt shorter—a downhill slope, the trail familiar. Today it stretched. The single junction was close to the start; there were no further turns to make and so no wrong turns. She could not have gotten lost. Still, it felt too long, and the air more and more acrid. She couldn't tell if that was the air of the old burn or the new, if she was in danger or only afraid—if she was borrowing trouble, or halfway to safety.

At last she was at the trailhead. The cars she had seen earlier were gone. Nen reached into her pocket for her keys at the same moment she looked through the car window and saw them dangling, worthless and taunting, from the ignition. She had always made a fetish of her little rituals, one hand holds the key, the other presses the lock. She hadn't been thinking today.

Nen screamed in frustration, but there was no response—not even an echo in this hollow among the trees. She didn't know the first thing about picking a lock. And she hadn't been home long enough to charge her phone after she'd gotten back from Lacey's. Probably wouldn't get a signal out here anyway. She would have to break a window.

A few small boulders marked the edge of the parking area, placed to keep the vehicle range from expanding on sunny weekend afternoons. Nothing huge, but all too big for her to lift. The trash can beside the pit toilet was chained to its cement pad. Underfoot, there were only the remains of last year's load of gravel, pummeled into the clay. It took her ten minutes to find a rock that looked halfway promising (she did find four beer cans, a muddy wool sock, a crumpled cigarette pack, a granola bar). She hefted the rock—a couple of pounds, anyway—and walked back to her car.

Rock in hand, Nen hesitated, unused to such deliberate destruction. She felt embarrassed, afraid someone would catch her in the act and more afraid no one would come. Finally, she lifted the rock and brought it down hard, or what she thought was hard. It bounced back at her.

She jumped aside with a yelp, fighting tears. How hard could it be to smash a window? Car-clouters were the scourge of trailheads, leaving sparkling cubes of windshield glass in their wakes.

Yet another case of the lock that keeps the honest person honest. Nen tried again, harder this time, grunting with effort. She was about to try a third time, rock raised over her head in both hands, ready to bring it down with all her strength, when she heard the crunch of tires on gravel, followed by the telltale scrape of a car with inadequate clearance taking the potholes.

More afraid than relieved, she dropped the rock on her foot when she saw the patrol car. She managed to stand still, as if nothing had happened. As if the driver wouldn't notice. The cop bleated the siren one time—a friendly hello?—and pulled up behind her, blocking her in. With a start, Nen recognized the officer who had arrested her mother. Did he never rest? And why was he all the way out here? A couple of popular trailheads were within town jurisdiction, though the land beyond was national forest, a fact that had led to a few legal tussles over the years. But surely this was beyond the eager newbie's bailiwick.

“That your car?” he challenged, lowering his window.

“What do you think?” Nen tried to sound tougher than she felt. Her heart raced. She was in the right—stupid, careless, but not criminal. Telling herself that didn't help.

“I think you're trying to break into a car at a trailhead.” His voice was scratchy with suspicion. Medium height, sturdy build, uniform crisp and smooth. His reddish hair was regulation short; the thin moustache was new since Nen had seen him last.

“I locked my keys in,” Nen snapped.

“We see a lot of that,” he said. “Usually people call the auto club.”

“Yeah, well, there's no signal out here,” Nen said. She resented his lecturing tone. “And I didn't call *you*, either.”

He climbed out of the cruiser, leaving it idling, a wasteful practice that set Nen's teeth on edge. She'd had more than one argument with car-idlers outside the grocery store or the post office. She opened her mouth to share her views with Officer Goldstone (guardian of the public safety ought to

safeguard the public air, or something like that) but felt her knees starting to wobble. She was not used to talking to the police. She'd left most of her bravado at the top of the trail. Whatever she'd had left was now pretty well spent.

He looked at her shorts, her day-hikers. "Trail running?"

"No."

"So what brings you out?"

"I was looking—" She stopped. Nen had no idea where the family camped, but she didn't want to give anyone away. She had no reason to trust him. He might be trying to track them down and lock them up; after all, the family was hiding. At least, that's what her mother had implied. She wondered how much her mother really knew. "I heard there might be families camped in the woods," Nen said cautiously.

"That's why trailhead registration is mandatory," the officer said. "So the Forest Service knows how many people might be out there."

"I don't mean that. Not—"

"Not recreational campers?" he finished for her, eyebrows a little too high.

Nen hesitated. "I heard something on the news about an illegal campfire," she said.

His eyes narrowed. "You know anything about that?"

"No." Nen shook her head quickly. "Was there?"

He ignored the question. "So you thought you'd warn somebody, or save them?"

"I know it sounds stupid," Nen admitted.

"Sounds dangerous. If the fire was headed in this direction."

Nen looked up, hopeful again. "It's not?"

"Not so far, no." He watched her for a moment. "The more people in the woods, the harder it is on search and rescue. Puts others at risk," he said.

“I recognized that; that’s why I came out of the woods on my own.” That, and she’d admitted to herself that she was out of her depth. No need to tell the good officer. “I think I need to get home,” Nen said. “I need to get into my car.”

“I can help with that,” the officer said, more kindly. Maybe he believed her after all. He rolled his shoulders, stifled a yawn, then opened the trunk of his cruiser.

“Naturally, cops know how to break into cars.” Nen couldn’t help herself.

“For emergencies. I used to work for a tow company.” He wiped his hands on his pantlegs, as if his palms were sweaty. “You really don’t want to break a car window if you can help it. And if you do, you need some protection—that glass can shatter all over the place. You don’t get new eyes.”

Nen looked at him sharply. “That’s what my mom says. About eyes, not the car window.”

He smiled. “Mine, too. Let’s get you into this vehicle.” He sounded like a car salesman. Taking a thin strip of metal out of the trunk, he held it up to the light. “This is what we need.” Nen waited for him to say more. He was looking at her too closely. “You look familiar,” he said.

“Yeah,” Nen said wearily. “You arrested my mother.” No point in pretending.

“The lady at the donations drop,” he said slowly, something like awe in his voice.

Nen aimed for a tight smile but could feel it was more of a grimace. “That’s my mom.”

“My first arrest,” he said, at once rueful and nostalgic. Nen squinted at him. He barely looked older than she was. When had he had time to work for a locksmith, let alone finish police training?

“A warning,” she reminded him. “You let her off with a warning. Does that count as an arrest?”

Officer Goldstone shrugged. “Hard to say.” He smiled, almost disarmingly, then circled the car, tapping the windows, looking for a gap.

“Does that work on power locks?” Nen asked.

“If you know what you’re doing. Too much pressure on the window, you break it,” he said as he began to wheedle the metal strip into the door. “I always take the passenger side, just in case. No

glass on the driver's seat if I screw up." Jimmying the lock was a painstaking, tinkering process, but he worked steadily and patiently and it only took a few minutes. It felt like a long time to Nen.

He pulled the door open with a small flourish, then checked himself. "License and registration?"

Nen sighed. People might be in danger and he was wasting time on paperwork? She rummaged in the glove compartment, handed over the documents. "It's my mom's car," she said.

The officer examined the registration with more care than absolutely necessary, returning the cards when he'd finished. "How is your mom?"

"She's okay."

"Did that cougar ever come back?" Nen tensed. "I saw the interview," he told her. "Wildlife comes first, right?" It was hard to read his tone.

"I think I said *protecting*," Nen said. "I meant I wanted it to go free, not call Animal Control. I didn't want to see it caged up or put down."

"I always wanted to see a cougar up close," the officer said, surprising her.

"Me, too," Nen admitted. "Not necessarily in my house."

He laughed. "No, I guess not. Be careful what you wish for."

"Better there than not at all. It was . . . not peaceful exactly, but . . ." She stopped herself. She didn't know this man—who, it was worth remembering, had arrested, or tried to arrest, her mother.

He glanced at her bumper. "You don't have one of those NATIVE SPECIES stickers."

"It's my mother's car," she reminded him.

She had understood something up there, when she had forced herself to turn back. Had taken responsibility for herself, pulled back from the edge of her headlong rush into the woods. Now she was trapped by the officer's questions. Trapped in the need to persuade him she was causing no harm yet worry him enough that he might take action, without putting others at risk. It was too much to balance, to twist and consider and spin. Her own cambium layer was growing. She felt

herself a tree, a spring. Felt in her pocket for the ruby, but of course she had left that at home, safe from misadventure, the greedy fingers of a keeping-finder like herself. She had left the lion at home, too. She had left the house in a rush, no time to weigh taking or not taking this or that, and still, the thought had crossed her mind, *don't leave an animal in a car on a hot afternoon*. Even a toy.

“I need to get home,” Nen said, remembering why she was there, the pointlessness and failure of her expedition, the uncertainty of the whereabouts of the girl and her family—whoever and wherever they were. Her mother’s beneficiary—friend?—and the girl who belonged with the lion; was there anyone else? She thought the air smelled smokier, but there was so often an undertone of smoke in the summer, it had become almost normal, hard to identify. She wasn’t sure if she was noticing a change, or something that had been there all along.

“It makes other people’s work a lot easier if civilians stay off the roads,” Officer Goldstone said.

“Civilians? Is this a war?” Now she was angry again. She knew it was dangerous to goad the police, but impatience and disappointment made her bold.

“I think you know what I mean.” He ran an index finger over his moustache. There wasn’t much to smooth.

“Well, I don’t want to drive around in circles. I want to go home.”

“Good plan. I’ll follow you.”

“Is that for my protection, or . . . ?”

“Covering all bases. Your cooperation would be appreciated.” He stood a little straighter. “Don’t want you to have to leave your vehicle out here in the woods, but I need to follow procedure.”

“Knock yourself out.” *As if I could stop you*, she muttered.

Nen slid behind the wheel. Officer Goldstone waited until she was buckled in before he returned to his cruiser. Plenty of time for a swift getaway, Nen thought fleetingly, a head start. But he was blocking her in, and there wasn’t much room to maneuver.

She drove home, white-knuckling it even at a precise half mile below the posted limit, hands tight on the wheel to keep them from shaking. Officer Goldstone in the rearview all the way. She wondered if he was growing impatient, if he did this often. His lookout if she was going too slow—the last thing she needed was a traffic ticket.

She felt drained, and more than a little ridiculous. She hadn't known exactly who she was looking for. Had connected dots, likely the wrong ones, following the dream image and her hospital recollection. Because they should be connected. The toy lion had struck her at the hospital, when she had no idea what had happened to her; that fleeting link to the girl had been followed by the live cougar in her home. The cougar had been the first tidbit filling her new hollowness, until the public reception of her story left her feeling even more out of control, at the mercy of others' opinions.

As she got closer to making sense of it, each detail she recalled of that day in the hospital took on greater weight. Then there was the scratch pad. *Riven research*: investigation split or sundered? She had been avoiding the reservoir; maybe it was time she went out there. There was no way she could pick up the thread of that canceled interview, whatever her mother might think. She would feel exposed, incompetent, too young. But she could find something, learn something.

Tight as she gripped the wheel, her mind was churning. Nen had been through too much in the last couple of hours—the uphill run, the burned forest's crushing beauty, the decision to turn back, her own bumbling delay at the trailhead, and then the further delay with the meticulous officer of the law. She remembered a long-ago hike, before her father died. Nen had wanted to bring her bear on the trip. Her parents said no, stuffed animals had no place on the trail. Douglas tried to take her side—at least he hadn't mocked her as a baby—but the adults were adamant: no extra weight. Only once they were in the car, brandishing a last gasp of parental justification to seal the deal, had her father said, "What if you lost her? That would be so much worse than leaving Small Bear lonely at

home.” Now she thought of her own efforts to return the lion and felt more charitable. Her parents had been protecting themselves from loss as much as shielding her.

Her anger resurfaced as she neared home, felt how little she had accomplished. Of course, she had wanted to find the girl. She had wanted to test the reality of that image, a dream so vivid, it felt more like a memory, something that had definitely, really happened. She felt as if she’d had a premonition, and it had been important to test it, because that would explain its weight and resonance, give it the meaning she hadn’t been able to extract or assign. She had followed her gut. What she hadn’t achieved was clarity or closure. The image was blurred now, soft around the edges. Less demanding. Except the girl was still missing.

Driveways were steep on their side of the street as the neighborhood rose up the hillside. Eye on the rearview, Nen pulled into the drive faster than she should have, gunning it to get up and over the initial slope and onto the parking pad. A deer stood motionless at the top, out of easy view from the road. Nen slammed on the brakes, but not fast enough to avoid the nauseating thud.

She got out of the car. At least the deer was dead before she got to it—stuffed, stretched, whatever taxidermists did. In recent years, the next door neighbor had taken up the hobby. Nen wasn’t sure if the occasional stuffed raccoon Barry added to their yard was meant as enhancement or comment, a warning or a gift. The deer she’d destroyed was his most substantial offering yet. Nen reached for an eye, dislodged from its socket, and held it up to the light.

Then she saw the girl, standing beside the driveway, motionless under her visor. Nen nearly blacked out at the thought she could have hit the child as easily as she hit the deer. She put a hand on the ground for balance, false eye clutched in her fist. As she looked up, the girl turned and ran into the house. Nen stood to follow.

She had lost her necklace in the estuary mud. The shopping or to-do list, whatever it was, had been pulped and destroyed. Leaving her jacket on the bus was one loss too many. Nen had few enough garments, and now no job for income. There was a Lost and Found near the stop where she and Aria had caught the bus to the transit hub. If someone had turned the jacket in, she might be in time to claim it. Three times a year, items left over sixty days were free for the taking.

She felt like the only person on the street, as if the city had emptied. At sunrise, the quiet might have marked a mood of expectation. Midmorning, it was eerie, as if only she had missed the evacuation sirens. Nen whistled under her breath. Traffic picked up as she walked—a silent bus, bicyclists, a woman dragging heavy bags—but not enough to dispel Nen's sense of isolation.

As she neared the bridge, Nen saw something draped around the downstream lion's neck, as if it had been wrapped with a bundle of cloth, a tangled banner. Was that part of the Promenade holiday, a round of civic decoration? On second look, the wrapping was bulky, asymmetrical. The waving was not a banner, but an arm. Drawing closer, Nen recognized Merlin Wicket. What was he doing way up there? She hadn't encountered him in person since Fishtide Eve at Mrs. Zinfeld's.

Wicket wore dark trousers and a white dress shirt that caught the wind from moment to moment like a sail. He had taken off his suit jacket prior to his climb, laid it over the bridge railing. Nen wondered idly if he had turned back his cuffs and loosened his tie. It looked as if the lion was wearing his scarf, except this was a different color than he'd worn at Fishtide. Wicket's head was bare, his gray hair unruly, a mane gone wild. His croquet shoes—flat-soled, white leather—struck an odd note with his suit.

Nen almost broke into a run, remembering the crumbled mortar Cole had showed her at the lion's feet. She thought of the shaky column of crushed teacups shoring up the city, wondered how the bridge itself had been built, though Cole had assured her it was solid. She opened her mouth to

shout a warning, defend the monument—surely Wicket was old enough to know better than to deface the statue with his grimy hands—then pulled up mid-stride. If the construction was shoddy, he was as likely as anyone to know. He might be in full command of his faculties and happy where he was. Cole had described a quasi-traditional climb, a rite of passage. Perhaps Wicket was revisiting his past triumph, showing off his youthful *joie de vivre*. Or perhaps he had made the climb to avenge a misspent youth, a triumph missed. At the estuary, Nen had felt a need to warn people about rising water, shaky ground, but Wicket should have been able to warn himself.

And he'd fired her, or had her fired; if he fell, he'd deserve it. Nen had seen the note he'd sent to Mrs. Zinfeld, the obscure threats that Mrs. Zinfeld wouldn't explain. She recalled Martina's apprehension when she'd seen the doc-fob, her caution that a shamed, humiliated Wicket could only mean trouble. Nen shifted her weight.

"This Wicket doesn't stick!" Wicket bellowed out of nowhere. Nen looked around. She didn't think Wicket had seen her, absorbed in his quest as he was, but there was no one else on the bridge. He was hollering for his own sake, on top of the world. She wondered if his climb had been nimble or slow, if prior climbers had established a route—marked handgrips, spots to rest. Nen shuddered, feeling in her own skin the abrasive wear of scrabbling fingernails and shoes. Granted, he was wearing those clean-soled croquet shoes. His manicured hands were likely clean as well.

She hadn't urged him to climb, but there must be some moral imperative to prevent harm—to see danger looming and do nothing to avert disaster was to abet it. Wasn't that what she had decried in Wicket and others, a willingness to turn an indifferent ear?

Her more generous impulses won. She called out, "I don't think that lion is as stable as you think. Do you need help?"

Wicket looked down. His eyes flashed surprise as he recognized her. "I am perfectly capable, young lady, as you can see from my ascent."

His tone was insufferable. Nen took a step closer, tried to get a better look at the cloth around the lion's neck, thought there might be words on it. "You had no right to threaten Mrs. Zinfeld."

"I do not care to be made a spectacle. Eleanor Zinfeld can take care of herself."

"Does she need to?"

Wicket made no reply. The public mockery must have hit a nerve of truth as well as vanity. If he thought Mrs. Zinfeld was behind the croquet installation, he must think she'd double-crossed him.

"You knew the West Building was unstable when you bought it," Nen accused.

He looked at her sharply, then shrugged, confident he had the whole deck up his sleeve. "Don't get high and mighty with me. Your precious Eleanor Zinfeld would have been glad enough of her check from the insurance company."

"What check?" Nen instantly regretted admitting how little she knew.

Wicket smiled unpleasantly. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Well yeah, I would."

Wicket smirked and adjusted his grip on the stone.

"Why don't you come down? You're not doing it any favors, climbing on it," Nen said.

Wicket's spine straightened. "The ancients held that the lion governed the Nile's annual floods—thus prosperity, plenty. Perhaps we should look to the lion to preserve us, rather than the other way round." He had shifted in seconds from belligerent threats to pompous lecture, his cultivated, plummy voice heavy with further knowledge he might yet deign to impart.

Nen was ready to peel that smirk off his face with the nails she was digging into her own palms. "So you admit high water is a danger," she said, clenching her jaw to keep from screaming.

"The Nile, my dear. Far away and long ago. I spoke as to the dignity of the lion, its endurance."

Now she didn't care if he fell. She did need one thing from Wicket. Martina had recognized a name, remembered her gran's story of a cousin's theft, but she didn't have proof.

Wicket clearly had good footholds, but he had not climbed to the top. Maybe with no one to see, he had decided he had climbed far enough. “Was that as far as you could get?” Nen goaded, waving at his perch. “Up or down. Face the music.”

Wicket glared at her but stayed where he was. He looked up and down the bridge, clutching and craning to maintain his grip. “Expecting someone?” Nen hazarded.

“Certainly not!”

Nen didn’t believe him. “I know your name’s on the deed. Your old name.” Lucy had shown her that on the doc-fob. “You didn’t change your name to stand out on the croquet circuit. You changed it to hide what you stole from your own family.”

A shadow flickered over his face. Nen wanted to think he felt guilty. If he did, he didn’t feel guilty enough to rectify it. “You can’t prove anything,” Wicket snapped. He climbed a step higher, wrapping his arms around the lion’s haunches before finding his balance.

“I wouldn’t bet on that.”

“What would you know about betting?”

Betting. What had Lucy said? Nen moved toward him, truly angry now. “You bet on croquet tournaments. You bet on yourself,” she said, taking a chance. “But you lost.”

Wicket looked toward the other side of the bridge again, seemed on the verge of admitting something before he pulled himself together. “Adam Zinfeld was only too happy to come to my aid. In exchange for a handsome consideration.”

“A true friend.” Nen resisted the urge to wipe her forehead, as if that oily, condescending voice had left a residue on her skin.

Wicket narrowed his eyes. “A true friend. Yes. Modest, resourceful . . .” He all but spat the words. Nen remembered the way he’d bristled at being asked to serve at Fishtide. “Thought he was so admirable, staying put in that dowdy little house, rubbing everyone’s nose in bigrag humility.”

“He bailed you out. Covered your tracks.”

“Again, nothing you can prove.”

“Maybe I can,” Nen replied, with more certainty than she felt. She didn’t know enough yet. And she wasn’t sanguine about the old man up there on the lion, even if it would serve him right if he fell. She wanted him to come down safely, if only to avoid taking his secrets to the grave. Assuming he had them. She looked down and read a hand-lettered sign propped against the bridge railing, “Sweep Out Sticky Wicket.” The sign would have been easy enough to pitch into the river; instead he’d gone up the lion.

It was too late to pull back. Nen might as well see what she could glean. “What’s that scarf doing on the lion?” she asked. The silk scarf was striped like a croquet peg.

Wicket’s face turned red. He climbed higher, batted at the fluttering ends of the scarf like a cat playing with string. Nen was getting a crick in her neck, looking up at him.

Nen didn’t know how far Mrs. Zinfeld might be willing to go in reevaluating her husband’s legacy, let alone her own actions. And—this was the most dangerous doubt—she might have been in on every deal from the beginning. After all, it was her company, the sweeper her invention.

“All you care about is sweeper profits, and holding onto your evaporation field rents,” Nen shouted. “You don’t care if sweeping does more harm than good.”

“Did she put you up to it, or was it your own idea, Miss Redesign?”

“Who? Put me up to what?” She was asking too many questions, none of them the right ones.

“You poxing innocent.”

“I beg your—”

She didn’t finish the thought. Wicket had stilled, eyes trained on the far end of the bridge as a bus pulled onto the span and began its journey across. Nen felt the vibration rise through the soles of her feet and into her legs as the bus picked up speed. The lion felt the vibration as well. Barely

perceptible, but Nen was sure she caught movement, a subtle sway that became a definite wobble. Wicket's weight wouldn't help. Although slight of build, he was not a small man.

Wicket made one last grab for the scarf around the lion's neck, whether to stabilize himself or claim the cloth, Nen wasn't sure. She heard a rising crunch of gravel, a gritty slippage, like the sound of bricks falling when the West Building collapsed, and then Wicket was falling. They were both falling, man and lion. It was hard, in that first instant, to tell where the lion ended and Wicket began. Wicket clutched the statue, arms tight around its middle, head turning side to side as he looked for help or explanation, too startled even to cry out. Maybe his life passed so rapidly before his eyes, he had to turn his head to keep pace with the volley of recollected images whizzing by.

Wicket somehow let go of the statue; he seemed to be pushing off, kicking backwards in a desperate attempt to not go into the water. For a moment, he hovered in the air. Then he was falling again, without the lion. The silk scarf fluttered loose.

The bridge pavement did not rush to meet him, except perhaps in Wicket's own perception. For a bystander, the fall was eerily slow. Nen thought of a mountaineer rolling head over heels after a stumble. There was nothing to catch onto, nothing to break his fall. His shirttails pulled free, the front of his shirt ballooned gently and then settled back against his abdomen as the back of his head slammed into the pavement with a crunching thud. The lion splashed into the water. Nen turned away, acid gorge rising in her throat. Bent double, she tried not to retch. Sweat beaded her forehead, her armpits felt damp. She managed to gag and swallow her way to a degree of composure and turned back to see the first bystander kneeling at Wicket's head. Wicket's hair was already matted with blood. Nen thought his eyelids fluttered (was that possible?) as a wave of scent rose from his body, unmistakable, cloying—sugar and rust.

Nen couldn't move. The bus had stopped. Passengers poured out, some converging on the victim, others hanging back, afraid. The driver seemed to be talking into a radio, calling for help

before he left the bus, waved people back, *give him air, give him air*. The crowd was wary, polite, a hum of voices but nothing distinct, no shouts or yells. Nen wanted to lean over the parapet to say goodbye, watch the lion sink, but she would have to cross the crowd, step over the body in the road. More people gathered, more than could fit on the bus, as if some scarcely audible distress call had alerted buzzards and worriers and hangers-on; as if the isolation Nen had felt, alone with Wicket on the bridge, had been an illusion.

“Stand back,” the bus driver said again, “give him air.” No reporters, no police, no official questions; no one with any answers at all. Nen recalled the swift response to the West Building collapse and wondered what had changed. The croquet-peg scarf, the sign at the railing; had it been a provocation, had Wicket responded? Had the authorities been warned off? Then the whispers started: *Do you know who that is?*

The ambulance seemed to take a long time, but it arrived at last, orderly and meticulous. The area was secured, Wicket was strapped to a gurney, lifted into the back, attended by medics and wires and tubes. The emergency vehicle departed, lights flashing. Nen felt dazed, insufficient. The horror was interminable, time frozen, extended, and then it was over in an instant.

The bus driver took up his seat, opened and closed the door a few times, calling any stragglers’ attention more discreetly than he could by blowing the horn. His passengers drifted back on. The bus pulled away, turning into the oncoming lane to skirt the stained pavement. People straightened their jacket collars, continued their walks. The wind had picked up.

Nen remained on the bridge, stiff with watching. Of course she was sorry. After the underground tour and the original plat Lucy had shown her, the confirmation that Merlin Wicket owned the West Building, Nen had felt she understood too much and too little. She had been ready to speak up in a way she had been unable to do at Fishtide, to speak up for herself in the face of her firing and to speak up for Martina in the face of Wicket’s lies. None of that would be possible now.

It felt meanspirited, regretting her lost showdown, if the man was dying in a hospital bed—perhaps was already dead. And what if she had provoked his fall?

She looked for someone to exchange a word with—acknowledgment or greeting, confirmation she had not been the only one to see him let go, but the small crowd had dispersed. She leaned over the bridge rail. She didn't expect to find the lion bobbing in the waves. Still, she wanted to see it. Read its expression, that face she had found so welcoming, comprehending in its flat curiosity. On the other side of the bridge, the lion's companion, newly bereft, stared inscrutably at the horizon.

The current erased any ripples that might have lingered in still water. Any one of the bulky underwater shadows might as easily have been an old boulder as a newly settled statue. Nen imagined the lion resting on the bottom, clear blue-green water, a beam of sunlight picking out the stone, white sand below, shimmer and promise—every possible sunken treasure emblem bubbled to the surface of her imagination. The lion must have sunk quickly, but the scarf dragged against the current, partially submerged, wet and weedy.

At the estuary, she had seen clear evidence that removing landfill and opening the dikes made it possible to accommodate more water, more species. She had seen hope for repair, even if damage couldn't be entirely reversed. Mrs. Zinfeld had spoken, however tentatively, of moving to higher ground, while Wicket had stalled and stonewalled, hanging on by his fingernails to the bitter end.

Hanging on by his fingernails to the lion. Until he wasn't. Nen shuddered, the crunching thud of his fall echoing in her mind, and turned away from the river. As she started home, she was aware of an emptiness behind her, where the lion should have been watching her go.

Nen was halfway home before she remembered her jacket. Maybe she'd check the lost and found tomorrow. It was still a few days until Promenade. She picked up her pace, eager for the

shelter of her small room, ready to curl up, even sleep. First, she stopped at Mrs. Zinfeld's door. She would have to tell her what had happened; there was no good reason to delay.

No answer. Nen knocked again, then crossed the yard to her apartment. She felt her airways opening, felt how shallowly she'd been breathing, holding herself in readiness. It was a relief, for the moment, not to have to watch Mrs. Zinfeld take in the news or try to interpret her response.

Nen washed her face, drank a bottle of fizztea to get the sour taste out of the back of her throat. Gulping too fast, she felt the light carbonation as pressure in her chest and tried to sip more slowly. She busied herself with domestic tasks, fixing herself something to eat. Sauteed greens, mycoccine on toast—she'd almost developed a taste for it, if she used enough garlic. Not that she was very hungry, but it was soothing to do something with her hands. Afterward, she curled up on the sofa and tried to read. She didn't have a lot of books, but she'd gathered a few, had improvised a low bookshelf under the window. She opened the first book that came to hand, one she'd already read.

She was about to call the hospital, knowing she had no claim on news, when Mrs. Zinfeld knocked. Her posture was more stooped than usual, her face drawn—Nen thought from fatigue or worry more than physical pain.

"I've been at the hospital with Merlin," Mrs. Zinfeld said without preamble, taking the seat Nen offered. "Seeing him unconscious was like looking at an hourglass. A reminder. None of us has much time."

"Oh?" Nen wasn't sure what to say. She had been ready to launch into her own news, but now she didn't want to interrupt. Besides, Mrs. Zinfeld already knew.

"There was an accident on the bridge," Mrs. Zinfeld explained, "he was taken in an ambulance. We were to meet next week. Perhaps I was the next entry in his pocket diary, or a nurse recognized him. Any road, I was called. Not quite next of kin, but . . ." She shook her head; Nen sensed something more than her concern for Merlin Wicket was bothering her.

“Is he . . . ?” Nen didn’t know how to feel; she certainly didn’t know how Mrs. Zinfeld felt.

“He hasn’t regained consciousness. No predictions—doctors are so cagey.” Mrs. Zinfeld seemed to settle further into her chair.

“Can I get you something?” Nen waved at the covered plate on the table. The mycoccine had been one of her better efforts, but she always had leftovers.

Mrs. Zinfeld shook her head again, then looked closely at Nen. “You’re not wearing your necklace,” she noted.

“No.” Nen coughed to clear her throat. “I lost it on the estuary boardwalk.”

The older woman’s face pinched in sympathy. “I’m so sorry. I know it was special to you.”

Nen shrugged. What could she really say?

Mrs. Zinfeld reached into her handbag. She pulled out a doc-fob—they all looked alike, but Nen naturally thought of Lucy’s—and set it on the coffee table, staring at the slender plastic rod as if it might speak for itself. The quiet spread. Finally she said, “I may have waited too long.”

“I saw him fall,” Nen said, almost at the same moment. Mrs. Zinfeld’s eyebrows rose. “He climbed one of the bridge lions,” Nen explained. “And then a bus started across, and maybe the vibration . . . then he was falling. He and the lion together.” Her throat clogged as her mind flashed on the way he had clutched at the lion, then pushed it away; the sharp, muffled crack as his skull hit stone, the texture of his hair, the smell of blood.

“That must have been awful to see,” Mrs. Zinfeld said.

“People jumped off the bus; the driver called an ambulance. It seemed like two seconds and then everyone was gone and it was just me on the bridge.” Nen heard herself saying the words, but it didn’t seem real.

Mrs. Zinfeld sighed. “He’s an old man. He has no business climbing.” She fiddled with the hem of her sleeve. “Could you make out his intent?”

“He was trying to reach for a scarf. It was like a flag up on the lion. I don’t think he was planning to jump. He was angry.”

“A scarf?”

“I didn’t get a good look. It was a bit like the one he wore at Fishtide.” Nen chewed on her lower lip, looked out the window. “What if I helped drive him to it?” There, she’d said it.

“Merlin was always too arrogant to do anything that wasn’t his idea. If it wasn’t his idea to begin with, he’d make it so,” Mrs. Zinfeld said.

“So he wasn’t, I don’t know, scared or something, or trying to defend himself?”

“How so?”

“There was a sign on bridge, ‘Sweep Out Sticky Wicket.’ You know, handmade. And then the scarf—maybe it was more of the same. Maybe he wanted to pull it down so no one could see.”

“He has always guarded his image.”

“So maybe all the parody Wanted signs and everything were too much?” Not that a thin skin should put him off limits. Still, that ugly thud . . . Nen swallowed hard, repelled at the memory.

“If the mockery bothered him, he would never admit it. I spoke to him not long ago. As you know, I was not pleased at your firing,” Mrs. Zinfeld said.

Nen wanted to ask, *what did he say?* Instead she mumbled, “Thank you.” She obviously needed protection. The need made her feel small, uneasily beholden, and also as if she had put Mrs. Zinfeld at risk. Shaken by what she’d seen on the bridge, she was ashamed that she didn’t feel worse.

“An unsatisfactory conversation,” Mrs. Zinfeld continued.

“Well, you tried.” Nen regretted the words as soon as she heard herself speak, still uncertain how much Mrs. Zinfeld knew.

Mrs. Zinfeld waved her aside. “Lucy Miles showed me a very instructive set of files she’d saved,” she said. “Perhaps you’ve seen them?” She indicated the doc-fob with a thrust of her chin.

Nen sat up straighter, tried to focus. “Some of them. I mean, I don’t know what she showed you, so I don’t know if it’s the same . . .” Mrs. Zinfeld’s lips began to purse at Nen’s hedging. “Yes, she showed me some files,” Nen finished quickly.

Mrs. Zinfeld weighed her words with a care that made Nen regret her prior doubts. Nen could see she’d been pushed off balance, had learned something she didn’t want to know, but also that the news was moving her to act. “I did not know Merlin owned the West Building,” Mrs. Zinfeld said. “That is, not before I spoke to Lucy. I didn’t go through every scrap after Adam died. There were lawyers for that.” She paused. “Nor was I aware my husband had a financial interest.”

Nen held her breath, tried to grasp the scope of Adam Zinfeld’s betrayal.

“Lucy showed me the documents some days ago,” Mrs. Zinfeld went on. “I have been looking into the matter. In the past, Aria has chided me for being incurious. No longer. I’ve asked my attorney to dig a skim further. To be absolutely sure.”

Nen saw an opening. She hadn’t yet told Mrs. Zinfeld everything about the walk at the estuary with Aria. She told her now, about the birds and the high water and what she had seen of restoration. And then she said, “It was generous of you to fund that, you and Mr. Zinfeld. I saw your names on the sign.”

Mrs. Zinfeld’s hands fluttered above her lap before settling, feather-light. “I wasn’t sure it was a good idea, parading ourselves around that way. It seemed at best a demand for thanks. But Adam wasn’t interested unless every donation was public. I don’t care to speak ill. He was a generous man if,” again she chose her words with care, “overly focused. Zero-in Zinfeld was his nickname as a young man.” She released a sharp puff of air. “Ironically enough, I had little idea why we might need to admit fault, only the fear it might seem as if we’d done so. Seems I took on those zero-in blinders along with the name.” She slid the doc-fob a fraction closer to Nen. “Lost time. It’s possible I have

too many secrets myself. While we wait on Merlin . . .” She swallowed. “It seems Merlin and your friend Martina were cousins,” Mrs. Zinfeld said.

“Really? That was on the—”

“That was in Adam’s private files. Not Martina per se, but the grand-gran’s bequest. With some effort, Lucy and I pieced together the family tree.”

“Wait, you mean Wicket was—”

“Some kind of cousin. Removed, second? Whatever you call it.”

Nen was bewildered. “Why would your husband have even had that?”

Mrs. Zinfeld knotted her fingers. “I don’t know. I won’t know. Adam was a magpie, a collector. He was a loyal and generous friend, and a shrewd investor, and . . . secretive.”

“What about Martina?”

“The property leased for the evaporation field remains, legally, in the name of ‘the heirs of.’”

“Martina gets to inherit—is that what that means? And is it worth anything, if it’s all under saltwater?” Too excited, almost giddy, Nen tried to rein herself in.

“It will be worth less if the evaporation fields fall out of use. That has been one of Merlin’s concerns.”

“I don’t understand.”

“As you know, we developed the sweepers to address water scarcity. But then, it seems, they were quietly repurposed as a way to deal with rising water—sweep it up so nobody noticed, everything tidy. Once the rains returned.”

“And parts of the landfill started to sink,” Nen interrupted.

“That, too. Good cover all around, our profits secure. For now, leasing rights remain quite valuable.”

“Is he dangerous? If he gets out of the hospital?”

“I think it doubtful. He may have intended to tell Mara. If he thought that would bring an explosion, he overestimated her father’s stature in her eyes. I suppose he could still call her.”

“Have you spoken to your daughter?”

“Not yet.”

“You look tired.”

“As do you,” Mrs. Zinfeld said with a smile.

Ned nodded. Nothing that occurred to her seemed worth saying aloud.

“Well, we can’t fix it this evening.” Mrs. Zinfeld stood, took a moment to settle her weight over her feet. “Goodnight, Nen. I am glad you’re here.”

Nen tossed and turned, finally woke from a fitful sleep, went outside to look at the stars. She thought of standing beside Aria in the rising dark, staring at the old silo as if there had to be more to see, listening with their whole selves. Seeing a light on at Mrs. Zinfeld’s, Nen waffled, then took a chance and tried the door. It was unlocked.

Mrs. Zinfeld sat on the sofa, still in her coat, a cat on her lap. “Merlin Wicket died late this evening,” she said shortly. She had gone back to the hospital in response to a change in Wicket’s condition. Despite the hopes of the nursing staff, he had not woken up.

“I’m sorry,” Nen said, almost truthfully. She felt thwarted. He had gotten away with it, and she didn’t yet know what all of it was.

Mrs. Zinfeld stroked the cat. Nen shuffled her feet, not sure whether to sit down or leave Mrs. Zinfeld to her grief—if grief was what she was feeling. For her part, Nen felt enervated, thoughts jangling, sensors abuzz.

“We were friends—associates—for a very long time,” Mrs. Zinfeld said. She undid the top button of her coat and took off her hat, placing it briefly on the cat’s head before setting it on the

sofa beside her. The cat jumped to the floor in protest. Mrs. Zinfeld met Nen's eye with a wry smile. "Merlin did not have his way in all things," she said.

"How do you mean?" Nen asked, taking her usual soft chair.

"My attorney phoned as well. Adam had retained an option on the West Building, with right of first refusal. Which option now falls to me."

"But if Wicket's dead . . ."

"He was alive and well when the option was initiated."

"But why exercise your option now? There's no building."

Nen thought Mrs. Zinfeld actually looked smug. "Merlin's stipulations were intricate. Possibly too intricate even for him. Perhaps he thought no one else would read them. The answers were clear enough when I took the doc-fob Lucy Miles shared with me to my attorney. The tower was heavily insured, but Merlin had not yet filed. The settlement now comes to me."

"So this happened before he climbed up on the bridge? Did he know?"

"I don't believe he did."

"Is that a relief?" Nen wanted to feel more triumphant than she did.

Mrs. Zinfeld cocked her head. "I suppose it absolves me in some sense. But I had hoped to have it out with Merlin. After all these years. I wanted to see his face."

"Me too," Nen said. The impossibility of confrontation—explanation—stunned her. She should have seen it coming, had been afraid on the bridge that she was asking the wrong questions, and yet the fact that no further answers would be forthcoming landed like a hammer blow.

"We wanted our last word, didn't we?" Mrs. Zinfeld said.

"We wanted him to hear it," Nen said.

Unleaving

Nen paused on the doorstep, looked back at the cruiser idling at the end of the drive and raised her hand in a floppy, *I'm okay* salute. Officer Goldstone evidently hadn't seen either the deer or the child. He drove away with a short bleat of the siren. She'd passed the test. Or he'd radioed in her particulars and gotten the all clear. Clearly, she watched too much TV.

She had returned empty-handed. Except for that resin eyeball—that was something. Hadn't the officer just told her, *you don't get new eyes?* She didn't feel renewed, but she did feel ready to meet the girl—meet her again. “We're in here,” Margaret called from the kitchen as Nen opened the front door. Nen stooped to untie her shoes, then followed her mother's voice.

Margaret and a woman Nen had never seen before sat at the table, drinking lemonade. There were snacks laid out—crackers, fruit. Nen registered the budvase, the woven straw mat; Margaret always considered presentation. The scene was placid enough, but Nen saw her mother's shoulders drop as she came into the room and knew she had been worried.

Margaret was lean, wiry. The woman opposite her was plumper, soft around the edges. She looked tired. Worn, like cotton fabric much laundered. A third chair had been pulled in from the dining room. The child perched on the extra chair, toy lion on her lap as if she'd been there all along. At the hospital, she'd worn her hair in two braids; now it was a single braid down her back. Nen looked at the girl. The girl looked back, brown eyes solemn.

“I burned the bread,” Margaret said, as if to explain the plate of crackers. Nen opened her mouth to ask, then remembered the kitchen smoke alarm earlier in the day. “You left your phone,” Margaret went on. “I couldn't let you know . . .” She waved in the direction of her guests.

Nen looked from her mother to the woman to the girl, then back. Too many questions to know where to begin. How did they get here? She hadn't noticed a car out front, but then she'd run over Barry's deer, so that wasn't saying much. Did they come for the lion, or were they seeking shelter for

some other reason? Did she even have a right to ask? Better to start with news of her own. “Barry left us another gift,” Nen said, placing the eye on the table.

The women recoiled, then seemed to recognize the eye as fake. “Good old Barry,” Margaret said. The other woman looked puzzled. “Next-door neighbor,” Margaret explained.

The girl tugged at her braid, leaned in for a better view. “Maybe you *can* get new eyes,” she said.

“With a little help.” Nen knew taxidermy was a kind of preservation, but it was beyond creepy, like having a mummy in your home, at once corpse and replica. Really, why would anyone? The girl blew on the eye—like a toy boat or a birthday candle—and watched it wobble side to side.

Nen’s stomach growled. She picked up a cracker, bit it in half. “Barry put a deer in the driveway,” she explained through a mouthful of crumbs. “I ran it over.”

The women looked to the girl, who nodded confirmation. They looked back at Nen, wanting more. Nen felt foolish, out of sync, but remembered her manners at last. “Sorry, hello,” she said.

“My daughter, Nen.” Margaret sounded faintly amused. In the look that passed between the women, Nen saw a deeper friendship than she had imagined. The mothers knew each other better than she’d thought.

“Dolores Arcal,” the woman said.

Nen shook the hand she offered. “I’m glad to meet you.” She must have heard Dolores—just a murmur, a *that’s enough* or *come back now*—on the other side of that hospital curtain. Had Dolores been the patient? Nen was no longer sure. It seemed a long time ago.

Dolores whispered to her daughter and the girl mumbled something Nen couldn’t hear, held out her hand in turn. Nen shook it gravely. “Mira,” Dolores supplied.

“Hi, Mira,” Nen said.

“Thank you,” the girl said. “I thought we lost Lion.” She wore her visor even in the house, pushed up on her forehead enough that Nen could see her eyes.

Nen leaned closer to her. “You’re welcome.”

“Did I hear a police car out front?” Margaret asked. She must have heard Officer Goldstone’s siren, the cheerful valedictory burst his calling card. Dolores shifted in her seat. She must have heard it as well; now Margaret had reminded her.

Had it been only her mother, Nen might have said something about the prior acquaintance. With witnesses present, possibly fearful, she said only, “I locked my keys in the car at the trailhead. He wanted to make sure I got home.” Margaret lifted her chin, scenting more, but Nen headed her off. “I’ll tell you later,” she said. “It’s fine. It’s all fine. All good. The car, too.”

“Which trailhead? What were you doing out there?” Margaret asked, unmoved by Nen’s breathless reassurance. “You didn’t see any campsites?”

“No,” Nen said. “Not where I was.” She didn’t want to say what she was doing. She had been heedless in her certainty and self-importance, had rescued only herself, from a situation entirely of her own making. She had *known*, had been so sure where she was going, but she hadn’t paused to think. She hadn’t known anything. At least she had summoned the gumption to turn back.

Nen pulled up a stool. She needed a story, a way to make her run in the woods more of a game, if not quite a joke. *Lighten up*, her brother used to tease her. “I was trail running—”

“You don’t run,” Margaret interrupted.

“New tricks, right?” Nen looked at her mother, daring her to contradict.

“First time for everything,” Margaret conceded.

“So I was on this one trail I like. A bit out of town. And I locked my keys in the car—that really was a first time!” Nen looked at Mira, got the beginnings of a smile. “So as I’m trying to break into the car with a rock . . .” Margaret half rose out of her chair, ready to check on the state of her paintjob. Nen waved her back. “Your car’s fine. I told you, the window’s fine. And everything else, like I said. So I’m there with the rock, and along comes Officer Helpful, the one who,” she met her

mother's eye, shifted again, "the one who I think is new on the force. Super young-looking, with this skinny little moustache. He blocks me in and starts giving me the third degree, what am I up to, is that my car—clearly, duh, I was up to no good." Nen laughed, so the others would know it was okay to laugh, too; would know she was headed for a happy ending. They listened in silence. Nen went on, "Old-style police cruiser out in the woods—totally unsuited. And you know what he said, when I said he shouldn't leave his car idling? *Purrs like a kitten*, he told me. And then he tried to purr himself—*grr, puurr*—" Nen imitated him, exaggerating the vowels and the heaving *r*.

At that, Dolores conceded a partial smile. The girl smiled too, an almost private expression.

"*Puurr*," Mira said softly, then again, louder. "*Puurrrr*."

"Exactly," Nen said. "No *r* roll. *Puurrrr*."

Dolores' smile opened.

"*Puurrrrrr*," the child repeated, "*puurrrrrr*." She broke down, tongue sputtering. Soon they were all gasping, holding their sides, wiping their eyes. Was it that funny? Of course not. But they were tense and worried and now released. Lion was found, and the little girl and the big girl safely home. Nen had been more afraid at the trailhead than she wanted to admit, and more afraid before that, when she had forced herself to turn back. Afraid she was lost, afraid she would get lost, afraid someone would be hurt because of her. She had kept the fear at bay, holding herself together for the drive. Then she nearly lost it in the driveway with the stuffed deer. Finding her mother with company, she had to hold it in a while longer. For now, Officer Goldstone provided cover, reason enough for her fear and its giddy, giggling release.

They laughed, then slowly quieted. Their breathing eased, each of them looking down at the table, at the toy lion, the resin eyeball. The spreading stillness held a contentment at having shared that laugh, and then a gradual pull toward conversation, a willingness to leave the protected circle and breathe again into daylight.

“Well,” Margaret said at last.

“Yes,” Dolores agreed. She dabbed her eyes, turned to Nen. “Thank you.” She seemed about to say more, then changed the subject. “I saw you on TV,” she told Nen. “At the laundry.”

“Me?” There had been no reporters in the woods, but that’s what she flashed on, Officer Goldstone breaking into cars at the trailhead, film at 11:00.

“They were asking you about a lion. A mountain lion in your home,” Dolores said.

“Oh, right.” Nen was relieved, mostly, to be back on old news.

Margaret’s eyes twinkled. “That’s my girl. You’re famous.”

Mira hopped off her chair. “A mountain lion here? In the house?”

“It came in off the deck,” Nen said. “Maybe looking for water or shade. Or it was curious.”

“They’re cats, after all,” Margaret said.

Mira held her own lion closer. “Were you scared?”

“I probably should have been. It didn’t seem scary at the time,” Nen said.

The girl nodded. That seemed to make sense.

“Did you ever see a cougar?” Margaret asked Dolores. “In the woods?”

Dolores shook her head.

“We have Lion,” Mira said.

Dolores smiled at her daughter. “We do.” She turned to Nen. “Thank you for putting Lion on the cooler. We didn’t mean to leave him behind. We had to come back.”

“Where—” Something in her mother’s face made Nen stop.

“Not the park, where the hikers go,” Dolores said. “We were staying with my brother’s family, near the reservoir. Camping.” She explained that, for a time, it had felt safer than their previous apartment. Fewer officials on the street; family looking out for one another. But the others had left the day before, in search of work elsewhere.

“What made you decide not to go with them?” Nen thought the question might be rude, but Dolores didn’t seem to mind. Maybe she appreciated the concern.

“School will start soon. Mira did so well in first grade,” she said.

“Dolores was a teacher before she came here,” Margaret said; Nen heard in her tone an embarrassing blend of esteem and condescension.

Dolores shook her head rather than elaborate. “A long time ago. But school is important.”

“Do you like to swim?” Margaret asked Mira, shooting Nen a meaningful look.

“The reservoir water’s not safe,” Dolores said before Mira could answer.

“I used to swim there all the time.” The defensive snap in her own voice caught Nen by surprise.

Dolores shrugged. “Maybe it’s different now. The algae blooms are bad. They get worse. My nephews had hives all summer.”

“Wasn’t that reservoir project finally approved? The expansion?” Margaret asked.

Nen nodded. If she started speaking, it would be hard to stop. The project should never have gone forward. She’d felt it for years, an alternating, pulsing knot of determination and despair, contesting the plans at student meetings and petition drives, defending the purity of the water she swam in. Even if there was enough water upstream to fill the reservoirs—increasingly doubtful—runoff from chemically burdened croplands along with a poorly designed catchment network made the reservoir more likely to become a poison sink than a wellspring of life. Since giving up swimming, it had been easier to keep her distance, leave a lost cause lost. Now it was personal again, immediate, close by.

Nen needed to rein in her attention, lighten the mood again. She rolled the deer’s eye across the table. The eye wobbled awkwardly, clipping a small eggplant-purple box beside the plate of crackers before bobbling toward the edge. Mira caught it as it rolled off the table, held it for a second before

dropping it back onto the wood as if it were hot. It rolled another inch or two, then stopped. All four of them stared at the eye, but it remained an inert lump of plastic. No oracle.

To break the silence, Nen asked, “What’s in the box?” Too late, she thought it might have been better saved for later. Her mother was braced, had been waiting for this.

“Jacob found something of yours on the street. He wanted to give it to you himself, then wasn’t sure when you’d be in the shop. Go on, open it,” Margaret urged.

Nen pulled the box closer, removed the lid. Inside she saw a puff of white tissue, her name spelled out in tarnished metal script. She stroked a finger across it, then lifted the necklace, holding it by the ends of the chain. “This is mine?”

“How many Nens do you know?” Nen watched her mother trying not to get her hopes up—it was an active, muscular undertaking, like something you’d do at gym, bench press or squats.

“I haven’t thought about it in a while,” Nen said. Thinking back to when she last wore it, when she might have lost it, she drew a blank.

“It hasn’t been *that* long.”

“No, I guess not.” It felt long to Nen, but it didn’t seem worth arguing. “Why didn’t you give it to me earlier?”

Margaret hesitated; Nen could see her mother had been looking for the impossibly right moment. She settled on, “You rushed out almost before you came in. You didn’t give me a chance.”

Nen held the necklace up again. *It’s kind of cheesy*, she thought, but her mother would be hurt if she said it so bluntly. She knew she had begged and begged for the necklace, had worn it for years.

And maybe it wasn’t so cheesy. Mira reached out a finger, traced the letters in the air. Her brows drew together. She didn’t read yet, or didn’t read script. “It’s pretty,” Mira whispered. Nen almost offered it to her right then, but what was the point of a necklace with someone else’s name? And her

mother was looking at her with such naked need. It had been a present, years ago, a birthday when Nen was about Mira's age, six or seven. Barely reading script herself.

Nen reached behind her neck to put it on, paused with elbows in the air, arms poised. The metal charm felt cold, and heavier than it looked. It pulled against her skin, unexpectedly dense.

Margaret got up. "Can I help? Those chains can be tricky." Standing behind Nen, she pinched the ends of the chain, ready to set the clasp.

Nen touched the pendant again, felt the metal—solid yet brittle—between her fingers, and tugged, gently, just enough to loosen her mother's grasp. "No, but thank you," she said. "I don't think I'll put it on right now."

Margaret rested her hands on Nen's shoulders, leaned forward to kiss the top of her head. "Okay."

Nen folded the necklace into its box. Mira nodded admiringly. She tugged at her braid, flipped it over her shoulder, adjusted her visor. Nen thought the girl needed a present much more than she did, but didn't know what to offer. "Do you want to see where the cougar was?" she asked. "The mountain lion? I can show you."

Mira slid her eyes toward her mother for approval; when Dolores blinked permission, she followed Nen into the living room. Nen pointed to the daybed, remembered how the cougar paused at the long mirror before moving on. "I was over there."

"Did it purr?" The girl purred into her lion's mane, then grinned up at Nen.

"I think so. It lay down by the jade plant," Nen said, trying to remember if that was true. "Like it was an indoor tree."

"For shade," Mira supplied.

"That whole big plant grew from a tiny piece," Nen told her. Here was something she could offer. Not much, but something special. "I'll make you a cutting. Wait a sec." Nen went back to the

kitchen for a knife. When she returned, Mira was whispering to her lion. Nen sliced off a bit of the plant and held it out to the girl, cut end first.

“Let that dry for a week or two. I know it sounds weird, but it’s a wound, see, where we cut it? So you don’t want disease to enter. When the bottom is calloused—it’ll look sort of scabbed over—you can put it in dirt to root, and it’ll grow a new plant.”

“I didn’t know you knew all that,” Margaret said. She and Dolores had joined them from the kitchen.

“You must have told me once,” Nen said. “I didn’t really know I knew either.”

Mira smiled her thanks and handed the cutting to her mother for safekeeping; Nen understood then that the girl saw her as closer to the mothers’ ages than to her own. It was jolting to be seen as an adult, no questions asked. She’d been used to putting adulthood on in stages, taking it on and off at will, like her mother’s Sir Walter Raleigh cloak. Maybe that part of her life was now past.

Or maybe Mira was just freeing a hand, the better to use both hands to place her lion on the rim of the wide Chinese pot. The jade plant spread and arched and cascaded; there wasn’t much visible ground for a lion in search of a shady rest, or even much access to the rim. Mira was gentle, deliberate. Nen watched as she tucked the toy into a gap in the foliage, pushed it a little farther so the eyes seemed to shine out from the jungle. She gave it one more little pat.

One pat too many: the pot crashed to the ground, upending the metal tripod that supported it and strewing potting soil and ceramic shards across the floor. Huge and sturdy and balanced as it had so long seemed, the plant had been top heavy.

Dolores dropped to her knees, hands shaking. “Mira!” Her voice crackled with fear as much as reproach; Nen saw too clearly how provisional her welcome must feel. Nen had noticed herself how do-gooders could be fickle—gentle and generous until someone stepped on their toes.

The girl went immediately to her mother’s side. “I’m sorry,” she stammered.

“You have to be careful!” Dolores snapped, but then she pulled the child closer, whispered in her ear. Mira nodded, wiped her eyes on her mother’s shoulder.

The plant was splayed on the floor, the crown collapsed onto the wood. Brittle stems had snapped as they fell, leaves scattered as if expelled. Once shallow enough to allow the roots to spread, the pot now held more root than soil. Those roots tangled with bits of vermiculite and a fistful of ruby-red florist’s beads, the lacy, whitish threads clutching the glass teardrops like so much fruit—pomegranate seeds below ground. Lady Fluff walked through the debris, delicately lifting her feet, sniffing at the roots and spilled dirt, nosing at the toy lion. Nen dusted off the lion and held it out to Mira, who darted forward to retrieve it.

“Does your lion have a name?”

“Just Lion.”

Like the cougar that had visited Nen. But it hadn’t visited Nen. It had entered her home, rested there until it was ready to leave. Something of Lion, too, remained unnamed, unknowable. Nen had read dozens of lion myths. Courage, flood, strength, adventure. The tales explained everything and nothing. The big cat was there, and then it was going; it was with her, and then she was alone.

Hands on her hips, Margaret surveyed the wreckage. “I never liked that pot,” she said. “It was one of Remy’s so-called antiques, nothing I’d have chosen.”

Nen opened her mouth to protest, shocked at this betrayal of her child self. She’d been told so often to be careful, watch her step, the pot was valuable, fragile, rare. That didn’t matter now; she was one of the grown-ups. She didn’t need to make anyone feel worse. Nen picked up the cat, inhaled the warm, clean scent of her fur, set the animal on the daybed. She beckoned for Mira to come and pet her, but Mira only shook her head.

Dolores began to sweep the shards together with her hands, looked around for somewhere to put them. Reaching for a large fragment, half a pink chrysanthemum, she slipped and planted her

palm on the sharp edge. She gasped and yanked her hand away, holding her wrist as blood beaded across her skin. Mira stared, frozen in place.

“I’ll call an ambulance,” Margaret said quickly. Nen saw her mother’s face go white—or closer to blue, like skim milk. Panicked at the sight of blood, she always wanted to call an ambulance—Nen and Douglas used to laugh about it.

“I think the emergency room would be plenty,” Nen said. “Or night clinic.” She crouched beside Dolores. “Can I look? I’ve taken a lot of first aid.”

Dolores held her hand out for Nen to see.

“That’s probably going to need stitches, but we can take you,” Nen said.

“No emergency room.” Dolores was firm.

“We should at least clean it off, get it bandaged—come out to the kitchen,” Nen said.

Dolores stood up, keeping her balance with difficulty. Mira slipped a hand under her elbow, for a moment a much older child. Margaret hurried ahead.

Nen calmed herself with a deep breath. It felt good, the certainty that she knew what to do. “Get me a towel, so we can apply pressure,” she told her mother.

Margaret handed Nen a towel. Dolores pulled her hand back. “The blood will stain,” she said.

“It doesn’t matter. You’re hurt.” Nen pressed the towel against the cut. Dolores shrank from the pressure, looked away as blood began to soak the cloth. Nen folded the dangling fabric back over her hand, kept pressing. “You doing okay?” Dolores nodded. “Let’s raise your hand up, over your heart. That can slow the bleeding.” Holding the towel against her palm, Nen lifted Dolores’ arm, as if helping a reluctant classmate ask a question. She made herself allow the second hand on the old cedar burl clock to tick around a full ninety seconds before she peeked at the wound. Slowing. Good. It took a solid seven minutes to stop the bleeding—long, but not so long she needed to go back on her agreement not to go to the emergency room.

At the sink, Nen washed her own hands, then gently washed off the cut. “No potting soil in it, at least,” she said. Dolores winced at the sting of soap. Her breathing was shallow, as if it were an effort to keep it under control. Nen leaned in, squinting, wanting to make sure there was no glass in the wound, afraid it might start bleeding again if she poked around too much.

When the cut was clean, Margaret helped Dolores to a seat at the table. Nen picked up the waist pack she carried on the trail from where she’d set it on the counter when she came in. “So you *are* still lifesaving,” Margaret said. Nen wanted to kick her, but she knew her mother was only trying to keep it together with a stupid joke.

“I have butterfly bandages,” Nen said. “They work in place of stitches.”

Mira’s eyes widened; Nen imagined bandages light and colorful as wings, soft yet durable. She shook her head. “That’s just what they’re called—because of the shape, a little bit.” She unzipped her first-aid kit, took out a package of bandages, a tube of antibiotic cream, then looked at the cut again. “The cut’s a little longer than you usually want to do with these, but the edges are clean, and if you really don’t want to go to the emergency . . .”

Dolores shook her head quickly. “I don’t.” Nen didn’t ask about that earlier trip to the hospital, when Mira had peeked into Nen’s cubicle. Maybe Dolores hadn’t been a patient that time; maybe something had gone wrong.

Nen opened one of the bandages, its rectangular tabs joined by a narrow strip, like a thread. “I guess this looks a little like a butterfly.”

“Or a kayak paddle,” Margaret suggested. “A barbell.”

Nen pressed one end of the bandage against Dolores’ skin, pulled it tight enough to hold the skin together, pressed the other end onto the opposite side of the cut. “Like taping up a package,” she said. It took seven strips total, working her way out from the center. She secured the edges with adhesive tape.

“Thank you,” Dolores said.

“You’ll want to keep that dry for at least a day or two,” Nen said. “Watch for infection—redness or swelling. Pretend the bandages are real stitches. They’ll probably fall off on their own after about a week. If they’re still there after two weeks, you can soak them off with warm water.”

Dolores leaned back, her breathing slower. It was a moment of quiet, yet Nen felt a need to keep moving. As if, having responded to a crisis, she could ill afford to lose momentum. She was trying to muster a next step when Mira whispered to Dolores, quiet but audible, “I’m hungry.”

“Of course you are.” Margaret scanned the kitchen. “What can—?”

“I would like to make dinner for you,” Dolores said. Her tone was formal; Nen thought maybe she needed to reclaim some dignity after being patched up by an amateur.

“But Mama—” Mira began.

“I have no place to cook now,” Dolores said. “When I do, I make a wonderful spinach lasagna.”

“Why not make dinner here?” Margaret asked.

“You can’t cook tonight,” Nen objected.

The women turned to her, Dolores’ injured hand evidently forgotten. “Why not?”

“Your hand,” Nen said, exasperated.

Dolores looked crestfallen. Mira moved closer to her mother; Margaret shifted her weight.

“I’ll cook, you tell me what to do,” Margaret offered.

Dolores brightened. “All right.”

“Don’t get the bandages wet,” Nen warned.

“She won’t lift a finger,” Margaret said. “What do you need?”

“It’s very simple.” Dolores began to list ingredients, ticking them off on her fingers.

Nen was impressed. “You can remember all that?”

Dolores laughed. “It’s very basic. Spinach, pasta, white sauce . . .”

“Wait,” Margaret said. “Go slow. One thing at time. Talk me through it.”

“Number one, spinach. Two pounds.”

Margaret opened the refrigerator, then the freezer. “Frozen okay?”

“Frozen is fine. We only need to press out enough liquid.”

“Not a problem.” Margaret set the bag of spinach in the sink, but didn’t open it yet.

“Eggs, butter, milk.”

“Check, check, and check.”

“Whole milk,” Dolores said, eyeing the carton Margaret set on the counter.

“I only have two-percent.”

Dolores sighed almost inaudibly. “That will be fine.”

“Make it the real way,” Mira said beside her mother.

“It will be the real way,” Dolores told her daughter. To Margaret she said, “Next, the recipe calls for ricotta.”

“Oh, I doubt . . .” Margaret pressed a finger to the bridge of her nose, as if her head hurt.

“I usually use cottage cheese,” Dolores went on quickly.

“I have that.” Margaret pulled a plastic tub from the refrigerator.

“Better check it,” Nen said. “It’s been in there a while.”

Margaret popped the lid. “Eeew.” She tossed the whole tub in the trash, then turned back to Dolores. “Strike one.”

“We work around it. I like to make a white sauce, a bechamel, but I add cheese. Mozzarella, sometimes Swiss. If we add enough . . .”

“It makes up for the ricotta? Okay, so far, so good.” Margaret added shredded cheese to the growing assemblage.

“Nutmeg, salt, pepper.”

“I don’t have nutmeg.” Margaret didn’t even have to look to answer that one.

“No nutmeg?” As if that were hardly possible.

“Find another cinnamon,” Nen said, remembering how much trouble she’d had pronouncing *synonym* growing up. Maybe that was how the alliteration game had started. Margaret laughed.

Dolores didn’t follow their private joke; she looked worried. “Maybe we could substitute . . .”

“Mace?” Margaret supplied. “Cloves?”

“No!” Nen said, too forcefully. Her head was starting to spin; that single cracker an hour ago had hardly filled her up. If assembling the ingredients was this hard, how long might the actual preparation take? “Sorry, it’s your recipe. But not cloves.”

“I agree,” Dolores said. “Wrong flavor. The nutmeg’s not so important.”

“Don’t forget lasagna noodles!” Mira sang out.

“Right!” Margaret stared at the cupboard shelves, then unfolded the stepstool and rustled through the further reaches. Turning back to the others, she held up a box like a gameshow hostess showcasing an exceptional prize. “I have rotini.”

Nen could see Dolores wanted to be a good sport, not make too many complaints. Nen complained for her. “With rotini, it’s just another casserole.”

“It’s all pasta,” Margaret said impatiently, but she climbed a step higher to search the upper shelf. “Wait, maybe . . . Eureka!” She set the box of lasagna noodles on the counter with a small bow of triumph.

“Package is open,” Nen observed.

“Oh, hell.” Margaret upended the box on the counter. Two broken noodles clattered out, surplus from some previous recipe. Nen tried to remember when in her life her mother had made, or even offered to make, lasagna.

Dolores was starting to flag after the first burst of grateful energy. She cradled her hurt hand against her chest. Nen's newly reknit arm throbbed in sympathy. "Do you want a pain reliever?" Nen offered.

Dolores shook her head.

"What about omelets?" Nen suggested. "My mom's a wiz at those."

Margaret smiled gratefully. "Good idea!"

"But you must take a rain check and let me cook," Dolores said.

"When your hand heals," Margaret said. "And I've had a chance to shop."

The spinach was returned to the freezer. Onions were chopped, mushrooms sliced. Omelets for four were quickly prepared and even more quickly devoured—fear, fellowship, forgiveness, foreboding all somehow expressed and assuaged by gently browned eggs and soft cheese. Nen tried not to shovel it in. Even one-handed, Dolores ate neatly. Mira picked and poked.

"A bird flew into the shop window today, couldn't see the glass for the reflection," Margaret said into a lull. "Maybe it saw branches, leaves—a place to roost. Or maybe it was like another cougar in search of shade."

Nen imagined a bird crashing into those crystal clear windows that were her mother's pride and joy. "Did you call the bird rescue people?"

"I was about to—Jacob went to look up their number. We made a sort of shelter on the sidewalk, a barrier so people wouldn't step on it, but by the time I went back out to check, it must have flown away."

"So it was okay," Mira said.

"I hope so."

"There are birders out at the reservoir. Sometimes we watch them. Some are more colorful than the birds," Dolores said.

“My uncle loves birds,” Mira said. “He knows all the names.” Nen was surprised the uncle was a birdwatcher, then reminded herself she didn’t know anything about him, other than that he’d spent the summer in an informal campsite, that his sons developed rashes when they swam. He might have been a physicist or a short-order cook or an actor in real life, wherever his real life had begun.

“It’s been so hot,” Margaret said. “I wonder if the birds—I don’t know, is it harder to fly? Is the air different?”

“I don’t know about air,” Nen said. “Or birds, really.”

Nen thought about people hiding. She thought of the trail, of running up that steep slope in a stupid panic—only it didn’t seem so stupid now, at a distance. Rushed and reckless but also an attempt to help. She didn’t know about air but she still knew about water. The water in the report she had tried to reconstruct—was the missing phrase something-*driven research*? Maybe she didn’t need the other scrap of paper to put things in place. Maybe that was just an excuse. There might yet be time to save the lake, before smoke or ash or fuel runoff drifted in to poison everything.

“Nen was very active,” Margaret started, then met Nen’s eye and cut herself off with a mumbled, “there’s been a lot of local opposition to the reservoir plans.”

Nen said, “It’s true, I stopped. It just seemed so hopeless.”

“Hope isn’t the ingredient.” Dolores shook her head, brows drawn together, impatient with her lack of words. “I mean, the motivation. The reason.”

Dolores’ expression was gentle, but Nen was caught short, unsure how to respond. Dolores went on, “I teach my daughter, do what you know is right. Maybe you see the result you wish for, maybe no.”

Nen looked down, adjusted her plate ever so slightly, the alignment of her water glass with the budvase. “I never thought about it that way,” she admitted. Even as she spoke, she knew she might

not have been as gracious to her own mother. She brushed her fingertips along the smooth edge of table. “That I was treating hope as . . . conditional. Like, I’ll only try if I believe it might work.”

“There’s nothing wrong with having hope,” Dolores said carefully.

“But it’s not the only thing.”

“I don’t think so. I don’t think it can be.”

The necklace box she’d left on the table and the taxidermy eye beside it made a peculiar centerpiece. Nen thought of the ruby she’d found, thought of the way all of them seemed to be moving through the world, collecting bits and baubles in case they might prove useful, offer some protection against the vast and unknowable dangers that seemed to proliferate and morph and tangle after them, no end in sight, relentless. What if she’d found a cat’s-eye instead of a ruby? Did they have to be polished to shine?

Margaret pushed back from the table. “We can leave the dishes for later, but I need a softer chair,” she said, and began stacking plates. Together, they drifted toward the living room.

The jade plant’s wreckage littered the floor. Nen gathered brittle roots, swept up potting soil, collected as many of the larger shards as she could, thinking her mother would want to try to reconstruct the pot when the guests had gone, whatever she’d said about not liking it.

“Don’t bother,” Margaret whispered, bending over to hold the dustpan. “I’m not being polite. That pot’s had its day.”

Nen looked up at her mother, saw she was both smiling and serious. It was just a pot, but Nen felt a change, something shared and understood. “No argument here.”

Mira crossed the room and climbed onto the daybed. Lady Fluff had settled in, snore-grunting in her sleep. Mira petted the cat, then picked up a book Nen had left there, one Margaret had brought home from the shop after Nen made a comment about Lacey’s ease with species identification, *Northwest Birds: A Comprehensive Guide*. More reference than field guide, the paperback was larger

format but not heavy, bound so that it easily opened flat. Mira stroked the book's cover. "I like this book," she said. "I read it before."

Nen sat beside her. "My mom's shop has kids' books at the back. There's lots of animal books."

"I know. I've been there."

"You have?" Nen remembered Jacob's free hand with the bagels for kids without a place to go of an afternoon. "I like animal books, too," she said.

Margaret chimed in—the natural history and nature guide sections of the shop were among her favorites, after all. "I like that book because it uses drawings for the illustrations. With photos, you're at the mercy of shutter speed and the photographer's luck. Not to mention the vagaries of natural light and shade, which can make it hard to distinguish green, greener, greenest, or beige from cream from brown. And will the photographed bird show off its best side, the one feature that distinguishes the greater sparrow from the lesser?"

Nen laughed at her mother's long explanation, but Mira was taking it all in, slowly turning pages as Margaret spoke. Nen looked out the window, saw it was nearly dark. Margaret switched on a lamp. "Where will you stay tonight?" Margaret asked Dolores.

Dolores looked at the floor.

"Do you have somewhere to go?" Margaret pressed.

Dolores tilted her head. "It's difficult," she admitted. "I thought we could sort that out, and then I thought we might follow my brother after all, but when we saw Lion was missing, we came here first." And then the day had extended, and she'd cut her hand. Everything had hinged on that missing toy; what might have shifted, what connections been missed because of this detour?

"What if you stayed here?" Nen invited. She looked to her mother. "Is that okay? They could have Douglas' room."

"I don't impose," Dolores said.

But Margaret had melted into happy relief. The tension drained from her shoulders, her face. “I wasn’t sure you . . . I’ve thought about Douglas’ room standing empty, but I wasn’t sure how much was too much. Too much change, or uncertainty, or . . .” she trailed off.

“You thought I’d flip out,” Nen said. She felt a sharp twist in her gut, a flush of shame as she realized her mother had held off asking them to stay out of worry for her, thinking Nen too fragile; unsteady, not just unmoored.

Alarm flickered over Margaret’s face, but then she must have caught Nen’s smile, because she said only, “I never want to make things worse.” She turned to Dolores, hands open in welcome.

“We do have a spare room, and it’s getting dark.”

Dolores looked at her daughter, then back at Margaret. “We would like to stay tonight,” she said.

“You must have things,” Margaret said.

“In my car. And in a friend’s garage.”

On the daybed, Mira edged closer to Nen, worked the book onto her lap. “Read to me?”

“It’s a bird book. There’s no story,” Nen objected.

“There’s always a story.”

Nen changed her Promenade clothes six times over, a level of indecision possible with her small wardrobe only because she kept swapping out the same two outfits. She paired the laboriously shortened pants with a simple blue sweater, then put on the midnight blue dress instead. Twirled in front of her scrap of mirror, swallowed hard, and changed back into the pants. Again. Repeat.

She wore the dress. When would she otherwise have a chance? Next Fishtide was too far off to contemplate. Her hair had grown long, settling toward wavy rather than springy, the weight of its length stretching the curl. She tied it back, to keep it out of her eyes if the day was windy. The morning was cold, bright—a half step backward on the unsteady march of spring. She draped a shawl over her shoulders. She had lost her jacket, but she could never have crushed her beautiful dress under an all-weather parka with scuffed hem and bulky sleeves. The shoes she could live with. At Fishtide, she had wanted silver sandals, high heels to go with the velvet. The closest she had come were silver flats—sensible, their closed toes suitable for cold weather, but they hit the base of her big toe with a pressure that left her limping after four or five steps. She'd thrown them away in disgust. Now, for Promenade, Nen wore still more sensible black oxfords.

Nen gave her hair tie a final tug and found her hands were shaking. She couldn't quash the fear that all those people on the riverbank would be the straw that broke the landfill's back. Merlin Wicket was no longer a threat, but that didn't make the riverbank safe. There had been predictions of a king tide, and while some had cautioned people to stay away from the riverbanks, naysayers mocked them for imagining a return to the original Fishtide, as if they might be going back in time. Truly high water seemed impossible. There were the sweepers, after all, years of scarcity, certainty, control. But the estuary restoration was not yet complete. Acres of fill remained dry behind the dikes. With nowhere to go, a high tide would rush up-river. It might not even take a high tide for the

undermined ledge to snap off. But curiosity was at least as strong as fear. Whatever happened, Nen wanted to be there. And she had no other way to reach Martina.

Nen had taken so long dressing, she thought Mrs. Zinfeld might have left without her, but she was just opening her front door when Nen finally made it outside. She was in a celebratory mood, curious and alert, ready with questions and praise. “That is a beautiful dress,” Mrs. Zinfeld said.

“Thank you.” Nen made a curtsy, adjusted her shawl, then laughed at herself. “You don’t think it’s too much?”

“Not at all.” Mrs. Zinfeld wore a simple wool suit in black and white houndstooth, with a narrow-brimmed, knitted hat. She wrapped a scarf around her neck, the same steel gray shade as her hair, and reached behind the door to pick up a cane—blond wood, curved grip like a shepherd’s crook. She waved it with a flourish that would have thrown her off balance if she hadn’t had the porch railing within reach. “This might come in handy.”

They set out. Mrs. Zinfeld walked steadily enough, scarcely leaning on the cane, but she was winded after a few blocks. “Let’s stop at the café,” Nen suggested. “I want to know what Jick decided about staying open.”

The café looked empty, until Nen saw Jick standing at the back, obscured behind a stack of blankets on the table in front of him. A chair was heaped with others yet to be folded. The blankets looked thin, tightly woven. Even halfway across the room, they smelled musty.

“The door was unlocked,” Nen said when Jick didn’t look up. He seemed oddly preoccupied, folding and counting and stacking and smoothing.

Jick nodded. “I don’t like to close, but I don’t want to miss the big event. I’ll be putting out sandwiches in a chilly bin with an honor jar. Split the difference, so to speak.” He seemed to notice Mrs. Zinfeld for the first time. “Good morning, Mrs. Zinfeld. Do have a seat.” Of course they knew each other, Nen thought. Mrs. Zinfeld had advertised the apartment on Jick’s message board.

“Thank you.” Mrs. Zinfeld took a chair close to the door, adjusting it with a series of little pushes to angle it just right before she sat down.

“Those look scratchy,” Nen said, waving at the blankets.

Jick looked her up and down, then smiled. “You don’t look scratchy. That’s quite the dress.”

“Thank you. Everyone’s supposed to wear blue, right? Blue or black or white, and fancy. That’s what I heard.”

“You’ve got fancy covered. Want a blanket? You look cold.” The midnight-blue sheath, though thick velvet, was sleeveless, even if the high neckline protected her chest from the breeze. The shawl—the only one she had—was thin.

“No, thank you. Really, what are those for?”

“People always need blankets. Any disaster report you’ve ever seen, there’s a shot of bedraggled survivors clutching blankets around their shoulders.”

“What do you mean, disaster?”

“They’ve been predicting a higher than usual tide,” Jick said, then laughed at himself. “I came across these in the storeroom. Haven’t you been talking about high water?”

“For all the good it’s done.” Mrs. Zinfeld was looking out the window, tapping her cane softly in time with her breathing. Nen wanted to get going, see how many people were gathering. “How come you have so many? Did you buy them special?”

Jick looked sheepish. “Club I belonged to. We used to do rustic camping, like the old days.”

“What old days?”

“Olden times,” Jick enunciated distinctly. “Prior era.”

“Like living history?” Nen thought of the estuary’s floating borders, shifting residents.

“I don’t do it anymore.” Jick said, folding the last of the blankets. “Should have given these away a long time ago. Maybe I’ll put them out by the chilly bin; people can take them to picnic on.”

Nen turned to Mrs. Zinfeld. “Shouldn’t we get going?”

“Aria was to meet us here.”

“She was?” Why was Mrs. Zinfeld only telling her now?

“That reminds me, she left something. Where did I set it?” Jick looked around, rubbed his chin, then extracted a package, carefully tied with string, from under a corner of his blanket stack. *For Nen* was scrawled on the wrapping. Jick handed it to her. “Open it.”

Nen picked apart the knots, unfolded the wrapper to find a box filled with mismatched sheets of paper. She began to leaf through the stack. Drawings, diagrams, charcoal sketches of feathers and beaks, detailed renderings in colored pencil. Full paragraphs, scattered phrases, some typed, others scrawled by hand. Nen was bewildered. “What am I supposed to do with this?”

“That’s Aria’s bird book,” Mrs. Zinfeld said, craning her neck but not getting out of her seat. Aria had said she was as interested in the birdwatchers as the birds, but there were no images of people, no photographs.

Was the cache of documents some kind of deposit? A task to be completed or performed? Nen was both flattered and irritated. Coming as it did, the gift was almost insulting—presumptuous, imperious, a message in a code so elaborate, Nen couldn’t begin to understand. What had Aria said on the boardwalk? *Be this*, no explanation, and then, *Care and abundance*, the Fishtide toast. Nothing about a bird book, the project as legacy. Aria seemed to have decamped rather than help, but what if something had happened to her?

Nen thought of the list she had smoothed, carried, memorized; had copied letter by letter in case that would jar loose some association. Had carelessly destroyed in the wash. All the lists here were Aria’s, all the handwriting the same. No *shops on Third*; no *2mi at the lake*; no *raspberries* or *report %s are off*. But the bird book was Aria’s great project—although, if this jumble was to be a book, it was far from finished. Was there a warning here? Aria had talked about birders’ capacity for contradiction—

trek through the wilds in search of a given species one month, the next month cut down the last of the trees in the last of the forests where that particular creature might breed.

Mrs. Zinfeld cleared her throat. “Aria manages to be present even when she’s not,” she said. “Perhaps we should be on our way?”

At the estuary, when Nen had returned breathless and shaken by the loss of her necklace, Aria hadn’t demanded more explanation than Nen volunteered. Yet underneath her delight in the swifts, her knowledge and care, had been a wistfulness. Nen had noticed it at the bridge, when Aria asked about her present and her prior selves, and again on the boardwalk, when Aria asked about her future dreams. The wistfulness carried a note of bitter resignation. An aftertaste—no, an undertaste. Thinking back, Nen had the odd, distinct awareness of the flavor of their conversation. She would have to ask Aria when she saw her again.

If she saw her again. “You don’t think we should wait?”

“We’ve waited a good while. If she left that,” Mrs. Zinfeld pointed with her chin at the sheaf of documents and sketches, “she’s not coming back.”

“At all?” Nen heard herself squeak.

Mrs. Zinfeld hesitated. “Not this morning.”

“Should we be worried?”

“Aria has her ways. She’ll catch up to us when she’s ready.” Mrs. Zinfeld had regained her energy.

Nen shook out the wrapping, looking for a note she might have missed, then turned back to Jick. “Did she say anything?”

“She only left the package.”

Nen began to rewrap the box, fussing with the strings. She didn’t want to have her hands full. She imagined papers fluttering out of her grasp to settle over the water like ashes, like her necklace

on the mud. That might almost be a relief, the burden—the mystery—lifted and lost. She might find herself tempted to let go. “Can I leave this here? Pick it up this afternoon?” she asked Jick.

“Of course. Set it on the counter. I’ll look for you at Promenade.”

People were gathering close to Zinfeld headquarters when Nen and Mrs. Zinfeld arrived. The downtown towers faced the river on one side; on the other, the avenue and the pocket park where Nen and Martina had first sat together. Jick’s café was two blocks down, in the direction of the older, residential area where Mrs. Zinfeld lived. The riverfront park began a block further on. Looking up at the Zinfeld building, Nen thought of her office, the heavy desk, the afternoon light—warmer, yellower than this outdoor winter glare. Her time in the office had already receded. It hadn’t been long. She recalled the weight of drawing paper in her hands, the warm smell of dust—the smell of tradition, of holding the line. How smoothly she had been taken in, and then how easily removed.

Nen and Mrs. Zinfeld followed the walkway into the park, a wide, sloped space of generous public lawns for play and picnicking and relaxation. The riverside path curved around a rise before straightening out for the narrow run between the water and the downtown office towers, the pavement right at water’s edge, flush against the buildings for half a mile or so. It had always been part of the Promenade route, one end of the riverwalk to the other. Nen caught the brackish scent of salt water she’d smelled at the estuary.

The sun was high, the sky white-gray. Nen shaded her eyes with her hand. Across the river, the banks looked low and bluish, not quite in focus. She felt exhilarated, the soft thrill of bright air, cool breeze around her ankles and a gathering crowd bent on walking. She saw club groups and kindergarten classes, giant puppets and old ladies in matching wool coats. Straw hats festooned with paper flowers, tassels, satin ribbons. A stilt-walker in striped pants and giant bowler hat. A wind ensemble, flutes and trumpets and a single trombone. Men in three-piece suits carried children on

their shoulders, keeping time to the music as the toddlers waved their feet. Nen looked for Lucy or Martina, for Aria. She recognized Carol, from New and Vintage, and waved. Carol was wearing a floppy hat—giant blue flowers against a white ground—and a sculpted ruffle of a dress, as if the mermaid gown Nen had passed up had sprouted a second and a third layer. A squadron of sweepers marched in formation, detached from their hover trailers but moving as one, as if practicing a dance. Nen spotted a few protest signs, but most people seemed to be simply enjoying the day. Vendors were hawking fried dough, grilled sausages, bottled fizzytea, and crinkly bags of new year's puffnuts.

A hurricane fence kept people out of the West Building site, now that everything of value had been taken. From the bus with Aria, Nen hadn't been able to see much. Up close, the ground looked crusty. Shards of window glass piled to one side reflected a shattered sky. Twisted girders poked out of the ground. A few blades of grass had begun to make inroads. And now there was a sign on the fence, lettered in yellow and blue. *Here lies the West Building. Collapsed due to unstable footing and eroded landfill. Future home of expanded greenspace, an unmonument to unbuilding. E. Zinfeld Endeavors.* Nen turned to Mrs. Zinfeld. "Really?" She had underestimated Mrs. Zinfeld. Again.

"It was time." Mrs. Zinfeld eyes sparkled. Nen was astonished and grateful, yet it seemed too easy, Wicket getting off cheap.

Except Wicket was dead. That wasn't cheap. "That's why you exercised your option with the site," Nen said slowly. "Does Aria know?"

"Yes. Aria loves a project, the long view."

"Unmonument, unbuilding," Nen repeated. "What does your daughter think? About the option and everything?"

Mrs. Zinfeld looked away, then spoke to the sky. "Mara would say I'm pandering. She'll see it when she sees it. I've no need to court her approval." Her tone was at once irritated and resigned; it struck Nen as sad, the way she couldn't admit she wanted that approval, couldn't ask for it outright.

Nen wanted to pry a little further, but Mrs. Zinfeld had shaken off her momentary discontent and taken a seat on a bench overlooking the river. “You look around. I will be entirely comfortable, watching people bumble along.” She gave Nen a push toward a clot of people closer to the headquarters.

“I’ll come back for you before the Promenade proper starts,” Nen promised. She did want to look around, but was reluctant to abandon Mrs. Zinfeld.

Mrs. Zinfeld saluted with a wave of the honeyed wood cane. “Be sure to see the floats. You won’t want to miss this year’s entries.”

Nen thought of boats, barges, buoys. There had been buoys on the list in her pocket, with a question mark. Navigation, floatation, fishing, diving—how many kinds of buoys were there? And why would there be floats here, if no one swam? The previous day’s tide had been high, but not extreme. No water lapping over the riverbank.

What was it Carol had said about Promenade? *Something always blooms, something you didn’t expect.* Beyond the food booths, souvenirs were for sale—scarves and mittens, mesh bags, ribbon bracelets. And there was Martina, selling paper flowers. Nen started to rush over, then hesitated. She had been eager to tell Martina about the inheritance, that Lucy and Mrs. Zinfeld had learned some portion of the evaporation fields might be hers, for as long as that lasted—meaning Martina, no longer running a sweeper, might yet profit. Selfishly, Nen wanted to be the one to give her the good news, though the inheritance might be no more than bragging rights, vindication. Still, vindication was something. But Martina had quit her job on her own, no push from Nen, and now she’d been enterprising enough to find an alternative. Nen wondered if she could buy a flower, if Martina would resent the implication of pity.

Paper flowers—thick, crepe-paper petals on wire stems—were a big item. Martina’s wasn’t the only booth. People had pinned them to hats, were giving them away. Some were fluffy paper pom-

poms, carnations or peonies in every shade of pink. Others remained folded, ready to bloom under a careful hand. Martina opened one, petal by petal, to give a doubting patron the full effect. Delighted, the man bought two, turned to tuck one into his friend's lapel. Martina moved on to the next customer. Nen listened as Martina explained her wares to a woman in a long, wool coat, evidently a first-timer like Nen. "You can add a flower to your favorite float—it's part of the judging. People's Choice, whoever gets the most flower votes, wins."

Not wanting to interrupt, Nen decided to catch up with Martina later. The floats were getting their finishing touches, almost hidden in the swirl of workers and watchers with their flower votes. She found Lucy beside the largest float, giving instructions. "I thought you weren't here!" It came out more accusatory than relieved.

"Hello." Lucy was unruffled.

"Why didn't—"

"It's a surprise, the float reveal," Lucy said, anticipating Nen's question. "That's why I didn't tell you." She handed Nen a bag of puffnuts. Nen opened the bag absentmindedly, not realizing she was hungry until the first one crunched between her teeth.

The float was some ten feet long, six feet across, decorated with rags and scrap paper ingeniously placed to mimic flowers. The frame was mostly wire, with skirting around the base. Nen circled the float, admiring the clever reuse of materials and the sheer beauty of the thing. It, too, was blue and black and white, with flashes of yellow and pink.

This year, Zinfeld's entry, with Lucy's design and Mrs. Zinfeld's approval, had recreated the croquet pitch Nen had placed in the pocket park, the downtown towers dressed up with mallets and brightly colored balls. That was the first plan. Mrs. Zinfeld had been ready to chide Merlin Wicket and do so publicly. Then he died. Obituaries had been written, a funeral planned. Wicket had little

family—none he acknowledged—but he had many friends and more acquaintance. His death would not go unmourned.

Neither would his reputation go unsullied. After his death, Lucy and a few helpers worked through the night to alter the design. Now the float was an artist's rendering of a reworked riverfront. Before and after: tippy towers at one end of the platform, cheery greensward at the other.

“We agreed to tone it down—less Wicket, more future. But not whitewash it entirely. *Now is not the time,*” Lucy intoned, then shook her head. “Understood. Right after the tragedy is never the time—but that’s when you have people’s attention. This is our moment. We have to act now, act fast. Make the case: *something must be done.*”

“I saw him fall,” Nen told Lucy. “I was there on the bridge.”

Lucy froze. “That’s horrible!”

“It was,” Nen agreed. “And—” There was more she wanted to say, but she didn’t know how to begin. “How do you move it?” Nen asked instead. She touched the edge of the float; it seemed heavy, solid, yet also unstable.

“Those poles.” Lucy pointed. Built on fat, squat wheelbarrow wheels, the float had poles attached at the four corners, each long enough for two or three people to push or steer. The float would fit the walk between the buildings and the river, but only just.

The Business Civic Organization and the Greengrocers Collective had also entered floats this year. The first consisted primarily of seated dignitaries, with a tangle of interlaced tubes at the center that Nen decided must be meant to represent shaking hands. The greengrocers had built a cornucopia that spilled over the sides of the platform in every possible color and shape, produce Nen recognized along with fruits and vegetables that must have been invented for the occasion.

The procession had been organizing itself while Nen and Lucy were talking. There were only three floats, but there were school groups, garden clubs, single walkers and families angling for a

good spot. Lucy answered Nen's questions as thoroughly as she could, but Lucy, too, had been gesturing and waving, half her attention on Nen, half on getting her float properly aligned. Now the floats were ready, the participating guilds lined up. It was time to start before the assembled herd began to stray, hungry or curious or bored.

As the float began to move, the paper towers swayed—seemingly about to topple—then righted again. If the object was to highlight instability, the float was an ideal way to do so. Nen turned back up the rise toward the bench where she'd left Mrs. Zinfeld. The column wasn't moving fast—it was a stroll, not a march. Plenty of time to gather Mrs. Zinfeld and her cane and catch up.

Going against the current proved easier said than done. The crowd was solid, sure of itself, and Nen felt self-conscious, all dressed up. Mrs. Zinfeld might be happiest on her bench. Still, Nen shifted and pushed. Her two or three steps uphill had already separated her from the float. She tried to wriggle through the crowd as she had when the West Building fell, pushing the unwelcome memory aside even as she tried to push past the woman beside her without being too obvious; in doing so, she found herself beside Carol. Nen opened her mouth to compliment her on the mermaid dress, but Carol was agitated, pointing to the water. Nen looked where she pointed. A low wave, a visible rise, was racing upstream. The river was running backward.

Nen saw the water rise against the bank; saw a band across the water, a lift. It was coming toward her, perpendicular to the bank. She knew it was a tidal bore, the riverbanks acting as a funnel as water entered the channel, though she had only read about them. No wind to push it and yet the water sloshed and rushed as it came closer. The river was narrow here; there was nowhere for the water to go.

The lead float was already in the neck of walkway between tower and stream, the pavement like a strip of beach at cliff bottom. The other two floats were not yet in the passage. Nen had a flash of gratitude that she hadn't retrieved Mrs. Zinfeld. With any luck, she had stayed put on higher ground.

Just as likely, she might have moved on her own to catch up. After all, she had her cane. She was ready for anything. Nen felt the scream rise in her throat and felt her throat close off. She might never speak again, might not even whisper, shocked forever into silence.

Others were screaming for her, *Look! Look!* Only they weren't screams so much as shouts of surprise, even wonder. No one had ever seen anything like it, not ever before. A wave swelled up, almost slow motion; not deep, perhaps an inch of water over the bank. Enough to lift and shift the precarious, top-heavy float, then set it down. But then, as people thought the danger had passed and were starting to push and crow and compare, the pavement slumped.

Nen heard the noise before she felt the drop, felt the slip and teeter before she saw the walk tilt off its axis, as if it were trying to pour its unruly burden overboard. Nimble children vaulted over the benches and seating walls that separated the river walk from the buildings behind. Others weren't so lucky, swept forward and back along the paved walk, the crowd itself sloshing like water. Ankles tangled in banners. Paper flowers melted into a slick sludge underfoot. A window shattered on the first floor of Zinfeld Industries, as people pushed into and through the panes. The crash and jingle of breaking glass echoed against panicked screams and barked instructions as the float's bearers spun into the stream.

Keeping her balance, Nen took a step uphill and then another, and then looked back at the water. A piece of the riverside walk bobbed on the current for a moment before it sank, a cracker crushed into soup. The float tumbled into the river but didn't capsize. Nen saw ten or fifteen people splashing, gasping, heads above water and then below. A few of them floundered to shore, where the crumbled walkway had made the bank more climbable than it had been, less the vertical wall, slick with algae and mineral stains. Others made for the float, clambered or were pulled aboard and floated downriver, startled to find their structure become a watercraft, more startled that their so-called float could float. Then Nen saw Martina, her face a blank sheet of terror.

She heard a voice at her shoulder, a voice she recognized yet could not identify—*n-n-never jump in after a p-p-person who's drowning*. She did not know why that should be so, why one must never jump, and then she was in the water. She didn't remember taking time to kick off her shoes, but her feet were bare. There was time in her fear and indecision to feel the delicious rise of the water, to read the current, sense the prickle of her skin against the cold. She felt herself buoyed in a way she hadn't since forever, since the last time she swam, if she ever did swim—since that swim before memory, whenever it was. Then her dress began to cling, the sodden velvet dragging. Water filled her nose. Nen clawed at the fabric circling her neck, managed to tear it enough to give herself some room to breathe, but there was no way she could shuck off the dress completely. What had she been thinking, wearing the dress? She spluttered and spat as salt hit the back of her throat.

Nen swam toward Martina, murmuring through tight lips so as not to take on more water herself, shushing her without shushing her, trying to say it with her eyes: *I'm coming for you, don't panic*. Martina was farther from shore than Nen had thought—she had jumped, she didn't think, she didn't pause to measure—or the current had carried her, struggling and weaving. Nen swam around behind Martina, looped an arm under her chin, whispered in her ear—“you're all right, be still, be still”—and began to pull for shore, stroking with her free arm, dragging Martina beside her, somehow keeping both of their heads above water. Martina should have been too tired to fight, too stunned to struggle, but she fought even more than Nen had feared, thrashing and rolling. She felt a tearing heat in her thighs even as her feet started to numb. The waterlogged dress was a lead suit, pulling her under. Nen kicked hard for the surface, finding an unexpected power in her scissoring legs.

When she looked up, Nen saw Cole on the bank, extending a pole. She recognized Mrs. Zinfeld's cane. The voice again, *Reach, throw*. Here Cole was, reaching. Nen forced her arm up—heavy, inert, not quite her own. She felt her grip slipping on the polished wood, then Cole's hands, or someone else's, clasped over hers. “Heave!” he commanded. “Come on!” She heard Mrs.

Zinfeld's voice, a simple, "Nen!" and then she was out of the water and so was Martina, chests heaving, spent muscles limp as putty. Martina vomited water and more water and reeled toward a bench, then dropped to her knees in the grass. Nen sat dizzily beside her.

"Thank you," Martina whispered, and then clearer, again and again, "thank you, thank you."

Nen nodded, trying to let her know it was all right, couldn't get the words out.

Most of those who didn't go into the water had swarmed uphill, out of the narrow corridor. Not a huge crowd, they lingered there now. A few had kept their heads and stayed to help. Turned back, once they felt safe, the worst was over, and approached the crumbled bank. Jick was there, his blankets in a handcart. He hurried over to Nen and Martina, draped a blanket around them. His hand rested on Nen's shoulder for a moment before he moved away to help others.

People on the float were waving goodbye, or were they calling for help? Nen wondered how the unlikely craft could ever make it back to shore, if they would bob right out to sea or if the river might eddy them back toward shallow water. Someone had one of the poles in hand, trying to row.

"Lucy!" Nen tried to scramble to her feet, struggling to stand. "What's Lucy doing out there?" Maybe she had decided to ride on her creation at the last minute; maybe that was one of the designer's perks. Martina shook her head, still dazed, and mumbled something Nen couldn't hear.

"Lucy!" Nen screamed again. Her legs collapsed and she sat down.

Lucy looked past her, seemed to mouth something. She waved her pole in the air before bringing it down hard into the water. Surely it was too deep for the pole to find purchase on the bottom and push the float toward shore. But maybe not. Lucy didn't look frightened.

Nen was scared enough for both of them. She imagined Aria on the float, headed out to sea with the others, but there had been no sign of Aria since the café.

The river current had reasserted itself. The water had slowed, as if the bulk of the water were caught in the middle, weighed down, a foot on the brakes, a thumb on the scale. As if the water

were thicker than usual, pushed or pulled in two directions, ponderous, hard to see. Under the blanket, Nen hugged her arms tight around her torso, felt herself rocking back and forth. She counted heads on the float—eight? ten? seven? They wouldn't be still, but she didn't think anyone else had fallen in.

“No children,” Martina said then.

Nen turned toward her. “What, where?”

“In the water, on the float. They all went uphill, they weren't trapped by the wave.” Martina was smiling, almost as if her own child had been among those who had escaped. Nen looked back at the float, counted again. Martina was right.

Nen had no strength left. She had been as unprepared as anyone when the riverbank collapsed. She had saved only Martina. Jick, she saw, was farther down the bank, still handing out blankets. Cole had joined him. At least they were doing something. Mrs. Zinfeld tucked the blanket around her more tightly. “What about—?” Nen started to ask, but then she was coughing again.

Nen coughed up whatever water she had swallowed; she coughed until there was nothing left, not even an aftertaste. She felt emptied. She was sitting on this bank, what remained of the riverbank, sitting with Martina, and she had swum her to safety, and now she didn't know what to say or how to move or if there was anything further to be done. If it wouldn't be better to sit, only sit, sit forever, to feel the air wash over her, air now like water, enveloping. She felt her skin begin to dry and then she was cold, the heavy velvet a weight on her lap. She watched water trickle out of the fabric, as if the dress were a sponge left on the edge of the sink. For the moment, all sense of purpose, all possibility, was gone.

Nen shivered and moved closer to Martina. Martina was patting her pockets, agitated in her turn. “What is it?” Nen asked.

“I can’t—” Martina kept turning out her pockets, then seemed to have located something too deeply lodged to be easily retrieved. She struggled with the wet fabric. “Ah!” she breathed at last, and held up the chit-roll that had been caught in the threads.

Thinking of her ruined list, Nen worried the bills would tear or fuse together. She watched nervously as Martina peeled the roll apart, spread the blue and orange chits on her legs to dry.

“Why are you carrying that around?” Nen asked.

“No bank,” Martina said simply.

Nen had no energy to argue. She felt a nudge, turned her head to see Mrs. Zinfeld’s cane. “May I?” Mrs. Zinfeld braced a hand on Nen’s shoulder—Nen almost buckled—to lower herself to the ground.

“Wouldn’t you be more—” Nen started.

“No,” Mrs. Zinfeld said. And then, “Look at them go.” Nen wasn’t sure if she meant the float or the rescuers or something else, but she was glad of the company. She knew she should formally introduce Mrs. Zinfeld and Martina. Her mind was cluttered with social niceties and her inability to ever get it right, but now also with a creeping, bubbling, flabbergasted happiness at having made it out of the water alive. She felt the grass under her fingers, the individual blades; felt every cell in her lungs and felt the blood return to her feet; felt an odd, unclassifiable yell rising in her throat.

“Hey, the lion can swim,” Martina said. She raised an arm to point.

Nen swallowed her yell. “What lion?”

“From the bridge.”

And there it was. The lion had resurfaced, dislodged by the countervailing pressures of tidal bore and river current. “I thought it was marble,” Nen said. The thought of her old friend floating raised her spirits, though she couldn’t see its expression any better than she could see the faces of the people on the float.

“Must be pumice,” Mrs. Zinfeld said.

“You think so?” It seemed logical enough, yet Nen found she preferred to leave it unexplained, the great cat’s mystery irreducible.

“We mostly stayed away from the evaporation fields,” Martina said quietly. “But one time, I took my daughter on a picnic. It was a creek where my gran used to take my mother, so I decided we should go, too. My daughter picked up a rock and dropped it in the water. It floated. ‘Look, Mama,’ she said, ‘a floating rock.’ I was a few feet away, on the bank. ‘Rocks don’t float,’ I told her. ‘Oh yes they do,’ she told me. She was so insistent, tugging at me with her baby hand. And she was right—some rocks do float. I’d never seen that before.”

“Let’s hope that Promenade float is pumice,” Nen said. The castaway group seemed to have organized itself into purposeful activity, though Nen couldn’t see what exactly they were doing. Lucy was still working the pole.

“Hope is porous,” Mrs. Zinfeld said. “Sometimes it stays afloat, sometimes it’s easily swamped.” She leaned forward to speak to Martina. “I have some good news for you,” she said.

“We hope it’s good news,” Nen cautioned. She and Martina were safe on shore, but the future riverbank pictured on Lucy’s grand creation was still bobbing downstream in all its soggy paper glory. Maybe it was too late for any news to matter. Martina turned as if to ask a question, then slapped a hand down to secure the fluttering chits on her lap before they blew away.

“Care and abundance,” Mrs. Zinfeld said, her voice warm with approval.

“Abhorrence of waste,” Martina replied, completing the verse. She turned back to the river; Nen pulled the blanket a little tighter. Nen waited, no longer determined to be the bearer of news, good or bad. She felt Martina and Mrs. Zinfeld to either side, shivering yet solid. The noise behind them receded as they watched the lion overtake the raft.

Nen had seen the lion as guardian, as friend. Now it was, improbably, buoyant—porous, like hope itself, or like surprise, the unexpected. Nothing carved in stone. And it wasn't floating only for her. Anyone could see. Nen felt herself a part of the crowd at last. Waves and ripples of disbelief swirled around her as people on the shore together took in the impossibility of it all—joy, fear, wonder all commingling, interweaving, dispersing like river currents channeled, interrupted, restored.