A Place Where Lovers Go

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CHRIST. SHE CAN HEAR HER FATHER already. Evy and her colleagues step out of their building and, as if on cue, it hits her ears: Her father's voice, less than a block away. He's at his favorite corner on Kirkwood Avenue, guitar and all, and he's belting out a song without fear or abash. Already, Evy regrets going out for lunch.

The others—Parker, Andy, Caroline from HR—don't even seem to notice. And why would they? Her father is something of a fixture in town, and his constancy makes him as easy to ignore as a scrawl of graffiti or a weathered flyer taped to a telephone pole. He's a lifelong resident of Bloomington, Indiana, and now Evy is a resident again, too. She's a director of development for Indiana University, and her office is right around the corner from her father's favorite spot.

As they walk, the others are chatting about a new policy from the university's foundation—a tighter restriction on donor communications—but Evy cuts them off in the midst of their complaints.

"Can we go to that sandwich place on the square?" she says. "What's it called? Carvers? I'd love a Reuben," but, really, she wouldn't. She doesn't care where they eat, so long as it doesn't take them past her father.

"What about Malibu?" Andy says.

"Too fancy," Evy replies. "I just want a sandwich or something."

"Well, *someplace* near Kirkwood," Parker says, and he turns the corner, steering them in that direction. "I want to show you guys something on the way."

"I don't want to go somewhere student-y," Evy says. "Can't we just—"

"Oh, come on," Parker tells her, cutting Evy off. He waves them all forward, and his stride never hesitates. He walks with the certainty and presumptuous swagger of an aging frat boy. His steps are just a bit too long, and with each footfall his heels hit the pavement just a bit too hard, as if he's snuffing out an endless line of discarded cigarette butts. "It'll only take a second," he says. "I promise," and Evy resists the urge to kick him in the ass.

And now they're moving toward her father, and his singing is getting louder, and Evy feels like turning back and eating at the office. But she can't. These are her friends, and her co-workers, and somehow, against her better judgment, Parker has become something even more than that. The ancient ache to be part of a group: Evy has never felt it more keenly than she has in the past few months. Since moving back to Bloomington, she's felt a perpetual sense of self-consciousness. It's surprising, honestly. This is the place where she's *from*: Shouldn't she feel at home here?

But she doesn't. She feels entirely out of her element. Bloomington, like so many college towns, is a transient place. All of her old friends have moved away, and even the town itself has changed in the decade she's been gone. There are so many new apartment buildings. So much new construction. Her favorite bookstore has closed. The late-night diner where she used to smoke cigarettes and play Uno with her friends is now an organic grocery store. But this is where she lives, for better or worse, and she has to make do. She wants to make new friends. She wants to feel comfortable again. And people who feel comfortable don't turn around and eat lunch by themselves in the office.

"How can I explain?" her father sings. "It's so hard to get on. And these visions of Johanna, they keep me up past the dawn."

"See that guy?" Parker says, pointing with his chin up the street at Evy's father. "The guy with the guitar?"

"I sure do," Caroline says. "Quite a voice he's got."

"That he does," Parker says. "And he's the one who owns that house on Eighth and Roosevelt. He's the final holdout."

"The final holdout for what?" Evy says.

"*That's* the guy?" Andy says.

Parker grins, bobbing his head. "That's the guy."

"The final holdout for what?" Evy repeats.

"The university wants to repurpose that whole subdivision," Andy says. "They've bought up all the other houses already. They're just renting them out until he sells."

Evy didn't know that. Monroe County isn't part of her territory, and Parker has never mentioned a real estate prospect on Eighth Street. But she isn't surprised. The university is constantly expanding, and her father's home sits on the edge of the university's eastern border. He inherited it from his own father, a longtime professor in the Biology department, and for many years her father's only source of income has been the money he collects from renting out the finished basement. The house matches Evy's father in every way: Unkempt, unashamed, ramshackle. Its front porch is collapsing like a sinking boat—rising up at one end while the other dips down—and a trellis of weeds covers the living room window in its entirety. It hasn't been painted in years, and its roof sheds shingles like a leper. The house itself isn't worth much, but the land alone is undoubtedly worth a lot to the university.

"Have they made him an offer?" Evy says.

"You mean have *I* made him an offer," Parker replies. "But, no, I haven't. I've met with him half a dozen times, though. He's a talker."

And with that Parker waves to Evy's father. Something passes across Parker's face, canny and well-trained muscles twitching into action, and suddenly he's a professional again. He smiles, and his cheeks curl and crest, and in that moment he's more friend than frat. He looks kind. Approachable. He looks like someone you'd want to sit next to at a dinner party.

But Evy's father is across the street, and if he notices them, he doesn't react. The moment passes—thank god—and then they're on their way again, headed for the square in a roundabout manner.

"Do you think he'll sell?" Andy says.

"Eventually." Parker slips his hands into his pockets. It's early April, and the weather hasn't warmed up all the way. "He doesn't have a job, and he doesn't have any other assets."

"Maybe he sells his hair," Caroline says, leaning back and turning her head.

"Check out that ponytail."

"I don't think *anyone's* in the market for that," Parker says.

"Rats, maybe," Andy says. "Or feral raccoons."

And the three of them laugh. Does it sting a little? Sure, but not very much.

Her father is easy to make fun of—Evy knows that—and their comments are made in relative innocence. They don't know that she's his daughter. Evy goes by her mother's last name, Talbot, and even the university's database hasn't made the connection yet. Evy has checked. She could correct it, but she hasn't, and she doesn't intend to.

"We see this empty cage now corrode," her father sings, "where her cape of the stage once had flowed. The fiddler, he now steps to the road—"

"So," Parker says. "What did we decide? Carvers?"

She's been living back in Bloomington for six months now, and in that time she has seen her father only twice: Once when he helped her move a sideboard from the store to her living room, and once when they had lunch together at an Indian buffet.

Of course, *seen* is a relative term. She has seen—and heard—her father many more times than that. He sings on the corner at least three days a week, and when he's not singing, he's sauntering. With his guitar slung across his back, he drifts up and down Kirkwood Avenue with the aimless jollity of a golden retriever. He chitchats with other hippie roustabouts. He nurses cups of coffee from the café on Grant Street. He shares cigarettes with the addicts and the homeless. Sometimes, he just sits, loitering in front of Chipotle or on the steps of the Lutheran church, one more piece of human scenery for the college kids hustling to and from the campus.

This has been his life for twenty years. He exists in that nebulous space between free-spirit and loafer, idealist and crackpot, hippie and bum. And in her adult life, Evy has come to resent him tremendously for that.

As a teenager, she had admired him. Her mother was so uptight, so strict. They had separated when Evy was only eight, and who could blame her father? He was a painter. An activist. He had things that he *believed* in. He wrote protest songs protesting nothing in particular, and on the one or two Saturdays each month when she would stay at his house, Evy and her father would watch kung fu movies and eat pizza straight from the box. She might have been embarrassed of him had they spent more time together, but in small doses, her father was more than just fun. He was cool.

But cool dads don't last forever. There's a line between cool and negligent, and by the time that Evy was in college, she saw him for what he really was. A scrub. A deadbeat husband, and even worse, a deadbeat dad. She stopped visiting him on the weekends. She didn't answer his phone calls. And more quickly than she would have liked, her father gave up on reaching out to her, too. They took to speaking only once or twice a year. Evy graduated from IU with a double-major in English and economics, and then she moved to Chicago. Got married. Worked in development for Lurie Children's Hospital. Made a new and different life for herself in a new and different city.

And yet here she is again: divorced, mid-career and almost middle-aged, back in the town where she grew up. When she thinks of her life in those terms, it's easy to feel sorry for herself. But then she remembers why she moved back to Bloomington in the first place, and she feels at once noble and terrified.

"Why didn't you just turn it off?" she shouts at her mother one Sunday afternoon. "Why didn't you throw a lid on it?" They're standing in her mother's kitchen. The wall around the stove is scorched, and a frying pan still sits on the burner. It's blooming with the charred remains of a deep-fried chicken breast.

"I don't know," her mother says. She blinks, puzzling at the stove. "I guess I just kind of—" She shakes her head. "—left the kitchen when it started to burn, and then I forgot about it."

Her mother, recently retired, isn't well. She's only sixty-five, but Evy knows what's happening, and her mother does, too. It's been happening for years. First came the little things. The difficulty with names, directions. The memories lost, especially recent ones. Sometimes, her mother used strange phrases for ordinary items. Once, she called a motorcycle a *wheelie-car*. Another time, she called her couch the *sitting bed*. At first, it was almost cute, but it isn't cute anymore. She's having difficulty shopping, taking care of her house, looking after herself. It's only a matter of time before she can't live alone. The incident with the stove, Evy thinks, is almost reason enough. But her mother insists. No, no, no. I cook all the time, honey. I just had a senior moment. There was a fire, fine, but it was an accident. I'm not ready yet. I just retired.

"But it's so good to have you close again," her mother says, smiling at Evy with the warmth of a saint. "My darling," she says, taking Evy's hand, squeezing it tight. "My girl."

"I've got sunshine," her father is singing the next morning, "on a cloudy day.

When it's cold outside, I've got the month of May."

And Evy closes the window in her office.

It's been four months since their lunch at the Indian buffet, and Evy almost doesn't answer his phone call. She silences the ringer, and then she watches her phone for a while. The screen says only his number. *Dad*, she considered labeling the entry. Then, *Father*. Then, his first name, *David*. But all of those names had felt more intimate than she liked. So, she didn't enter any name at all. Just the number. But she knows that number by heart.

"Yeah," she says, picking up the phone at the last possible moment. "Hi, Dad."

He wants to see her. He has something he wants to talk about, something important, but he'd rather not go into details over the phone. She drifts in and out as he speaks. She's staring at her computer screen, jammed up in the middle of a gift proposal for a prospect in Indianapolis, but the words and letters and punctuation marks all blur together, and she closes her eyes. Leans her head against one hand. Can she come to the house tonight?

"No," she tells him. "I'm busy tonight," but she isn't. She feels like saying *no* because *no* feels right. He's denied her so much in life. She should deny him something, too.

But she does agree to see him after work tomorrow night, and her tone and exasperated sighs make it clear that it's a burden for her.

"Okay," her father says. "Bye, Pumpkin. Thank you, Pumpkin."

All afternoon, she waits for his voice to come wafting through the air, but it never does. The next day, either. She gets so much work done.

The first thing she notices is the cutout of Elvis in the master bedroom's window. It startles her—this motionless, shadowy man staring down at her—and then she's angry, or at least perturbed. She feels duped, and she feels like a fool. What a nice greeting that is. Boy, she sure feels comfortable now.

When her father answers the door, he hugs her.

"What's with Elvis upstairs?" she says.

"Elvis?"

"In the window."

"Oh, *that*," her father says, and he smiles wide. Stubble covers his chin, and his teeth are as yellow as Post-it notes. "I like having the King around. He freaks out the college kids."

"You like having a cutout of Elvis blocking your bedroom window?"

"Sure," her father says. "He watches over me as I sleep."

He shows her to the living room. The house hasn't changed much in the six or seven years since Evy last visited. There's his tumbledown couch—its fabric the color and pattern of a 1970s ascot—the same couch she used to sit on while they watched movies and ate pizza. The walls' wood paneling is crumbling to pieces where it meets the floor, and with that the whole living room feels as if it might detach from the house at any moment and drop into an abyss below. The walls are covered with paintings and art from around the world. A pair of Ashanti masks float above the fireplace. An Uzbekistani quilt hangs beside the couch. A perimeter shelf lines the room near its ceiling, and this holds clay pots, sculptures, and other small artifacts in varying states of decay. Some of these items belonged to Evy's grandparents, but most were collected by her father. He's rarely left Bloomington, but he adores foreign artwork.

"Thank you for coming," he says, easing into an ancient Queen Anne chair across from the couch. His guitar case leans against one arm of the chair. He asks if he can get her anything to drink. An empty bottle of Sierra Nevada Pale Ale sits on the end table beside him.

"No, thanks," Evy says. "What's up?"

But, hold on. Just hold on, Pumpkin. Let's put the business talk on hold for a second. First, he wants to catch up, and he asks Evy an all-too-predictable litany of questions. When she tells him that she got divorced about a year ago, he doesn't even remember her ex-husband's name, despite the fact that he attended their wedding.

"Mitchell," she says, more weary than angry. What's the point?

But she's gracious enough to delineate their separation, however briefly. Really, it wasn't that complicated: Before getting married, she had made it clear that she didn't want to have children, and that had been fine with Mitchell. Two years in, however, and he had changed his tune or, perhaps, he had been bluffing all along. Either way, surprise: She hadn't been bluffing, and she still didn't want to have children.

That wasn't the only thing that destroyed them, but it seems to Evy now that

this disagreement was one that festered in the very soul of their relationship. Mitchell began fighting with her more, and she fought back. They needled each other constantly. They got on each other's nerves. They dedicated more and more time to their respective jobs, because neither of them wanted to come home at night. When Evy's mother began slipping, she decided that she would start applying to jobs in Bloomington and move back home, and Mitchell decided that he wouldn't come with her. They separated with minimal fits of crying between the two of them, and Mitchell has already remarried, if Facebook is to be believed.

So, now Evy is back to having casual sex at the typically uncasual age of thirty-seven. But she doesn't mention that part to her father. As she tells him the rest, he listens solemnly, legs crossed at the ankles, one fist balled beneath his chin.

"I'm sorry to hear all that," he says when she comes to a close, and she offers him the slightest smile.

"So," she says, "what do you want to talk about?"

But she already knows. What else could it be? And sure enough, her father launches into it. The university wants to expand, and they want to buy his home. They've wanted to for years, but this time he's actually considering it. He's already met with someone from the Office of Development, which seems like a misleading word to him, *development*, because it doesn't mean *development* like developing land but rather *development* like fundraising, though in this case it's also developing land. Regardless, she has a background in this sort of thing, doesn't she? Not only professionally but as his one and only child, and he wants to know what she thinks.

All the while, she listens attentively, playing along. Then she sets the record straight: Not only does she have a background in this; she works for the same office as the man who's visited the house.

"Why didn't you tell me that up top?" her father says.

"You were having so much fun talking," Evy tells him. "I thought I'd let you go on for a little while."

His surprise fades to a smile, and his shoulders wilt. "I'm sorry. I feel like an idiot."

"Don't," Evy says. "It's okay. But, actually, we can't talk about this."

"Why not?"

"Because I work with your gift officer, and I work for this branch of the university. I'm your daughter. It's a conflict of interest."

"Oh, Pumpkin," he says, wincing a little. "Give me a break. Fuck the university. Who gives a shit? I want to know what you think about all this. *You*, Evelyn. Not some woman who works for the university."

She rakes her fingers through her hair, an old coping habit of hers. "It's your house," she says. "Just do with it whatever you want. That's all there is to it."

"It's not just my house," he says. "It's yours, too."

"Is it?" She looks around, feigning a cursory examination of the room. "This doesn't look like my house."

"Well, it is. You're my only heir."

"Oh, please."

"What? You are."

She gawks at him for a moment, waiting for the flicker of understanding. But it never comes. Her father just stares at her. Honest. Unassuming. Ignorant.

"I don't want your fucking house, Dad," she says. "If you want to sell it, then sell it. But don't come asking me what my opinion of the matter is."

She stands, and then she crosses the living room in the direction of the door.

"What is going on?" her father says, rising to his feet. "Am I missing something here?"

"You're missing a lot of things," she says, and she loves how biting that sounds. She should storm out the door right now. End on a high note. Wouldn't that feel great? To zing him like that, and then slam the door behind her?

But she hesitates. Her footsteps slow down, and she sets her hand on the doorknob but doesn't turn it. How many times has she walked out of this house? More importantly, how many times has she walked into it?

"I've been such a shitty dad," her father says. "I know. That's what you mean, right?"

She doesn't answer.

"Then let me make it up to you. Let me make it up to you both."

"Us *both*?" She stares back at him. "Who *both*?"

"You and your mom."

"What are you talking about?"

"You mother is sick," he says. "She has early-stage—" He wipes his hands against his pants, a nervous old burnout talking to the police. "—Early-stage

something. Alzheimer's or dementia or something."

"How did you know that?"

He bounces his shoulders. Gives a little laugh. "We still have *some* of the same friends," he says. "They didn't all take your mother's side." He steps forward. "I want to help her. I want to take care of her. I want to make up for all the years I was a shitty husband. I want to sell this house, and give her the money."

"You can't just give someone hundreds of thousands of dollars," Evy says. "There would be enormous tax penalties. It wouldn't be worth it."

"But she's not just someone. She used to be my wife."

"Yes," Evy says, "*used* to. Spouses can transfer assets between themselves without being taxed. Ex-spouses can't."

"Well, fine. Then I'll sell the house, and I'll give the money to you, and you can use it for your mother's care. Will that work?"

"No. There would still be—"

"Then we'll figure something out," her father says, nearly shouting now. He's rattled. He strokes his fingers through his graying hair, and Evy realizes with a little jolt that she must have learned this habit from him. "We'll do this *somehow*," her father says. "I'll give her the money a fucking penny at a time if I have to. The point is that I want to help her."

And her mother does need help. Evy has already researched local retirement homes, and the least expensive option is six hundred a week. That's just for an apartment, too. The assisted-living facilities are vastly more expensive than that. Evy's mother owns her home, and she's done wonders keeping it in order. But she can only do so much with a pre-fab, mid-century like hers. Two bedrooms. One story. Outdated kitchen. Outdated everything. In Bloomington, it would sell for seventy thousand, if they're lucky. Her mother had worked for decades on the cleaning staff of the Indiana Student Union, but her retirement savings are modest. And she's comparatively young. Frighteningly young, really, for what's coming. She isn't financially prepared for the storm ahead, and Evy isn't either.

"I'll do whatever it takes," her father says. "I want to finally be there for her, and for you, too. I owe this to you both. I owe you a lot." He clasps both hands. "Please let me be your dad again, Evy. Please."

Her head is all static and noise, and she doesn't know what to make of this.

But she knows that she wants to leave. She wants to go home—to *her* home—a one-bedroom apartment on the west side of town with as much charm as the waiting room in a doctor's office. She'll make herself dinner. She'll drink some wine. She'll peruse houses for sale on Zillow. And she'll forget about this, or she'll try to.

"I have to go," Evy says, and she finally succeeds in opening the door. The chilly April air sweeps around her, and a wave of sallow light splashes against her eyes.

"Wait a second," her father says, reaching out for her, though they're ten feet away. "Does she ever talk about me?"

"Mom?"

He nods. He's dressed in cargo pants, a white T-shirt, and a green vest checkered with Rorschach stains of grease, oil, who knows what else. His hair is frazzled, wisps of gun-metal gray that refuse to lie flat, even when they're bound by a braid. His skin is so rough, beaten to rawhide by the sun and heat and cold and the endless march of time. But somehow, amongst all these features of age and wear, her father's eyes still look bright and young. They shimmer with anticipation, and life, and an almost childlike flicker of hope.

Yes, Evy's mother talks about him sometimes. And when she does, she talks about him with a mix of pity and scathing disdain. *I feel sorry for him every now and then*, she once told Evy, *but mostly I think he's a total waste of life. The world would be a better place if he was dead.*

But in looking at her father now, Evy can't bring herself to tell him the truth.

"No," she says. "Mom never talks about you," and she walks out the door.

On Saturday, she sleeps with Parker again. They have drinks together, then dinner and a desultory walk around downtown. Droves of howling college kids pour through the streets, crosswalks ignored, music thumping like distant thunder from every bar. On Saturday nights like this, people-watching in Bloomington is two-parts entertainment, one-part peril. They witness a clutch of girls nearly razed by a pimped-out truck, and at one point, just a few feet in front of them, a young man flicks his cigarette away and then casually vomits on the sidewalk.

"Ah, to be young again," Parker says, and they laugh.

Then it's midnight, and they're back at Parker's house, an historic four-square half a mile from downtown. It's the fifth time they've slept together. They agree that they don't want a relationship; both of them are still recovering from their last. Like Evy, Parker is divorced, but he has two children, both boys, six and nine. She's met neither of them, but their pictures bespeckle every wall in the house. They look like miniature versions of Parker himself, as if he's an amoeba who's twice split apart, no worse for the wear. The boys smile in every photograph, and Evy can tell that they've already learned how to pose, how to put their best face forward.

"Any progress with the guy on Eighth and Roosevelt?" Evy says.

She can't help herself. They've finished, and they're lying together in the dark bedroom, Parker on his back, Evy on her stomach. The window above the bed is open, and the room is filled with eddies of crisp, evening air and the intermittent hollers of young men desperate for attention.

"Actually, yeah," Parker says. He's smoking a joint. An ashtray in the shape of a baseball rests on the windowsill above them. Parker taps away a column of ash, and then he takes another hit. "I made him an offer just yesterday," he says. "Haven't heard back from him yet."

He offers Evy the joint, but she waves one hand. Parker stubs it out, exhaling a dart of smoke, and then he settles down, stretching both arms over his head as though he's in the midst of a pencil dive. He's never held her hand or put his arm around her shoulders, and Evy doesn't especially want him to.

"What do you think of him?" Evy says.

"The guy?"

"Yeah."

Parker frowns, turning the question over in his mind. "I don't know. He's just one of those townie shitheads. One of those lucky townie shitheads, you know?"

"I don't."

"I just mean he's lived here all his life, and he's done nothing. No job. No assets except for his house, and even that he inherited. But somehow, it's all worked out for him. He's got the university by the balls, and he's taking them to the cleaners. Fuck." And now Parker chuckles, his big chest—muscles gone to fat—quaking beneath the sheets. "Actually, when you put it like that, good for him. Cheers to being a fuck-up, you know?"

"Has he mentioned why he wants to sell?"

"Not really. But he's told me plenty about his collection of fucking Navajo pots."

Parker laughs. Evy doesn't. May as well, she thinks. It would be weird if this goes on any longer.

"He's my dad, you know," she says, and even in the darkness of the bedroom, she can see how Parker's face goes flat, then flush.

"What?"

"He's my dad. Seriously."

"David Blanford?"

"Yeah."

"Oh, my god." He stares at her for a few more beats, making sure that she's serious. Then a smile creeps across his face, and he covers his face with both hands. "I am so sorry," he says.

"Holy shit. I honestly had no idea."

"I know. It's okay."

"I thought you were from Chicago."

Against the pillow, she shakes her head. "That's where I lived after college, but I was born and raised in Bloomington."

"He's your *dad*?"

"We're pretty much estranged," Evy says.

She tells him the details. The divorce when she was eight. The sporadic visits throughout high school. Her decision to cut him off. The biting disappointment when he didn't try to stop her. She talks for five minutes straight, pouring out her soul, her youth, all the aching loneliness of her stunted life.

"I think he wanted to be my friend," she tells him. "But I didn't want a friend. I wanted a father. I wanted to be like everyone else."

And when Parker doesn't respond, she realizes that he's fallen asleep. Arms above his head, smoke still twisting in the air, his chest rises and falls with the easy rhythm of rest, and Evy is lying alone in the dark.

Days pass. Her father calls twice, but Evy declines it each time, and he doesn't leave a message. The streets outside her window are quiet, and she wonders if

her father is actively avoiding her. Perhaps he took the missed calls to heart, and they wouldn't speak again for a very long time. She isn't sure what she'll do if her father calls again. She doesn't know if she wants to encourage this—his plan, their relationship, all of it—any more than she already has. But a third call never comes, and she feels both relieved and disappointed.

On Thursday, she travels to Indianapolis to meet with her donor, a hawkish old man who owns a luxury apartment building in Broad Ripple, among many other properties. He's an alumnus, and for tax purposes he's considering gifting the entire apartment building to the university. His donation would be the first major gift that Evy's closed in her new job, and the man has previously suggested that the deal is more or less done. But today, over lunch, he shakes his head and tells Evy that he needs a while more to think about it.

"I'm considering other avenues," he says simply.

And Evy quips, "Which avenues? I thought most of your buildings were on boulevards and streets."

She's trying to keep her cool. She's trying to make him laugh, to introduce a bit of levity. Her donors have always liked that; talking about money makes people nervous, and a few small jokes can put people at ease and sway an entire conversation.

But this man doesn't laugh. He chews his steak, and he ignores her.

"When are we going to win more basketball games?" he says. "We can't play for shit."

She goes back to the office, but she doesn't know why. It's almost five o'clock by the time she gets back to Bloomington, and the base of her skull is throbbing. She closes her door and takes off her shoes. She feels awful. She wants to do something, but she doesn't know what. Cry? Drink? Sleep? Scream? And then she remembers that she's supposed to have dinner with her mother in half an hour, and for the first time in a long while Evy resents her mother with seething intensity.

She should have stayed in Chicago. She should have divorced Mitchell, yes, but she should have kept the apartment, kept her job, kept the life that she had built for herself. She hates this fucking town. But here she is, playing the good daughter, and perhaps she's not as noble as she once thought. She wants to abandon her mother. She wants to give the problem away. Look at her: That's how she thinks of it now. Her mother isn't her mother anymore but *the problem*.

And is that really so shameful to admit? Evy has her own life to live, but instead she's choosing to be here. Alone. Of course that's a problem.

Then she hears music. Singing. Her window is closed, and the words are muffled, but it's her father. He sounds closer than usual, louder than usual, even with the window closed. Evy stands, stepping forward, and then she sees him outside. He's standing on the grass beneath her window, gazing up at her from twenty feet below. His guitar is around his shoulders, and he gently sways as he sings. She opens the window.

"You can buy a dream or two," he sings, "to last you all through the years. And the only price you pay is a heart full of tears." He takes a long breath, bracing himself for the chorus. "Going down to Lonesome—"

"Stop it!" Evy shouts. "For fuck's sake. Just stop." And she slams the window shut.

"Headed off to Lonesome Town?" Parker says as she passes him in the hallway. He grins like a fool.

"Fuck you," she says, and his face drops.

Evy is outside thirty seconds later. Her father has stopped singing, and he's swung his guitar around to his back. Its neck juts out from behind him like a tail.

"What are you doing?" Evy says, stepping out of a side door in the stairwell.

Her father smiles. "Serenading you."

"Why?"

"Because it's fun," he says.

"It's not. It's embarrassing."

"I'm sorry," her father says. "I didn't mean to embarrass you."

"You didn't," Evy says. "You embarrassed yourself." She's standing on the grass in her stocking feet—her shoes are back upstairs in the office—and as she speaks, she sinks a little deeper into the cool, soft earth, as if her words themselves are pulling her down. "Do you really not know how stupid it is," she says, "you singing like a crazy person in the streets? People make fun of you. They laugh at you. They laugh about your hair and your awful voice and how you don't have anything better to do. Are you really not aware of that?"

Her father squirms. He bows his head. If he wasn't ashamed before, he is now. "You sound like your mother," he says.

And she isn't certain if that's meant to be an insult, or if he's meaning to say,

You're right, and she was right, too. But Evy doesn't have the energy to figure that out right now.

"Just get out of here," she says. "Please leave."

But her father doesn't move.

"What should I do?" he says. "Tell me what to do."

"About what?"

"The house. Your mother. I just want to help her."

"What exactly are you suggesting?" Evy says. "What are you planning on doing with this money?"

"Whatever you want me to do," her father says. "I'll pay for medical bills. I'll pay for housing. I'll take care of her myself, if she'll let me."

She wouldn't. Her mother would never go for this. She has too much pride, Evy knows that. But she also knows this: In time, that won't matter. In time, her mother's pride will be swept away with everything else. She won't protest, because she won't know to protest. Ultimately, her father is correct: They can work this out. Somehow, he can help them, if only Evy allows it.

And in truth, she does want his help. She has always wanted his help, his attention, his love. She had once been so strong. She had been fearless. She finished college in three years. Two majors. Phi Beta Kappa. She moved to a new state, new city, but never once did she feel intimidated. And against the odds, her confidence paid off. She got a great job. She chipped away at her student loans. She made friends. She met a good guy. She fought against her misfortunes, and she persevered.

But somehow, it's all fallen apart, and now she's broken. Disaster has crept up on her, and Evy doesn't know what to do with it. If she had been fired without notice, she could have managed that. If her mother had died one night in her sleep, she could have come to terms with that. But the most difficult disasters to weather are the ones that don't happen overnight, and now more than ever she needs her father's help in so many ways.

But she can't accept it. Some things can never be healed. Some things break apart piece by piece—a life, a mind—and what remains isn't always worth saving.

"Tell me what to do," her father says. "Just tell me what to do, and I'll do it." Evy stands taller, and the earth sinks beneath her. She takes a long breath.

"Do you promise?"

"Yes."

"Okay," Evy says. She closes her eyes. "Sell your house, and keep the money for yourself. Leave this place, and never come back."

She's crying now, and even with her eyes shut, she can tell that her father is, too.

"Evy," he says. "Pumpkin—"

It's one of her earliest memories: The origin of that nickname. When she was seven years old, Evy's father took her to a pumpkin farm in Spencer. She remembers the rolling fields. The orange and yellow orbs poking through the grass like gemstones. They took a hayride. They picked their own pumpkins. They had a wonderful afternoon. And in the car, buckling her seatbelt before buckling his own, Evy's father had told her, "I love you, little pumpkin."

And Evy threw her arms around her father's shoulders and kissed him on the cheek.

"I love you, papa pumpkin," she said, in that time when love is so easy for us all. You love mommy. You love daddy. But then it's thirty years later, and your mother is going crazy, and you're telling your father that you never want to see him again.

"You promised to do what I told you," Evy says now, opening her eyes. "And I'm telling you to leave and never come back."

"You can't mean that."

"I do," Evy says. She takes a step away from him, stumbling a little, as if she's been pushed. "I've told you what to do, now do it."

"Evy," her father says. "Please. Pumpkin—"

But she turns, and she goes back to her office. The stairs feel very steep, and her legs feel heavy, but she makes herself move. Parker has left. The hallways are quiet, and she is alone.