

The Long-Distance Runner

i. the beach house

The girl is twelve when her father moves them, takes them from one arboreal corner of the country to the other. He expects her to make friends, to learn to love the heat, the slash pines, the stench of paper mills. Expects this of her mother, too, who says it will be an adventure, they're only an hour from the ocean, a half-day drive to Disney. Not that they ever go. The closest they get is canoeing in the Okefenokee where the girl and her mother marvel at the prehistoric girth of the alligators; her father, at the cypresses. His eyes at their roots or their crowns, and one time he stands up in the canoe to reach for a low-hanging branch. He's tall but sure-footed and even though Sarah—the girl's name is Sarah—shrieks in terror, or perhaps joy, the canoe doesn't roll.

In the photo she's older, a freshman, with gangly limbs and a cross-country jersey. A trophy dangles from one hand, but she presses her lips together despite her coach and her mom both saying *smile*. Her faded eyes stare straight ahead, a glare almost, as if she knows this will be her last track meet, not that she has any way of knowing. She doesn't yet know her father's trip to Brazil has been extended, first by a week that stretches to two, before he finally calls and promises to send a check that doesn't come. There's timber there, see, and good money, and a woman named Bianca. He doesn't describe her. Sarah imagines Carmen Miranda or one of those girls from that Duran Duran video. Dark-haired, olive-skinned, perfectly aligned teeth. Not sun-burnt with oily blonde hair like her or the brittle bob of her mother, her mother who says nothing, refuses to cry or rage or call him names, who gets a job at Kmart, gets Sarah one at the Dairy Queen. Weekends, now that she's dropped track.

She works. Goes to class. Talks to her father on birthdays and Christmases, most years. He sends fifty bucks for her graduation and a photo of him straddling a felled Jequitibá tree. Its mammoth size makes him look small and childlike. He doesn't ask what her postgraduation plans are. No one does.

That's the summer the boy—for that's how he seems, a boy, though he's easily over twenty—pulls up to her drive-through blaring Nirvana's *In Utero*. Sarah leans out the

window and says she loves that album despite being way past her grunge phase. It's then she remembers him: playing bass guitar, screaming "my libido!" and wearing a stringy wig. This, at the high school talent show when she was a freshman, before she traded in her cross-country jersey for a DQ polo, before Tommy Jenks in his beat-up Corolla or Damien Coons beneath the bleachers, before Wade Marcin who got fired and rehired and three months from now will get fired again. Wade, who hides a bottle of Popov behind the Blizzard dispenser. Wade, who has bad skin and says Jacob is so out of her league. That's right, the boy's name is Jacob. He played baseball. Hung out with the jocks, the student council crowd. Now drives a company truck, his father's logo emblazoned on his hat. Wade leers at her when she offers Jacob a free sundae.

A year from now, Jacob will claim she wrote her number on the receipt, and she'll say no, it was him who asked for the number. "She's the one who asked me," he'll insist to his parents, his friends, to everyone in the Club Room that his parents booked. It's only when they're alone and she's still mad at him that he'll ask, "Why does it even matter?" and she won't have an answer, will never have an answer, other than it just does and always will. Even so, she will let these arguments go. She's supposed to be happy, after all, as they talk florists and reception halls and whether they should honeymoon on St. Simon's—Sarah's idea; she blanches at the expense of anything more—since that's where his parents' beach house is. "That's perfect," Jacob will say. "It's where I fell in love with you, you know." He will whisper this and take the wedding planner—a large three-ring binder his mother made for her—from her hands. She will close her eyes and let him massage her fingers and think to herself what a foolish boy.

But when he pulls away from the drive-through with his sundae, with her phone number, she'll think Wade is right. He *is* out of her league, will never call, or if he does, it will only be for one date, maybe two. She doesn't expect a third, much less an invitation to the beach—she's never been, despite it being just seventy miles away.

Once there, they hold hands and wander the dunes without talking. She can't decide if she likes that about him or not, the protracted silences, the way she'll catch him staring—not at her tits like Wade, not that she has much there—but at her face, her eyes, before blushing and jerking his head away. Jacob searches among the broken shells for flat ones to skip into the waves; Sarah folds her arms across her bikini top and squints up and down the beach. It's emptier than she expected. Only seabirds skittering across the sand and a brace of older women, retirees, power walking toward them. A gust blows hot against her, and she hugs herself as if chilled.

"What's wrong?" Jacob asks.

Sarah shrugs, looks to the sky, then shrugs again. "It's hot," she finally says and lets her arms fall to her side. It's not that hot, but she does look longingly for shade. The nearest palms are scrawny things and not that tall. Jacob says he knows somewhere they can get

a drink. “I spent a lot of summers here,” he says and mentions his parents own a cottage nearby. When she asks to see it, he says it’s probably rented out and they won’t be able to get in, but Sarah still wants to peek in the windows and look for signs of guests and, when not even a suitcase can be seen, to try each window until one eases upward, all the while saying, “Relax, you can’t be busted for breaking into your own home.” Only afterward does he tell her it’s his first time. Her face is on his chest, and she listens to the liquid churning of his heart, like a drowning animal kicking furiously. Beneath her head, he feels a hollowness spread through his chest, his gut: a familiar Baptist guilt that will dissipate into the night air. Her own guilt lies balled up beside her, a small thing, and she says nothing about Wade or Tommy or Damien.

And as he still massages her hands, she will say, incredulous, “You fell in love with me that early? We hardly knew each other.”

“But I knew then,” he will answer. “Just as I know now. You’re the one.” His voice wavers, is almost tearful, and she will think to herself, *he’ll never leave me*, and his fingers will pull at hers, squeezing and kneading her joints, and she’ll pull away and stare at her red, swollen knuckles and slide her ring off and on.

ii. *ghost*

Sarah falls asleep in the traffic jam, the air stagnant but not too hot in the minibus. The driver keeps his window down and sometimes a breeze picks up, sending a sweet, oily smell of exhaust through the windows. When she awakens, they’re rumbling down a narrow, rutted road, the rain forest close about them. She feels for her passport, her wallet. Her mother insisted she wear a money belt—*there are thieves everywhere, you know*—but there’s only a young woman with a little girl in the seat next to her, an older man stretched out on the seat behind them. None of them speak English, not even the driver. Sarah wishes she could ask them how much further. Instead, she stares out the window, searching for wildlife, but sees nothing in the deepening shadows of the trees. By the time they reach her father’s village, it’s dusk and the trees are black smudges against a dark blue sky. It’s then that she sees him.

He looks smaller than she remembered. His once blond hair now glows white. He smells of sweat, of cigarettes, of something woody; it’s not unpleasant. She lets him hug her. She lets him take her bag and lead her in the half-light down a dirt road toward his house. She tries to remember the angry words she’d prepared but only manages, “It’s good to see you, too.” She won’t remember if he apologizes. She thinks perhaps he does, on one of those evenings when he fills and refills her glass with *cachaça*, a local variety, from a logger he knows who distills it himself. Bianca doesn’t drink much and makes Sarah strong coffee in the mornings and walks with her into the village for fresh fruit and *pães de queijo*.

The mornings here are warm, but not uncomfortable. Sarah expected a sweltering Brazilian summer now that it's December, but it's nothing like the heat back home. The past summer had folded in on itself, shrunk in size until its memory—of the Independence Day picnic when her mom finally met Jacob's folks; of the weekends in Jacob's pool, once even skinny dipping; of the locust-filled nights driving to the lake, sometimes only by moonlight—the memory of it all seemed small and paper-thin, something easily creased or crumpled. She remembers it being hot and oppressive and ending with a broken condenser, a three-grand repair job, and she and her mother sleeping on the floor of the living room beneath their only ceiling fan. Sarah didn't want to mention it to Jacob, but her mother insisted. "Let him take care of it," she said, and he did, charging nothing for labor and next to nothing for parts, and her mother saying, "See, he's a keeper." That was the summer Wade got fired and then arrested—or was it the other way around?—though he was out of jail by the time the heat wave broke and September became October. Then the photos of her and Jacob posing beside a jack-o'-lantern: her, green-faced beneath a witch's hat with fingers extended toward Jacob in his Scarecrow costume, as if fire would spring from her acrylic nails. Another of Jacob doing a keg stand, the straw spilling out of his shirt, his feet held up by Wade Marcin, unrecognizable behind a hockey mask. And later, Sarah's face paint smeared, her hand lifting a red Solo cup in a toast. She can't remember if this was before or after their fight, the one that happened in the driveway, that almost ended with her staggering home, that did end with her losing her witch's hat and broom.

She tells some of this to Bianca as they walk through the village with Bianca's dog, Pom-Pom, and Bianca nods and sometimes asks a question in her poor English and then smiles whenever she doesn't understand. Sarah thought she wouldn't like her—tries to dislike her—but finds herself sharing more and more with the older woman: that she and Jacob are on a break, have been for a month now, just till she gets back. "A pause?" Bianca says, the same words Jacob used after she pulled out the stock excuse of needing space—and it seemed true enough at the time—before she said, "It will be good for us. Just till I'm back from my dad's. Don't you agree?" and Jacob nodded, stupidly, before finally answering, "I guess."

Bianca slows her pace and waits for Pom-Pom to do his business. The little dog resembles her with his wide-set eyes and jowly smile. When Sarah goes out on her own, he tags along. She's grateful for his company even though he humps her feet and discarded shoes. He reminds her of Jacob—his clinginess, not his humping—and she takes photo after photo of him. Her mother will later ask, "Why did you take so many pictures of their dog? Didn't you see any jungle animals?" But Sarah doesn't see any monkeys or jaguars or macaws, only some splotched cattle grazing and a small herd of goats.

“You get back with him when you return, yes?” Bianca asks, and Sarah doesn’t answer but bends down to pet Pom-Pom. She doesn’t mention Wade or going to his place where they fucked sober in the amber light of his bedroom, the TV blaring through the wall from a Chuck Norris flick his dad was watching and Sarah wishing she were drunk, wishing he’d turn off the lights so he wouldn’t see how bony she’d gotten, how the acne on her back hadn’t cleared up, how she looked even more horse-like on all fours in front of him. She scratches behind Pom-Pom’s ears as Bianca rephrases her question more slowly, sounding out each word with care. Sarah rises, shrugs, and says, “Probably. I don’t know.”

After her trip, Sarah’s mother will be too distracted by her bigger news to pay much mind to the rest of the photos—the cinderblock church, the log trucks spackled in mud, the encroaching rain forest, the burnt tracts that run alongside the pockmarked road. Only a couple of her father, none of Bianca or anyone else, not even the boy from the *mercado* who helps bag the groceries, who stares at Sarah with large eyes and doesn’t look away. He’s perhaps fourteen, long-limbed, a runner’s build. Years from now she’ll try to remember his face but will only remember his eyes, black and liquid that somehow shine in the fading light like something feral. She’ll remember the first night when, hours after they leave the *mercado* and unload the groceries, she mistakes him for an animal or perhaps a forest spirit crouched beneath her window among the thorny shrubs. She rises from her cot to take a closer look, and he stands also, his man-child eyes steady, unblinking. When she steps forward, she expects him to bolt, but he doesn’t move. They regard one another in silence. From the next room, sitcom laughter filters through the door. Sarah takes a step forward, then another, fingering the hem of her shirt. She pulls it over her head and reaches behind to unclasp her bra. The boy’s nostrils flare rapidly. When, from the next room, Pom-Pom barks, the boy flees. He leaves only a shadow behind.

Her mother will flip through the photos and say it looks like a ghost town, a backwater she’s glad they dodged. “Can you imagine if he wanted us to move there? What a wasteland,” she’ll say, and Sarah will remember the whirlwinds of gray dust that would blow alongside the road, like ashy dervishes.

The boy leaves no footprints in the dust, leaves no trace at all. Not the next evening nor the evening after as the sky fills with bats and night sounds and the first glimmer of stars. A darkness settles onto the burnt landscape that extends from Sarah’s window to the forest beyond. It is there that, ghostlike, the boy’s pale yellow shirt hovers, his face and limbs lost in the twilight until he steps forward and she can see his eyes. Then he halts and comes no nearer and neither of them speak. He slips into the blackness before her father returns with another bottle of *cachaça*, and Sarah stands naked at the window, straining her eyes for a sign of his T-shirt. Each morning, she looks for signs of the boy beneath her window, but the dew-drenched grass is undisturbed.

She will find three photos of the *mercado*—one exterior and two indoor shots—and will consider framing them, maybe blowing them up. Jacob’s mother will say she ought to make a photo wall; she’s full of design tips. But what will she want with photos of a grocery store? Of produce and canned goods and signs in Portuguese?

On her last day, she doesn’t look for his footprints and instead spends her morning throwing up. “Too much *cachaça*?” Bianca asks, not ungently, and pours her another cup of coffee, but Sarah shakes her head. She knows better, has counted the days since her last period. She doesn’t leave her bedroom for lunch or dinner, and that night, when the boy comes, she tries to remember the Portuguese for “go away,” yelling, “*Vámonos! Vámonos!*”

Her mother will think it’s malaria, will lay a hand on Sarah’s forehead, will want to schedule a doctor’s appointment, and Sarah will say, “It’s nothing. I’m tired, that’s all. It was a long flight.” And her mother will hug her and say that she missed her and ask if she’s too tired to see Jacob. “I told him he could come around, but if you’re too tired...”

Sarah won’t answer right away. She will want to sleep, will want to wake up.

It will be dark by the time Jacob arrives. His face will be flushed and he’ll tremble as he hugs her and kisses her and pulls her into the backyard. The evening will be cool, almost cold, and she’ll miss the warmth of Brazil. The smell from the paper mill will hang in the air, and all around, the blackness will buzz with insect wings. They’ll sound different here. Closer.

“What is it?” she’ll ask. “We’ll get bit up out here.” And she’ll swat away a mosquito or a moth, not that it matters, because Jacob will be on his knee and shaking. Over his shoulder, Sarah will see her mother through the kitchen window washing dishes, her stiff, mechanical motions presaging arthritis. And Sarah will think, *She looks so worn and old.*

Pom-Pom barks. The boy takes a step forward. He can touch the windowsill if he wants. The closest he’s ever been. “Please leave,” Sarah pleads. She’s crying. Is she crying? “Please,” she says again. Pom-Pom barks louder, then Bianca calls out to her and asks if everything’s all right.

She won’t want to look at Jacob’s eyes or the hinged box in his hand. “Please,” he’ll say, and reach for her hand, will open her palm, will say the words, and she’ll finally look down and try to smile but by god she’s tired and her stomach will clench and she’ll refuse to throw up again, not here, not now, and so she’ll help him to his feet and let him hug her and will try to forget the biting insects, the stench of the mill, the ring too loose and she’ll forget them all the next morning when her period comes.

Night hasn’t fully fallen yet as the boy turns and runs, picking his way through the burnt waste toward the forest. At the edge of the tree line only his shirt can be seen, and

then not even that. Sarah waits, waits and watches. She has to pack, has a long trip ahead of her, but still she watches.

iii. night running

They put the crib beneath the window, overlooking the backyard. They still need to paint, and Sarah wants to order a rug and mobile and a night-light that plays lullabies, but they have time yet; she's only seven months along. Jacob's parents say they should move the crib, that it will be too drafty. "The baby will catch cold," they say. "It's always hot here," Sarah answers. She fans herself and keeps the AC blasting icy air. Forces Jacob to sleep in the guest bedroom where he can bury himself in blankets while she sleeps nude beneath the ceiling fan in the master suite. It was the first thing they installed after moving in, a fan in each bedroom, even the unused ones. Something to push the air about in the oversized rooms. The master suite bigger than the living room of her mother's house, her old house. "You'll get lost in your own home," her mother had joked when they first bought it, when the development was brand new and the swamp freshly drained. Now the remnants of the marshland have crept back, and the running trails that the builders cut are overgrown and lined with stagnant pools, all teeming with mosquito larvae. Every Wednesday, trucks roll through the neighborhood spraying a blanket of pesticide. "It's perfectly harmless," Jacob tells his parents, but Sarah stays indoors.

She tells him she likes the quiet and doesn't mention she misses her job. He would only ask why. He knows she hates the commute and finds the work boring. But it's easy enough and has good health insurance and her boss doesn't seem to notice or care that she spends much of her day surfing the Internet, scouring Craigslist for used furniture and laughing at the Missed Connections section. She found their bedroom set there, cheap, but in decent condition. A pine dresser and lingerie chest and matching end tables. The bed is a king, too big with Jacob in the spare room beneath a pile of blankets. On the nights she cannot sleep, she pads over to him. He doesn't waken but snores softly with a nasally flutter. She places a hand on his chest, feels for his pulse through his cotton pajama top. It is distant, like an echo.

The baby will come three weeks early, almost on their anniversary. "Seven years is good luck, right?" Jacob will say. "The best anniversary present you could give me." Sarah won't answer, will not think of their child as a gift, as an object to give—and yet he will seem like an object, small and squalling and alien and unbelievable, as if the nurses presented her with a tiny writhing animal and said, *Here, you made this. This came out of you.* They will name him Simon—Jacob's choice—and Sarah won't mind in the end.

And she will pace with him, her small object, Jacob sprawled in the king bed and somehow able to sleep through Simon's cries—and her mother saying it will get easier,

he'll learn to latch though he never fully does—and she'll have to pump in the copier room that doesn't lock and twice her boss will walk in on her—and Simon seems to prefer Similac anyway—and he's colicky and waking every three hours and Jacob still won't wake up—and Sarah will wake with a start as her tires growl across the highway's rumble strips and almost misses her exit—and she won't start running again like she promised herself, even though she buys new Nikes, not until the night she's sobbing because her milk has dried up, and Jacob pats her on the back saying, "It'll be OK. At least you can get drunk again." She'll want to hit him, throw the useless pump at his head, but instead she'll wipe her tears and lace up the sneakers and plunge into the dusky evening. The trail will be hard to follow, and she'll stumble into sharp spines of palmettos that claw and scratch. She'll roll her ankle in a soft patch of sand and shout fuckfuckfuck into the growing darkness and won't return to the house until the night is filled with the screams of locusts.

Now the insects are quiet. Only the hushing drone of the AC can be heard beneath Jacob's soft breathing; that, and an almost inaudible ticking from the antique mantel clock her mother gave her, a relic from her own marriage. Jacob complained it was too loud for their bedroom, so it sits on a table in the hall beneath a collage of photos. She slips her hand beneath his shirt. He doesn't stir. The clock ticks louder, slices up the stillness into smaller and smaller parts.

At first, she will limit herself to a glass of wine at lunch, maybe a finger of bourbon once home while Simon naps, just a small amount, never so much that brushing her teeth couldn't mask the smell. Not that Jacob will kiss her when he gets home, later and later that summer. It will be another heat wave, him working twelves and fourteens and then reviewing invoices over dinner and already asleep by the time Sarah slips beneath the sheets naked and presses her breasts against him. Only sometimes will he awaken and move with her heavily, no longer kissing her throat, no longer sliding his hands along her thighs. Over a year will pass before he surprises Sarah by reaching for her, first with a hand up her T-shirt, then a tug at her panties, and then he's finished and snoring. Sarah will reach for her phone in the dark and browse pornographic GIFs on Tumblr and m4w ads on Craigslist. At work the next morning, she'll create an anonymous e-mail account.

She finds his heart beat. It's strong. He's strong. He hasn't yet grown paunchy, won't for many years yet, and he'll always be more attractive than the others.

The first will be a lawyer, married also with a limp comb-over. He'll treat her to boozy lunches before giving her barber's rash in the back of his Prius. There'll be the community college teacher who's tall like an older skinnier version of Jacob but with sagging testicles longer than his penis. She'll hold out hope that the cop will be exciting, but he'll turn out to be a security guard and won't even own a pair of handcuffs. An engineer over twice her

age will have soft eyes and hands and promise to only leave bite marks on her thighs. The twenty-something student won't have better stamina, will have bad breath. She'll cancel accounts, sign up for new ones, cancel them again. She'll delete their sexts, their dick pics. She won't remember their names. She'll hope they forget her also.

Jacob murmurs something in his sleep, and she withdraws her hand. She runs a finger along his jawline. She hopes their son gets his looks, the way his breathing comes effortlessly, contentedly. Jacob's forehead is hot, or is it her? She's sweating again and the air is stale. A faint smell of beer in the air. She fans herself and feels the life stirring inside her, only a small kick. It's a small thing.

iv. green flash

The same year Simon starts kindergarten, Jacob undergoes knee surgery and opts to work from home for the next six weeks. Six weeks becomes twelve, twelve becomes twenty-four. He finds he likes rising early and making breakfast—eggs or waffles for Simon, just coffee for Sarah before she dashes out the door—and likes walking Simon to the bus stop, now with a cane, before returning to his new life of spreadsheets and phone calls and faxing work orders. Sometimes he drives to job sites, but he's always home in time to meet Simon at the bus stop, sometimes without his cane, though as winter gives way to spring rains, the stiffness in his ligaments returns.

Now the ground smells of pine straw and frogs, and the road still steams from a noon-time shower. Simon rushes ahead, jumping in each puddle along the way, then stops at the mailbox, his daily responsibility. He leafs through the envelopes, mimicking Jacob with “Bill, junk, junk, junk, bill,” and pausing at a large envelope. “What's this one, Daddy?” he asks and hands over the manila envelope. No return address, no addressee, just their house number and street name written in a sharp, angular scrawl. Jacob peels away the flap and slides the contents into his hand. Ahead of him, Simon has already bounded up the steps to the porch.

“Wipe your feet, bud,” Jacob calls, his voice thick. He studies the glossy sheets once more than slides them back into the envelope. His hands shake.

“Daddy, are you coming?” Simon shouts from the front door, then disappears inside, leaving the door wide open. Jacob shuts it heavily, steps over Simon's dropped raincoat, the strewn sneakers, then limps down the hall to his office. His knee throbs. He closes the door behind him and shreds the envelope and its contents.

Years from now, on an airplane with Sarah, Jacob will almost have forgotten that day, the envelope, the way his knee throbbed so much he had to wrap and ice it. Simon will be in baseball camp that week, already proving to be a natural. He'll be tall for his age, almost taller than Jacob, and looking more and more like the photo of Sarah's dad that she

keeps in the bottom of her dresser. By the time the plane touches down, he'll be buzzed from the rum and cokes, and Sarah will be frowning in her sleep like she always does.

It's dark by the time Sarah gets home that evening. He hears her enter the living room, turn off the rerun of *SpongeBob*, and ask Simon, "Where's your father?" She calls Jacob's name, but he doesn't answer. He takes a swig of beer and returns the Bud Light to his knee. The can is no longer cold and almost empty. She flips on the hall light then pushes open his door. "Why are you sitting in the dark?" He doesn't answer, finishes his beer. "Dinner's not started? Simon's hungry." She waits in the doorway for him to answer, then goes down the hall. Kitchen cabinets open and slam shut. "Did he at least have a snack?" A knife thwacks against a cutting board, louder and louder. Jacob stands unsteadily and limps to the kitchen. Sarah's pulling out a skillet. She looks tired. Puffy around the eyes. She needs a haircut. Maybe a new hair style. She looks up, her eyes glaring at first, then widening with fear. "What is it?" she asks, but he pushes past her to the fridge and grabs another beer.

The resort will be an all-inclusive: tours, food, booze—plus the photographer and the beachside pavilion where they'll renew their vows. The value package. The flimsy-papered brochure will show photo after photo of beaches and ocean and young, bronzed couples by the pool. Everything bright, overexposed. Airbrushed, Sarah will think, and will try to imagine herself in front of the glassy water wearing an ivory rental gown that's bound to get dirty no matter how white the sand looks, and how much will they charge for cleaning? They'll try to get a sunset time slot but will have to settle for a morning service with the minister who also tends bar. This will mean skipping the buffet breakfast, not that Sarah will be hungry, just hungover and bloated from too many rum runners and angry that the fucking rental dress won't zip up. "We can call it off," Jacob will offer. He'll look smart enough in his tux. Men always hide their paunches somehow. But Sarah will shake her head, suck in another breath, until the zipper finally relents. She'll feel light-headed by the time the ceremony is over and will have to sit down and won't even notice that she's sloshed wine onto the creamy fabric.

Simon's in bed, and the house is quiet, has been all evening. Sarah navigates through the darkness to the master bedroom. Jacob is on his side, not sleeping. She undresses, waits for him to say something, then slips beside him. She places a hand on his back, then his arm, then wraps around him and pulls herself into him, him into her, until he shudders and trembles, his whole body sobbing, first softly like a child then with an uncontrollable heaving. Sarah holds tight, tighter, and rocks with him as he buries his face in her throat. Thoughts of the business failing, loans gone bad, losing the house, losing everything stream through her head and soon she, too, is shaking. But he doesn't talk. He chokes back his tears and rolls away from her. "Everything will be all right," she whispers. "We'll

get through this.” He stares at the ceiling, at the gentle motion of the ceiling fan. She stares with him until the room seems to spin and she has to look away.

Three more envelopes arrive that spring. Each time, Jacob waits to open them behind the locked door of his office while Simon is plopped in front of Nickelodeon. Jacob slides the photos out slowly, studies the shadow of her breasts, her doe-like eyes that stare directly into the camera, the draped lingerie cascading over her thighs. The last envelope has a photo of her in a midnight blue negligee with ivory trim. He doesn’t recognize it. One she bought herself? A gift? He goes upstairs to her dresser and sifts through the drawers, carefully peeling back each article of clothing until he finds the garment. It’s wrinkled and has a musty, oaky smell. It takes three tries before the shredder devours it. No more envelopes arrive after that, and spring turns to summer. Business picks up. They talk about adding a pool, about getting a dog, but neither happens.

Sarah will blame Jacob for the stain, for bringing her red wine when she wanted white. When he says she never specified, she’ll only shout louder, saying that they never should’ve come, that they should’ve saved their money all for what—some lousy photos? And the bartender/minister will say, ma’am, ma’am, over and over and Jacob will keep saying it’ll be fine, just calm down, and Sarah will feel sick—not drunk, no she hasn’t drunk that much, not really—just sick of it all and tired. When they find out that the stain is no big deal, that the resort can clean it no problem, that dresses have been returned in far worse shape, she’ll laugh, they both will. And they’ll laugh at how awful the photos turn out—Jacob blinking or squinting or Sarah trying to force a smile that comes out lopsided or, in the only picture where their faces are relaxed and natural, the fat couple in the background in electric blue swimsuits. And Sarah will ask, still laughing, “Why did we even do this?” and Jacob will shake his head and not remember why. And they’ll laugh some more that evening as the sun is dipping into the sea and they see the same fat couple—they must be in their sixties—holding hands, leaning into one another, and then pointing excitedly at where the sun used to be, saying, “Did you see it? Did you see the green flash?” But no, they won’t see it, not then or the rest of their trip. They won’t see it, and they won’t mind.

v. funeral

It’s one of Sarah’s long days—an eight-mile circuit out the neighborhood and down a network of dirt roads before hitting pavement again. As she turns back onto her street, she’s sure she’s coming in under an hour. Her breathing is steady, controlled. But as she nears her house and sees the car in the drive, her pace falters. Beside the car stands the couple and Jacob helping with their luggage. The couple doesn’t turn toward her, and from a distance they look small, diminished. Then they follow Jacob inside. Sarah stops.

Doesn't check her time. She doubles over, hands on her knees, and gulps in air and focuses on not throwing up.

Inside she sees them closer, sees that yes, they are diminished, both of them shrunk over how many years now—sixteen, seventeen? Bianca no longer chubby—if not for her sunken, grief-lined eyes she might've been beautiful. And her father: his skin hangs loosely; his formerly broad shoulders now have a stooped cant to them; his once flushed and tanned skin is now pale and splotched with rashes or burns. When he hugs her, a chemical scent lingers between them. Only then does she allow her eyes to focus on his now bald head.

"We wanted to surprise you," he says.

"It's good to see you, too," is all she manages. It's Jacob who asks the questions, about the cancer, the treatment, how long they'll stay—they should stay as long as they want, really, what's the expression, *mi casa su casa*?

"That's Spanish, not Portuguese," Sarah says, but nobody pays her any mind. Already her father is talking about Brazil, its politics, how everything's gone to shit, what with the collapse of lumber prices and tree poaching, and how he single-handedly saved the company from going bankrupt, and now they're trying to edge him out just because he's a gringo, but he's going to fight it, by god, you don't mess with him and think you're not going to get a fight, that when he gets back there's going to be hell to pay if the books aren't in order, and how are you kids doing, you look great, you really do, you've got a great family here, a nice home, and it's a shame you have to be so far away, but that's how it is these days isn't it, you have to go where the money is, you can't expect to sit around and wait for happiness to find you or whatever it is you're looking for. He no longer speaks with his broad, sweeping movements and instead jabs his head toward everyone in the room like a small bird. He keeps his hands in his lap.

"When do you go back," Sarah asks.

"Soon. Very soon. You know how it is, the docs want you to stay forever and run more tests, but what do they know. They act like I'm dying, but I know better."

When he does die ten years later, it won't be from the cancer but something as mundane and common as a careening log truck. It will swerve then jackknife across one of the newly carved roads scarring the rainforest. "He died instant," Bianca will say. "These accidents happen all the time," she'll say. Her voice will be staticky over the line but clear enough, and Sarah will tell her thank you, will wait for the tears to come or a hollowness to bloom within her chest. That will be another record-breaking summer with fires blazing to the south, burning swaths of tree farms and charring the pines until they look like creosote poles. The smell of the devastation will blow across their neighborhood like a dog's hot breath.

But now her father asks for something to drink, something strong if they've got it, and Sarah brings out glasses and whiskey for all of them. She still needs to shower from

her run, but by god she needs a drink and even Jacob doesn't say no even though it's not lunch yet, and nobody seems hungry, not even Simon who's been playing quietly on his iPod, Simon who's nine now, who Bianca says looks just like his *avô*. It's not until past five that anyone begins to think about dinner with Sarah's father saying they should all go out, but nobody is sober enough to drive or sober enough to remember that it's Sarah and Jacob's date night, and by the time Sarah's mom pulls into the driveway it's too late to turn her back.

Her mother will cry right away when Sarah breaks the news. "I don't love him anymore, but it's still sad," she'll say, and then ask about the funeral and how Bianca is holding up. She'll say she should send flowers, and she'll hold Sarah and rock with her until Sarah pulls away still wondering where her own tears are. Jacob will only answer at least it was quick. Simon will say he doesn't remember him. He'll be home from college that summer, helping Jacob with HVAC installs, and when Sarah says, "It's winter in Brazil," he'll say, "Yeah, I know, Mom. I'm not stupid," and Sarah will want to slap him or maybe hug him, and she'll feel a knot form behind her sternum and will inhale through her nose, hold the breath, then let the air stream out slowly through pursed lips. That will be the summer she runs her fifth marathon, finishing under four hours, the summer they finally dig a pool, the summer her mom retires from her manager position and books a trip on a Disney cruise.

Now Sarah's mother enters the living room and stops, taking in the scene: Jacob on the floor watching a ballgame, Bianca nodded off in the armchair, Sarah busying herself cleaning up pretzel bowls and beer bottles, and her father waving his glass about telling Simon about how he wrestled a jaguar deep in the heart of the forest—where the trees grow so thick it's always night, he says, his voice bright and not yet slurry. He stops, eyes Sarah's mom, and says, "Jesus Christ, it's good to see you," and tries to rise but his legs won't cooperate, so he just sits there as she takes a step forward and says, "Hello." She sits down. Smiles. Asks if anyone is hungry.

Later that night, after her father and Bianca are asleep, Sarah's mother sits in the darkened kitchen and nurses a glass of chardonnay. "I'm not mad at him," she insists. Outside, moths plip against the windows and sprinklers hiss into the lawn. "I mean, I was, for a time. When he didn't send any money. Angry for you. But I knew he would leave sooner or later. Had always known that, I think. I was ready for it. It's done. And I like Bianca." Sarah nods. She likes Bianca also. "And he seems settled now. Something I wouldn't have believed. Maybe he just needed to be someplace wild and untamed. To think I thought I could tame him. What a joke. Our marriage was a joke. Was actually funny at first. Maybe you don't remember. We used to have a good time. I used to think that moving here killed it, but it was dead long before that."

“I only remember some of it,” Sarah says. The sprinklers stop. So do the moths. The house seems to hold its breath. From down the hall the mantel clock ticks slower and slower, winding down.

“But you’re happy,” her mother says. “In spite of everything, things turned out all right.”

Sarah doesn’t answer and the clock goes quiet, stays quiet, and the next day she forgets to wind it.

Bianca will send photos of the funeral, of the candles lit all across the altar, of the procession to the graveyard and the simple stone marker with an image of a tree engraved above his name. Pictures will show a crowd about the gravesite, young men and old and stony-faced women and children, and the pallbearers easing the coffin into the earth, each of them thick-armed men, some with logging scars, and one with eyes black and liquid, a thin mustache grazing his lip. Sarah will take the photo and return it to the envelope and place it in the bottom of her dresser drawer, beneath the wool sweaters that she never wears. It’s a new dresser, cedar-lined with dovetail joints, and its drawer closes smoothly without a sound.