

## Something Salvaged

It was three weeks 'til Christmas. Cavan and his sister Tara were both flushed from a lost-count number of trips up and down the stairs. Three flights, no elevator. The building was warm, and it was new. No one had ever lived in this space, and as far as Cavan knew he was the only one here on the third floor. Six months back these buildings hadn't existed—there was just a dilapidated farmhouse amidst a sea of tall yellow grass, abandoned farmland—and now there were eight. All three stories high, cathedral ceilings on the third, and twelve apartments to each floor. His building was the most recently built. *His building*—it seemed strange even just to think of it.

“You’ll be able to start a whole new life,” Tara said. “New beginnings. Think of it that way. A lot of people would envy you. They want change, something new. It’s a pretty common desire at our age. I made you a lasagna and a salad—you need to make sure you eat well; a lot of guys don’t when they live alone. And I bought you some groceries. They’re in my car.” She smiled a little. “I didn’t want to mention that until we got all your stuff up here.”

When she had left, Cavan took a seat upon a box of books in the corner. Boxes everywhere, mostly books, but barely any furniture. He had left all the furniture at home, despite Leah’s shrieks in the middle of one of her explosions that he could take it all. She didn’t want anything. No memories. Of him.

Cavan and Leah had been married eighteen years and had been in the same house, the next town over, for seventeen. Five children, the three youngest—girls—still in school. And then, just the spring before, Leah had got back in touch with her high school boyfriend on Facebook. Likes turning to messages turning to texts turning to quiet phone calls with the door shut in the spare back room downstairs. Calls turning to FaceTiming. And by the time they were FaceTiming, he figured now, it was a runaway train, and there was no stopping it. No brakes. Leah had been spending a lot of time in the back room downstairs, saying she was exercising, and when he had walked in on her in the middle of a FaceTime and asked her with whom, she didn’t try to deny it. “We’re exploring our

relationship,” she had announced to him and the children—he still couldn’t believe she announced it to the children. “And what might have been. Nothing more. It’s completely innocent. He’s married. He’s a great father and a wonderful man, and we have a lot of unresolved feelings.”

Unresolved feelings. Cavan had felt as if someone whacked him in the gut. And then one side of the head with a bat. Leaving him down on the mat. Leah had a quick temper and a sharp tongue—a flashing penchant for ridicule and cruelty, but nothing like this, at least never before, and if nothing else the one thing he had always been sure of was that she loved him. Always. Something like this, another man, was impossible.

Now he sat on the bare mattress in what would be his bedroom, his back to the wall. The ceiling high and the lights dim. He would need another light for the room, he thought. A nightstand lamp. And he needed an actual bed. Needed a dresser. Couch, chairs. Television. He needed everything. The cat had come with him and now sat on the end of the mattress, staring at him. The cat was gray and white and fat. His daughter, Lindsay, hadn’t wanted the cat to go, but Leah insisted. Leah hated cats, hated all animals, and the cat had been terrified of her. Cavan had hoped to leave her there for a day or so—asked her if he could—until he got settled, but Leah wasn’t having it.

“You’re taking her now, Cavan. If you leave the fucking thing here, I’ll throw it out in the cold or just have it put down. I don’t care. I swear to God I will.”

Leah, petite and pretty with dark hair and blue-gray eyes which rarely looked directly at you unless she was enraged. If enraged, she glared, her eyes biting. Cavan had been set up with her by a mutual friend more than twenty-one years back. He had just moved home from New Orleans, and the friend had said Leah was recently divorced, lonely, just needed someone to hang out with, nothing serious. Maybe they could just go to a movie now and then, have dinner, and, if comfortable enough, have sex once in a while. Fuck buddies, the friend said.

Fuck buddies didn’t last, though. The thought of it made him laugh now. Cavan had somewhat cold feet going in—he knew her ex-husband, an asshole, probably a sociopath, and Leah already had two children. A ready-made family. Cavan was only twenty-five years old and wasn’t sure he was ready for a ready-made family, nor that he ever would be. But Leah did something to him, pulled at his heartstrings. Tales from the past, poverty, a run-down house in an even more run-down city, an unstable mother, and all kinds of abuse. Just spin the wheel and pick your poison. Her husband hit her when he didn’t get his way, sometimes to the point of black and blue, but she survived. She was strong, he told himself—a survivor—but vulnerable, a victim, and Cavan thought he could protect her. He would never let anything like that happen to her again. He thought he could make her happy. He thought he could save her.

She doted on him, catered to him early on, and sex was charged and nonstop when they were together; often she would drop her clothes the moment he came through the door. Then he would wake in her bedroom in the middle of the night, candles still burning on her dresser, and sometimes she would be clinging to him, and sometimes she would be crying. And then there were her children, already attached to him, and he loved them. So how could he leave? Desert them? They had already been deserted once. So how could he do that again?

They had married—a wedding of over two hundred people: “This time I’m doing it right,” Leah had said. The children’s father, happy to get out of child support, had signed over his rights, and Cavan had adopted them. And then he and Leah had three more, the two youngest twins, and bought a renovated old box-shaped farmhouse with a stream running through the woods behind it, on a street that had once been all pasture.

He had started driving past this place, this apartment complex, late last September, trying to imagine, picture himself living inside. His sister had found it online. They looked like nice apartments, advertised as luxury, she said. He needed luxury right now, she said, nice things to help with his mental state.

The man who had shown him the apartment was tall and broad, built like an NFL tight end, and dressed in a white suit, silk black shirt. Bald, his head shaved clean. He looked more ready to go dancing than to show an apartment. The space, empty, looked enormous.

“These places are going like hotcakes,” he said. “Hotcakes. We’re going to have to start turning people away. I hate to do it, hate to lose business, but we’re not going to have any other choice. This unit alone I’m going to be showing three more times today. If you’re interested, I wouldn’t wait. Are you moving from another apartment?”

Cavan had gone to the back door, slider, looked out over the balcony. The woods beyond, the trees now skeletal with the coming of winter. Wetlands. “House,” Cavan said. “I’ve owned a home for almost twenty years.”

The man hesitated. “Well, that’s the thing, right? Nobody wants to own anymore. Why would they? Everybody wants to rent. Everything is taken care of for you. I’m here ’til six every day, and someone is on call 24/7. Everything is taken care of. Believe me. I just bought a house myself. Nothing but headaches.”

Cavan smiled. He wanted to laugh, but he couldn’t laugh. “Then why don’t you rent?”

The man seemed taken aback for a moment. “Kids,” he said at last. “My wife and I split up, but I have kids. Do you have kids?”

“Yeah,” Cavan said.

“Well, plenty of space here,” the man said, looking up at the high ceilings, the second-story loft. “You can put two in the second bedroom and even use the loft as a third bed-

room if you want. Two baths, two showers. You'll be living the good life. Are they going to be living with you?"

Cavan didn't answer right away. His two oldest children now lived on their own, but having the younger three every other weekend and one night during the week was supposedly the deal. Leah, he imagined, eventually, would go whichever way was against what he wanted. If he wanted more, she would push for less, and vice versa. She had always been that way.

"Sometimes," Cavan said.

He had been in the garden that summer when it all came to a head. He had just returned from Martha's Vineyard, a house they rented for a week every July. But this summer Leah had said she couldn't get the whole week off—she put in for it too late at work, she said—so Cavan suggested she come down for half the week, a few days, but she refused. She had projects to do around the house, she said.

"Besides," she had said, "I told you a while ago I need a couple days to myself to regroup, and that's what I'm going to do." Cavan had been taken off guard. He loved the Vineyard, loved the years of summer vacations they had spent out there, loved the time with his family. And Leah had always loved going, too. But this year she wouldn't budge, and it was too late to cancel without eating the rental fee and disappointing the kids; Leah knew that, and no matter how much he tried to convince himself her reasons were sincere, he couldn't help the dread from sinking into his flesh, a cold feeling something like death at the foot of your bed, slithering up to gnaw at your insides, something he never thought possible. She would be home alone for a week, and he didn't want her home alone for a week. A week would mean, he couldn't help feeling, the point of no return. But in the end he had agreed, Leah, euphoric, telling him that by the time they got home, the house would be spotless, the gardens watered and weeded, immaculate, and the pool clean, sparkling. And she would be relaxed, refreshed. And maybe that was just what she needed.

And then after they actually did get home, the garden was overgrown with weeds, everything else nearly dead. He had had the garden for the past fifteen years. Tomatoes, lettuce, spinach, peppers, squash, eggplant, basil, and pumpkins. A little of everything. His father had a large garden growing up, and it just seemed natural for Cavan that he would have one, too. He had a family, and it felt good to be able to grow some of their own food and put it on the table. A rite of summer. And he loved summer. Cavan was standing in the middle of it, beer can in hand, the fence three feet high surrounding the perimeter and deer netting above when he saw his neighbor strolling, chin lowered as he swayed heel-to-heel, down the street towards him. Ted. An ambulance chaser with just a few wisps of hair combed over atop his head. Black sneakers and white gym socks pulled

up to the knees. Long plaid shorts and the white tank top he wore while mowing the lawn, his “getting outdoors clothes,” Cavan always imagined. He could never figure out just where the man came from. His house was behind Cavan’s, kitty-cornered, and each day he walked down the long private road, inspecting the pavement for cracks as he did, to get his mail. Cavan imagined he lay in bed thinking about those cracks, losing sleep, waiting for the next one to appear. The fear and the dread. Life could be that way. Ted had been talking to Cavan about the cracks in the road ever since he moved in, his own house just built. “It may be a new road, but it can’t hold too many vehicles, you know,” he would say. “And trucks, forget it. They’d destroy it in no time. I tried to find an oil company with a truck with a hose that stretched from the main road to my house, but apparently they don’t exist. It would be a worthy upgrade.”

Now Ted stopped, looked over the garden fence, and forced a wide smile. Held it. “How’s the north forty?”

“North forty?”

“North forty acres,” Ted said. “That’s what I call it. It’s, uh, my little joke.”

Cavan just nodded a little. “It’s seen better years, Ted.”

Ted looked about. “I remember that year you had all the pumpkins. Do you remember that year?”

“I remember that year,” Cavan said.

“A lot of pumpkins. Barb still talks about it, the vines running all over your yard. The fence couldn’t contain them. She couldn’t stand that. She hated looking at it every time she drove by, especially once the vines started to wither and die. She said it was an eyesore.”

“Well, pumpkins aren’t for everyone. You need a strong stomach, I guess.”

Ted didn’t appear to hear him. He usually didn’t. Leah was always arguing with Ted about something—property lines or cars turning around on his road, potentially causing more cracks—or sending Cavan over to argue for her. More often, conversations were one-way with him, and Ted didn’t bother to listen. He came, said what he wanted to say, asked what he wanted to ask. Not much more.

Now: “Were you guys away last week? The end of the week? I noticed your car wasn’t in the driveway.”

“I was on the Vineyard with the girls,” Cavan said. “Leah was home.”

Ted just nodded. “I noticed that. Her brother staying with her?”

Cavan looked directly at him then. “Her brother?”

Ted shrugged. “I just figured it was her brother. Barb saw someone through the back kitchen window. Some guy, she said, so I just figured it was her brother. I know she has a few brothers. I’m not sure how long he was there, though. They hung some curtains over the big back window after the first night he was there, or maybe it was during the

first night, Barb wasn't sure. There was a car parked down the street, though, just off the bike path. We didn't know who it belonged to. I was going to call the cops, but I figured it wasn't any of my business. I like to try and mind my own business. Barb does, too. Live and let live."

Ted waddled away to check his mail, and Cavan found himself paralyzed in the garden, his heart seizing up. It wasn't one of her brothers. That would never happen, and if it had she would have mentioned it. He thought of her insistence that she stay home this year. He thought of her racing off with her phone to text, FaceTime. Innocent, she had said. Just friends. He was just suspicious, he was just an asshole. But no, he thought now, the panic hollowing out his insides. He wasn't suspicious, and he wasn't an asshole. He was a moron.

"Nobody was here," she said after he went inside. She at first looked away but then looked him dead on. Eyes empty. "I was barely here. I stayed at my sister's most of the time you were gone. I don't like staying here alone."

"Ted saw a guy here."

Her face filled with rage then. "Ted is a fucking asshole! Why doesn't he mind his own fucking business? There wasn't anybody here!" She was making macaroni and cheese for the girls, and she slammed the pot down on the stove. Cavan just watched her a moment, cursing more about him being suspicious and cursing about Ted. And then she had suddenly stopped, hesitated a moment, re-evaluating. "Oh, wait a minute, now that I think of it, there was somebody here. My brother Eddie was here for a while Friday night. He stayed over."

Cavan wondered where they had slept. Fucked. If they had used the couch. Their bed? He didn't think they would have used their bed, but the bed in the back bedroom, the daybed, was small. So maybe they just fucked on the floor; he had no idea.

"Now that you think of it, huh? Like it was that long ago?" he had said at last. "Eddie stayed over by himself? Without Mabel?"

"Yes, she was away for the weekend, so he came over here. He was bored. I'm not going to sit here and be interrogated, Cavan. I did nothing wrong. If anyone did anything wrong, it was you." She stormed off after that. Slammed the door in the back bedroom. Caught.

Now, in the apartment, Cavan stepped out on the balcony, pulled the slider shut behind him. The cat was sitting in the middle of the living room floor looking out at him. He wondered if the cat knew they were staying for good. What she thought, if she thought. It was cold, well past dark. The trees in the woods stark silhouettes. He looked about the back of the building. Lightless except for the lights on in an apartment below him on the second floor. The balcony down there had Christmas lights strewn around the railing. Cavan wondered if he should get a tree. He had never bought a tree by himself before. Just lugging it up the three flights of stairs here would be a chore. And for what? To decorate it

himself? There didn't seem much of a point. Leah was already arguing that she was going to have the kids both Christmas Eve and Christmas Day this year, which he had told her made zero sense, but hadn't gotten very far. They weren't even divorced yet, but she was already dictating her own decree.

He reached into his jacket and pulled out a cigar. There were rules about smoking—anything—in the apartment complex or even on the grounds, anywhere. If you wanted to smoke, the apartment manager had told him, somewhat apologetically, you had to go out front to the sidewalk. “They line up out there all day long,” he said, “pacing and puffing. It can be three degrees and you still see them out there. They're willing to pay any price to kill themselves.” He laughed a little. “In a way there's something admirable about that. The commitment, I mean.”

But who, Cavan wondered, was going to see him smoking back here? The building was still almost completely empty. You're one of the first ones, the manager had told him, the quiet will be exquisite. And it was out back, walled off by woods, the dark water of the wetlands below, the night sky above. And it was his balcony, outside, his apartment. He was paying more than his old mortgage to live here for Christ's sake. And besides, even if anyone were in the building on a night like this, no windows would be open. No one would smell a thing, he couldn't be bothering anybody. His nerves were on end, his chest still feeling like an empty black hole, his soul long gone, and he needed something.

The stars were bright the way they can only be in winter skies. It was a shame, he thought, that winter was the best time to see them. When they shone most clear. He lit the cigar and took a seat at the little round black iron table he had brought with him. The chair was cold beneath him, and he figured he could use a cushion. He watched the woods and listened. Nothing out there, at least nothing moving, not in this cold, but then he thought he could hear something. The noise sounded to come from below him. He leaned over the rail and thought he could see someone standing down there, the floor below and two balconies over. A shadow in the darkness. It was hard to tell in the dark, but it looked as though the person was looking up at him. Cavan carefully placed the cigar in an ashtray he had made out of tinfoil and sat very still, trying his best to look inconspicuous, just someone sitting outside enjoying the cold winter night. Or better yet, not visible at all.

A few weeks after he had confronted her, Leah had approached him, the anger all gone from her voice, submerged and waiting, and suggested they forgo the lawyers, just get a mediator. The divorce is happening, she had already told him, you can't force someone to stay married to you. But they didn't need lawyers, she said. They were way too expensive. A mediator was cheaper and much more simple. They would just divide everything in half. Simple, she said. She put a piece of paper before him, asked him to sign it. Simple,

Cavan thought. She was funny. He knew her too well—aggressive and intimidating, quick to play the guilt card, make him feel guilty, make him feel awful when he had done nothing wrong. Without a lawyer, she would make him feel guilty for things he never did, guilty for things she had done. She would have him for lunch and leave him in a box under a bridge.

He had glanced at the paper, didn't bother reading, and then turned back to his computer, the news. "No," he said. And Leah had stormed out of the room, turning once to curse at him, telling him to go fuck himself. Loud in the quiet of the house.

The next day she was telling him he had to leave. It couldn't wait. It had to be now. It had always been like that with Leah, with everything—there was no such thing as build-up, anticipation. When she wanted something, once she set her mind to it, it had to be now. And now she wanted the divorce. He had to leave, it had to be now. She looked on the verge of tears as she told him her need, still unmet.

"Give me the rest of the summer," he had said. "Let me stay the summer, so I can spend a little more time with the kids and have my yard, my garden." And even now he wondered why he had been bargaining for anything—he had done nothing wrong. If anyone should be leaving, Tara had told him on the phone, it should be her. You did nothing, don't leave. Make her leave.

"What sort of self-respecting man stays when his wife asks him to leave?" Leah had asked then, sobbing.

"The kind that wants to stay in his home, that wants to stay with his children," Cavan had said, and Leah had stormed off again, but then shockingly, after a day or so of arguing some more, she had given in. The summer, she said, and then that's it. September 21<sup>st</sup>. And his garden started to come back a little, a few plants anyway, but for the most part, he had just sat and looked at it from the back porch and done nothing. No inspiration, no drive. No point, he thought. By mid-August, what had survived was smothered in weeds, a tall sunflower breaking through the top, and if you wanted to look for any fruit, you had to forage. But not really much had grown. It had been dry, hot, and Cavan hadn't watered much, and the garden, just like his life as a whole, felt hopeless, withering all around him.

"Dude, you need to get out," his brother-in-law had said on the phone as Cavan sat on the back deck. His brother-in-law had been calling him, texting, repeating it regularly. "Like right now. It's not healthy. She's killing you. You can hear it in your voice."

And was she killing him? He imagined she was. But again, he had thought, why should he leave? Why him? It made no sense. He hadn't been the one who was having an affair, he hadn't done anything wrong. Nothing cataclysmic/marriage-wrecking, anyway. And his children were here. He didn't want to live away from his children. She was going to kill him either way, he figured, quickly or slowly, so what did it matter whether he stayed 'til it was done?

He had looked out at the twilight, the little red all-weather radio Leah had bolted to the shelf on the wall, playing beside him. The weekends with Alice Cooper program. Cavan had always loved twilights in the summer, especially when the girls were small. Watching them run about the yard and the fireflies, shouting and laughing, merging with the dusk. They almost seemed like fairies, about to disappear at any moment, and then before the dark settled too deep, he would go pick up the littlest ones, and carry them home.

Sometimes his neighbor from across the street, Paul, would come by. He was single, no kids, living in the house alone with his two cats, and in top shape, on an eternal quest to keep his youth. The gym and the basketball court. The last time he had come over last summer he had been commiserating, consoling Cavan, talking in a whisper, the windows open in the summer heat. It had taken Cavan a long time to tell him, to tell anybody, even family, what was happening. He couldn't bring himself to say it. He was ashamed and didn't know what to do. They had failed. He had failed. People in his family didn't get divorced. It just didn't happen. You found someone, you married them, and you stayed with them right up until the earth took one or the other, or both. That was all.

"It's just not right," Paul said, "all these kids. And her older two you adopted and took on all responsibility. Who does that? No one does that. All those years together. And now this? She does this? Seriously? It's not right."

Cavan offered him a cigar and Paul puffed on it frantically, trying to keep it lit.

"I'll tell ya, though, you could see it coming."

"You could?" Cavan asked. "Really?"

"Oh, yeah, oh, yeah," he said, nodding, puffed again. "You can see it coming with most people, but with her...look out! Jeez. But look at how she treats the animals. That's how you can judge a person—by the way they treat animals. She's terrible to that cat. It's just not right. You had to figure something was coming sooner or later."

He had taken a couple days off work to get settled, try to get unpacked. He had ordered furniture online, bunk beds for the twins, a couple flat screens much bigger than he could possibly afford or need. He was rifling through the little he had in savings, but it didn't seem to matter. In the past, when he had envisioned the future, it was always fairly vivid: retirement, buying a house on Martha's Vineyard, grandkids, trips to Europe. Scenarios that may never come true, but possibilities, hopes, just the same, things to look forward to. But now when he thought about the future, nothing was clear. Just a void of sorts. And money didn't seem to mean much. So he wanted to at least make the place attractive. Wanted his children to want to visit.

An hour before sunset, two days after his night on the balcony, he had set out for a run. It was cold again, high twenties, and he put on three layers and ran down a street

of farmland and woods, wetlands, the occasional house set off far back and alone, a thin trail of smoke rising from the chimney. When he got back to the complex, pacing on the sidewalk, his body steaming and breath fogging in the cold, a small woman pulled up and stared at him a moment before getting out of her car. She must've been in her sixties. Stringy red hair down past her shoulders and thick glasses. Standing no higher than maybe five feet tall and reminding him a little of late-life Raggedy Ann with a lot of red lipstick.

"Are you the guy upstairs?" she asked.

"Not at the moment," Cavan said. His head was spinning a little, but he had the rush, the high, the endorphins going. It was always the best high there was—beat alcohol, beat drugs, at least for a few moments—and was the one thing that kept him running.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I thought you were."

"I was just kidding."

"Oh, I get it—you're not up there right now. Ha ha. I live on the second floor. My name is Sally. There's only a few of us in the building so far. I think it's just me, you, and the woman down the hall. I think her name is Ellen. Her boyfriend smokes cigarettes when he visits out in his car in the parking lot here, he's not supposed to do that, but I've seen him. Oh, and there's two women living on the first floor." She lowered her voice to a whisper: "I think they might be lesbians. They kind of look like lesbians. One of them drives a pickup truck."

Cavan smiled, nodded. "Well, I'll be sure to keep an eye out."

"It's quiet, but I hear you walking around upstairs—you walk around a lot—and I hear you opening and shutting your door."

"I'll try not to do that anymore."

"Well, you have to get in and out of your apartment, I get it. I just wish you didn't do it so often. I'm glad people aren't always walking up and down the hall, though—that would be even worse, but that's probably coming too, eventually. Benjamin says they plan on having the whole building rented by March. April at the latest."

"Benjamin?"

"The property manager." She lowered her voice again to whisper. "The Black guy."

"OK, I didn't know his name."

"He's supposed to be in by nine every day, but he never is. He's always late. Sometimes I wait outside the office there until almost ten just to talk to him. Then he comes rushing in, always looking for his keys. The heating system makes a lot of noise. It shouldn't do that. It's brand new. And these are supposed to be luxury apartments. That is how they advertise them—luxury. So I keep telling him I want it fixed. He hasn't done anything yet, though. I think he forgets. I was ready to move, though, to get out of the place I was living. I was tired of owning a house, and I had been divorced for almost eleven years.

I've talked to a lot of people in the other buildings. Everyone here is divorced. It's like a home for divorced people. Like a support group."

When Cavan got back upstairs, there was an envelope taped to the door. After he went inside, he placed it on a pile of boxes and then changed out of his running clothes—wet now, and he was starting to get chilled. The cat was clawing at the carpet when he came out of the bedroom, and she stopped to stare at him a moment. "Don't mess with my security deposit," he told her. He opened the envelope and was taken aback for a moment. It was a violation notice, a copy of his rental agreement attached. Smoking on the balcony. The date—two nights before—and the time, 11:30 p.m. He was being fined two hundred and fifty dollars, and if it happened again, he would be fined three hundred. If it happened a third time, he would be subject to eviction. The notice was both threatening and impersonal, signed by Benjamin Taylor. Cavan read it again, dread rising up from his belly. Less than a week, and already on probation. He almost felt like he was back in college. He stepped out onto the balcony now, looked about the woods and slanted lawn below, and when he looked down to his left, Sally was down there on her balcony, staring back up at him.

His twins had come over for dinner the fourth night he was there. Melanie and Lindsay. Lindsay, brunette, and Melanie, blonde, twelve years old. Cavan had bought two mattresses for their room, the beds on order, and stocked the refrigerator. On the night he and Leah had agreed to tell them they were getting a divorce, that Cavan was leaving, Lindsay was the only one who had stayed in the kitchen after hearing the news. The other two had fled, running up the stairs, doors slamming behind them. Madison, his sophomore, shouting down the stairs at Leah. It was her fault, she said, she was driving him away, she drove everyone away. Leah was at the stove, slamming pots and pans about, and hissing at Cavan, blaming him for the way they had reacted: she'd never forgive him, she said. But he wondered how she thought they would respond. He was their father. He loved them, and they loved him. Lindsay had started shaking, her face streaked with tears, but she didn't move from the stool at the island after the others had fled. "It's not forever, right?" she said. "It's just for a while? And then you'll be back?"

Now thirty seconds in the door, she was looking for her cat. She loved the cat.

"She hides sometimes," Cavan said. "And then once I'm in bed, watching TV or sleeping, she decides to come out and attack me."

Melanie just opened the refrigerator quick, looked inside, and then slammed it shut, running upstairs to the loft above the kitchen. There was a third mattress on the floor in the loft. Boxes of books. A desk and a computer. The cat came trotting out of the room then, and Lindsay picked her up and hugged her. Kissed her head.

"Did you miss me?" Lindsay asked the cat. "You should get her a friend, Dad. A kitten."

“Right now, one is enough for me,” said Cavan. “She likes sitting out on the balcony, though, likes taking in nature. She has friends out there. Squirrels. Birds.”

“Dad! Don’t let her out there! She might jump!”

“It’s kind of high for that,” Cavan said. “I don’t think she’d risk it.”

“I bet she would. Rosey is very brave.” Lindsay strolled about, looking over the room. “Or she might want to kill herself.”

Cavan hesitated a moment, wondering if he should follow up on that or just ignore it, let it go. “Did you guys get your Christmas tree yet?” he asked.

“Yes. Last night. I didn’t go, though. It was too cold. Mom picked it out.”

“By herself?”

“Yeah,” Lindsay said. “I think so. Melanie helped her bring it in.”

Cavan had put some pictures out on the counter below the wine glass cabinets. Almost entirely pictures of the kids and one of Leah. He had taken the picture of Leah on the Vineyard the year before. She was standing in the middle of Waban Park, dusk, her hair up and her head turned to face the camera. The moon rising above her and the sea beyond. He remembered taking the picture. They were walking to the beach to look at the stars over the water. Now, just the night before, he had started trying to draw the picture, her face, and he had left the drawing out on the counter, three-quarters done.

Lindsay stopped and looked at it a moment.

“I always liked that picture,” Cavan said. “So, I’m trying to draw it. I bought a new sketchpad. Are you still drawing?”

Lindsay was quiet a moment, her eyes still studying the picture. “Some stuff. I need some new art supplies.” She hesitated again. “You should draw a picture of Rosey.”

“But I see Rosey all the time,” Cavan said. “You don’t like this picture?”

“It’s fine,” she said. “I want a drawing of Rosey, though. You can draw it for me. I don’t see her all the time anymore.”

“You can see her as much as you want. You can come over as much as you want.”

“I have school, Dad. And I like sleeping in my own bed.”

Cavan went to the pantry and took out some linguini, his thoughts spinning and his face flushing, not wanting to overreact, not sure of what to say. The whole situation was new, brittle.

“But I’ll come over on Saturdays and Wednesdays,” Lindsay said. “I promise.”

Cavan filled a pot with water, turned on the stove top. “Has he been over at our house since I moved out?”

“Who?”

“You know who.”

“I don’t want to talk about that, Dad.”

“Well, I don’t want to talk about it either, but it is what it is.”

Lindsay crouched down on her knees on the carpet, the cat arching her back beneath her hand as she petted her. She picked her up and started to hug her again, squeezing. “Then let’s not talk about it.”

Their anniversary was the next night. Cavan remembered when they got engaged that he had argued against setting the wedding date for December. People are getting ready for the holidays, he said. There are too many parties, events, school activities, he said. No one wanted to add a wedding to the list.

“Well, it’s not their wedding,” Leah had said. “It’s mine. And anyone who doesn’t want to come doesn’t have to come. That’s up to them. We were both born in December, and I want my wedding to be in December, too. And that’s what I want.”

He had stopped at the pub with the twins before he took them home; they hadn’t wanted the linguini. The pub had wreaths and holly adorning the walls, lights strung above the bar. They liked the pizza. Spinach, feta, and bacon. He had called Madison about joining them, but she had texted back saying she was upstairs in bed. She had a headache.

He pulled up to the house, and Leah had the Christmas lights on outside. More lights than he ever remembered her putting up. Strung along the farmer’s porch and throughout the weeping cherry tree. Candles in the window.

The twins kissed him on the cheek and he told them he loved them. They ran up the driveway, and Cavan slowly followed, telling himself he just wanted to check in with Leah on the plan for the following weekend, that was all.

The twins disappeared into the house and shut the door behind them. He saw Melanie, through the window, stop and say something to somebody and then disappear from view. Cavan could hear Christmas music playing inside. Bing Crosby.

He rang the bell and took a couple steps back. It was strange, approaching his house—his house, he reminded himself, he had lived here nearly twenty years, was still paying the mortgage—and ringing the bell. But despite everything that had happened, he wanted to show her that he was following their agreement, respecting her wishes. Maybe if he did, she would put the brakes on things. Maybe if he did, there was a chance. Back to normal. He wasn’t a fool—he knew things could never go back to exactly the way they had been. Too much damage, too much water under the bridge. But maybe there could be something. Something salvaged. Life going forward could be like the old wedding rhyme, but not. *Something olde, something new, something salvaged, something blue.*

When no one came to the door, he rang again. And then he heard footsteps. The door swung open, and Leah stood there, looking at him. Her hair done up and her makeup on. Lipstick and eyeliner. A black blouse and tight black capris. Perfume—he could smell her perfume—and his heart suddenly picked up; she had been waiting for him. She knew

he'd be coming to drop the girls off, and she was waiting for him. He could see candles going in the family room behind her, and the music was still playing. But she still hadn't said anything, just stared.

Finally, "They already came in," she said. "I saw them run upstairs."

"Oh, I know."

She nodded slowly. "Then what?"

"What, what?"

"What do you want?"

"I just wanted to see how things are going."

She pressed her top teeth into her bottom lip a bit, growing quickly, visibly impatient. "They're going fine."

"And I, uh, just wanted to check in about the plan for next weekend."

"Well, it's my weekend. You had them this weekend. I have them next. I thought we made it pretty clear. I really don't think we should have to go over this every week." She began shutting the door. "If anything changes, I'll let you know."

When he got back in the car, he sat looking at the house, watching as shadows occasionally passed by the window and waiting to see if anyone pulled into his driveway. His house, he thought again. When he started back towards the apartment, he took a left instead of a right at the end of the street. Drove past the middle school, the high school, the dance academy the girls used to belong to—Miss Lulu's Ballet and Irish Step. He had dozens of pictures of them in their black dresses, with Keltic designs in red and yellow and green, and their curly wigs. He passed the old video store, Video Mania, now closed. There were no more video stores—relics of a time gone past. It used to be a weekly outing with the kids—kids' videos were free in there, VHS, and they were each allowed to pick out two or three, and then he would rent a movie for himself and Leah. He drove through the town center, the telephone wires lined with wreaths, and the lampposts with garlands. Past the house of pizza, the town hall and town common, the trees in white lights and the gazebo in the distance. There were lights everywhere. Christmas lights and warm yellow lights inside homes with fogged windows. People, men, inside with their families. He thought about turning down his old street, passing the house again, seeing who was in the driveway now, who was there in the family room with the music and the candles. But if he did that, what would that make him? Once a husband, now a stalker. A displaced stalker. Surrendering his self-respect, his dignity. If nothing else, at least he still had that.

When he finally got back to the complex, the lights were down in all except one apartment in his building. The rest was dark. He parked and stared up at the third floor. He thought of the cat up there. The cat would just be sitting there, silent, staring at him the

moment he turned on the light. Comrades, alone in exile. He didn't want to go up there. Not yet. Instead, he got out and started back towards the office to check his mail, keying himself in, the bright lights turning on automatically as he stepped inside the door. Surreal and silent and empty. He keyed his box open and pulled out his mail. An electric bill already and his credit card statement. A copy of *The Atlantic* and a letter from the court in Fall River. He stared at it a moment beneath the bright lights, everything inside him going hollow again. He knew what it was going to say, and he wondered if he just didn't open it if that would keep it from being real. If he could keep it away.

Back outside, a beer in his pocket, he walked to the sidewalk, the edge of the lawn. It was cold, the air crystallizing, and his breath fogging before him. He looked at his watch, just after ten; he hadn't been aware he had been driving in circles so long. There were few cars on the road, just the occasional headlights passing by. Passing and fading and leaving the night dark behind them again. The moon broke free of the clouds for a moment, and the tall grass in the field across the street looked silver in the light. Cavan opened his beer and discreetly took a sip before slipping it back into his inside coat pocket. He pulled out a cigar and slipped it out of the cellophane before snipping off the end. He struck his light and puffed three or four times before it got going. He couldn't stay out here long. It was too cold, and he didn't want anyone to see him. He didn't want to be one of them.

"I asked Benjamin if we can hang holiday decorations on our doors. Some places let you and some places don't. The problems start when people leave them up all year. It makes everyone look like trash." The voice came from behind him.

Cavan felt the hairs rise on the back of his head, his heart skipping a beat. He turned quickly. He hadn't realized anyone was out here with him. He thought he was alone. But there was a small figure sitting on the bench. Little more than a shadow in the darkness. With long hair, unkempt. And glasses. Watching him.

Sally.

She drew on her cigarette, the head of it briefly illuminating her face in the darkness.

Cavan almost laughed, both angry and amused. "You're smoking."

"I'm thinking about quitting," she said. "I'm in the pre-contemplation stage. I hear that's what they call it."

"It makes no sense," Cavan said.

"I know. I really need to quit. But I've been doing it since I was eleven years old."

"No," he said. "I mean, you turned me in."

She tapped her cigarette. "You're not supposed to smoke on the grounds. You were breaking the rules."

He nodded. "I was out back on my balcony and not bothering anyone. And now they fined me two hundred and fifty bucks. In my own home. You kind of get used to a routine,

you know? Back at my house, if I wanted a cigar, I could go out on my back deck and have a cigar. And no one was there waiting to tell.” From the corner of his eye, he could see two or three more shadows in the darkness, pacing slowly about. One with a cell phone held up to his ear. The other, head down, stopping, inhaling.

“That was back at your house,” Sally said. She smiled a little.

“Yeah.”

“Well,” she said, “you don’t live there anymore.”