GAIL LOUISE SIEGEL

UTOPIANS

THE MORNING WAS STILL COOL and sweet with the scent of new-mown grass when I dropped Lorden at the camp bus. I leaned against the YMCA's stone wall as she tossed her sleeping bag onto a pile of khaki and orange duffles, leapt into her friend Deena's arms and shrieked. It was a relief to see her again as an excitable child, not voluptuous jailbait.

My worries had steadily climbed, pacing the summer heat, since my divorce came through in April. There were too many muscular boys with pierced brows and tattoos ogling her on our shopping excursions for mosquito headnets and backpacks. Men were vying to be bad uncles. When a thirtyish hiking boot salesman held her calf a beat too long I nearly barked, "She's only thirteen." Then she stood and her knee whacked him in the forehead.

Now Lorden slid out of Deena's arms and darted back to say goodbye.

"Be careful in Utopia," I said. Utopia was our slang for Camp Superior —the same place I'd summered as a girl. "Use that sunblock. And remember your inhaler."

She indulged me with a smile. "Bye, Mamma. Have fun on *your* trip."

We did our quick squeeze-kiss routine, and turned away—Lorden to the bus and me to my car, still cramped with my own luggage.

BY THE TIME I REACHED O'HARE for my flight, the sun was making good on the weatherman's 102-degree prediction. I boarded a jet and three hours later felt smug, landing in Canada and driving off in my rental. I had done my parental job; both Lorden and I would dodge the searing heat wave.

The first leg of my trip was a tax write-off detour before visiting my friend Mara. Spruce College, with its small woodsy campus, was an unusual setting for a polling industry conference. Its rocky topography and scattered pine groves reminded me of Camp Superior, where Mara and I had met as children. But it was only heaven for the colony of ants that discovered my cache of granola bars, and the attendant men, reveling in the skewed female-to-male ratio.

Between seminars, I took long walks in the woods alone and erected a force field when any man emanated too much interest. I sank into the solitude of a room overlooking a lake where I could see a double sunset: one in the water and one in the sky. I wasn't there for romance. Being single was still a novelty and I liked the quiet: no radio, no TV, no senseless chatter about the basketball draft. When I was ready for a man, I'd find one. That was part of the trouble with marriage—the other appealing men passing through my field of vision. They were everywhere: on the train, chaperoning Lorden's friends to the pool, at the coffeehouse. The world was nicely overrun with them.

Just to avoid going home to Ben and his 300-channel, HD-TV, widescreen mistress, I would lock eyes with a lonely soul, and end up in the wrong bed. I called Mara the morning after that first time. I told her about the computer consultant, how he smelled like bay rum. How he made jokes about *software, hardware, underwear*. How I giggled nervously, riding the elevator to his room, intoxicated with the scent of the forbidden. How I felt aroused yet detached, even as I slipped off my shirt, thinking, "So *this* is what kind of person I am."

"This is what kind of person half the world is," Mara sighed. It wasn't absolution, but it was the closest I'd get.

It became a pattern, once every few years. A brief fling. Eventually, each man would lobby me about some life I didn't want: boiling down bear fat in the Montana wilderness, stringing windchimes in a commune in Nebraska, running a bluegrass school in Kentucky. I attracted alternative types who confused my batik skirts and gauze shirts with lack of ambition.

But then, at Spruce College, everyone was a pollster. Nobody mistook

me for a lapsed hippie and I only had one close mating call. The last night, a lovely man from Portland named Trevor walked me to my door, excited to discuss a sampling firm that provided 24 hour turnaround via email for nationally weighted phone numbers.

"Dahlia, it's a terrific company. They even pre-screen for business numbers and disconnected lines," he said, widening his eyes.

"Sounds great," I said. I meant it. "Why don't you give me their number tomorrow?"

He stalled, running his hand through his hair. I noticed then, how unusually long and thick it was for a man his age—maybe thirty-seven? Forty-two? It was coarse, like straw, and singed brown at the long ends above his collar.

I was admiring it—his burnt-hay hair–when he said, "Have you noticed, since September 11th, how polling has changed? We used to ask people their opinions, but now we ask about their fears? It's like we're weighing the national psyche every morning on this new, ominous scale that only registers *worry* and *terror* and *fear*."

It was one of those questions that didn't need an answer. I nodded and held out my hand to shake his, but he used it to draw me close. I thought about the hiking boot salesman, although I didn't resist. Trevor held my body until my breath went shallow. I felt him through our clothes' flimsy fabrics. He wasn't hard, but he was evident, and not fettered by briefs. His lips grazed my mouth instead of my cheek. It was, as Mara would say, knee-weakening.

Yet, I didn't press against him in response or even admit the flirtation. It was too much work to explain myself to a man who lived 1000 miles away. Everything seemed equally true: the futility of half a continent's distance; a post-divorce urge to lie in bed alone and invent my own pleasure; a heightened craving for the sleep that eluded me.

And each facet of my sleeplessness glimmered with fear. Fear of falling in love, or falling out; becoming vulnerable as pudding or impenetrable as stone. I wasn't worried about my property values, or the future of social security or my cholesterol or even terrorists. I feared the way desire stopped you in your tracks, a stray bullet to the heart. How it blinded you to danger, or tedium, and you found you'd squandered your life—maybe watching sitcoms–far too late. I feared every consequence of lust that might claim me or claim Lorden.

I lay awake, picturing Lorden slipping off a ledge into an abyss, or suffering a fatal insect sting, or capsizing her canoe in rapids—dangers of the north woods paradise. I imagined some god deciding to visit my sins upon my daughter as punishment. My love for her kept me up.

In three nights at Spruce College, I totaled five hours sleep. After the final panel, I caught sight of Trevor while I was idling in the parking lot. He was gentlemanly, pressing his business card into my hand through the car window. His fingers, resting on the cream card with its blue writing, were scarred along the knuckles, as if he'd spent his youth lumberjacking before settling down at a keyboard. They looked sensually competent, hands that could steer you to pleasure. No rings.

I turned off my ignition. "Are you ever in Chicago?" My fear-meter was ticking, like a cooling engine.

"Might could be," he said. "Now and then."

"We could have lunch," I said. "Compare anxiety questionnaires."

He tilted his head. "I'd like that."

As I raised the window, I checked the rear-view for bags under my eyes.

GROGGINESS, PLUS A MILDLY EROTIC preoccupation with the memory of Trevor leaning into me, made the long drive to Mara's foggy and surreal. I misread signs and billboards—EXIT as EGYPT, LEFT as DEFT—and only found my way by the dream-like familiarity of the New England landscape. I passed Hedwig's Greenhouse and took a left into an unmarked lane, barreled past the Newton Lumber Yard, hung right onto a local highway and followed a field to The Mohawk Valley Co-Housing Community driveway. I was, as Mara would put it, flying on radar.

I arrived at dusk, parked in the lot and opened the door of my cool capsule onto a muggy night. My reprieve from the heat was over. I climbed the pathway up to Mara's; cars were banned from the route from house to house. Mohawk was an *intentional* community of thirty homes in the woods—kind of a suburban commune carved out of a forest preserve—with a long list of rules: no fences, no garages, and biweekly vegetarian meals for eighty in the sprawling Common House. It was somebody's idea of Utopia, maybe somebody who went from camp to college to the real world, and found reality wanting.

Mara, herself, was an *accidental* Utopian. Cashiering at Organic Junction during graduate school, she captured the fancy of Cliff—the owner—despite her propensity for bacon cheeseburgers. Fifteen years later, after acquiescing to his every new age folly, from aromatherapy to goddess worship, Cliff went the old-fashioned route. When Organic Junction was gobbled up in a national health grocery consolidation, he cashed in big, and ran off with the massage therapist next door.

Now, Mara was waiting on her porch swing; fumes from her freshly painted kitchen had driven her outdoors. I gave her a firm hug, sat down and nestled into her, despite the humidity. We sipped gin and tonics and watched the full moon change from orange to yellow to white, as if it was emerging from a chemical bath. The sight was soothing; the moon was a chilly medallion pinned to a velvet sky. Our talk made its inevitable way from work to children to sex.

"I keep warning Lorden about sex, about her slutty clothes. I say she should think about the messages she sends men. Then she sneers and says, *Mom, I'm not going to dress like a nun*. I want to paste STOP signs around the house and repaint them to read AIDS, RAPE, BABIES." I chewed the pulp off my lime rind. "I sometimes wish Ben was there to back me up. But he'd glare at me and I'd *hear* him thinking, *hypocrite*."

Mara sighed. "Dahlia, how is Amelia taking your divorce?"

Amelia is my mother.

"Mostly by pretending it's reversible, like a jacket. She keeps asking if Ben might like to join us for Mother's Day or Father's Day. The truth is, he would. He loves Amelia and she has worshiped him ever since he replaced her garbage disposal when we were dating. But I don't invite him."

"Defiant, as usual." Mara laughs.

"Maybe I'm just getting even with Amelia. I don't like her blaming me for the divorce."

For a moment we swung in silence. Mara grabbed my hand. While I chronically disappointed Amelia, I could not disappoint Mara. She strictly adhered to the central rule of girlfriendship: *Loyalty trumps morality.*

"Honey, even *I* blame you for the divorce," she said. "But I love you. I don't want custody of Ben's friendship. I want yours."

I squeezed her hand in gratitude for not equating me with Cliff–another bad, unfaithful egg. Her fingers were smooth as marble, as if her hair follicles had been polished away. We sat there, sipping and swaying, until our words were slurred and peppered with yawns. After a quick whiff of Mara's paint fumes, I retreated to the Common House, to sleep in one of the two free communal guest rooms for the night.

Despite the enforced friendliness of Mohawk Valley, which would prompt me to brick up my door, I liked staying at the Common House. The guest rooms are hidden at the end of a private hall, one to the right and one to the left. They share a spacious bathroom and a separate shower room. The sleeping quarters themselves are sprawling, furnished with castoffs from the thirty families. It sounds like a setting for nightmares, with so many competing ghosts haunting ancient bureaus, four-posters and frayed Afghans from across New England. But it always induced deep slumber. I inhaled the fresh peonies and mountain columbine in the vase by the bed and the herbs in the windowbox, and fell into sleep like a well.

I woke early, roused by the rooster one co-houser had bought for the communal chicken coop. Rude-ster, Mara called him. His constant braying ignited a fiery debate that stalled in the Quality of Life Committee, and was now in mediation. By next summer, Mara thought Rude-ster would be chicken strips.

Mara drove to town, to punch in at her office—she'd become a buyer for a shoe store chain. I drank coffee on the Common House porch and watched a carpenter build a deck on the home across the path. If I had a camera, I would have shot a whole roll of the scene: a house with barn-red siding girdled by fresh lumber, the carpenter's crimson ladder leaning against the floor of the deck, his red van at ease on the lawn, doors flung open like pockets turned inside out, tools spilling on the grass. Letters spelling PICKETT were stenciled in black on a red toolbox. In turn, the presumed Pickett used a green table saw, an orange-handled drill, and a blue hammer. He had a yellow tape measure hooked to his belt and wore a lilac Newton Lumber Yard t-shirt, which was plum with sweat across his broad back and under his arms.

The homeowners were anxious for him to finish; they already had two wrought-iron chairs and a small table on the planking, where they could take their meals in a nest of wood shavings. A little red wheelbarrow, a red-pedaled tricycle, a red delivery cart, and a red Radio Flyer wagon were all parked in front of the deck, as if they were gussied up for a class picture. A welter of red flowers grew across the lot—roses, begonias, impatiens, mountain laurel; even a potted hibiscus.

In the distance, laundry danced a can-can on a clothesline. The whites reflected the sun like tinfoil; the underwear looked hot to the touch. Although the porch was deeply shaded, I knew it was blistering in the sun. In a few short hours the heat would penetrate everything, and crouch like an illness on my chest.

TO AVOID GREETING THE STREAM of gray ponytailed men and Birkenstocked women flowing in and out of the Common House, I examined the tan, sinewy carpenter more diligently and thought about the statistics Mara had quoted, appealing to my pollster's curiosity. In ten years, Mohawk Valley suffered three divorces (Mara is separated), bore seventeen babies and welcomed five adoptions. Roughly ten percent of the adults were gay, including a white lesbian couple with a black teenage son. Children called adults by first name, the same egalitarian conceit that made my mother insist I call her Amelia.

I could guess the rest of the profile: more laptops than average, older cars, higher median number of lifetime sex partners (even more than me) and fewer minorities, despite said adoptive black teen. More trust funds, more foreign travel, more post-graduate degrees. More ceiling fans and fewer air conditioners. No security systems and no locked doors, not while at work, not while on vacation. More Birkenstocks and fewer neckties.

Even I had left my Common House room unlocked. In case I needed it, there was a key tacked to the wall outside the guest room. But most of my valuables were stowed in the car. Wearing nothing but shorts and a bathing suit, I had no pocket to hold a key. I was stripped down to the bare essentials, even slipping off my jewelry, knowing my fingers would swell in the heat. I placed my watch and my silver ring from Seattle's Public Market on a lace doily on the dresser–it was a companion ring to one I'd bought Lorden on a business trip, embossed with feathers, crescent moons and arrows. I massaged hand cream into my fingers and worked my wedding band over my knuckle for the first time in fifteen years. It was a chore; the skin seemed to grow up around the ring like bark over a tree knot. Then I left it stranded on a far corner of the doily, leaning against the jar.

ONCE THE PEOPLE-TRAFFIC SLOWED, I ventured into the kitchen to refill my coffee. With its rows of gleaming pots, its industrial-sized sinks, its long stainless counters, it would be the envy of a hotel chef. My flip-flops made soft sucking sounds, crossing the moist tiles. Otherwise the room was still.

Then there was an angry "Fuck him" from the parlor, around the corner.

I stirred honey into my cup and listened.

"So I said you're out of your fucking mind, man. I'm not paying no fucking one hundred dollars for those shitty speakers. No fucking way. Fuck you."

The talker paused, waiting for someone's reply. From the wait, I guessed he was on the phone. From his pronunciation—articulating his "g's"—he seemed young. He was practicing swearing, not cursing in earnest.

I busied myself in front of an easel outside the hallway. It held a display of Mohawk Valley's children. There were a few dozen photographs with names in capital letters printed below.

"He's a fucking moron, man. The first time he installed them, they didn't fucking work. Now he wants me to pay him? He should fucking pay me."

I read the names: Tyler, Kieran, Mavis, Paolo. Katarina, Caitlin, Betty and Bret. No Johns, no Jims, no Joes.

"What the fuck. I'll see you at the beach."

He hung up the phone and I struck a casual pose, curious to sneak a peek at the talker. He rounded the corner in a white t-shirt and bathing trunks. He was handsome, with short brown hair and even features. He smiled as he walked past—a neat, polite, smile—like he was a dinner guest, or Lorden's junior counselor at camp. I smiled back before scoping him out on the easel: Daniel.

WHEN MARA RETURNED, we went for a swim. To get to the pond, we followed the mercifully shaded Mill Road past the dam, a beautiful old stone structure posted with red warning signs. The pond had swallowed too many bodies—mostly drunken college students and unruly teenagers testing their limits and failing. They got sucked into the current like paper into a vacuum tube, tossed over the edge and crumpled against the scenic rocks below.

I knew how quickly it could happen from a post-camp summer spent lifeguarding at the South Boulevard beach. Ben was the other lifeguard, the one who did CPR on the girl I pulled out of the lake, eyes rolled back in her once-lovely head, foam spuming from her swollen lips. I

was chilled, panting, as he worked away at her, his muscles undulating under his skin, struggling to burst out. I was exhausted with effort and adrenaline, not yet thinking of death. I was enthralled with Ben's biceps, our heroics.

I had no inkling he'd grow up to be a couch potato; there were no TVs at the beach.

Two weeks later, when they finally took her off life support, the obituary read *Cynthia Braverman, Cheerleader, 17.* Ben took me out for a drink that night and for solace, I took him to bed.

Even today, when I least expect it, her vacant, damp face floats up at me out of the waves.

So, Mara and I set up our towels on the shore opposite the dam to baste in the sun without contemplating death. It wasn't much of a beach; it was mostly grass. Instead of building sand castles, a pack of toddlers chased a frog. Mara scrutinized the co-housing kids with curiosity, having none of her own.

She chatted them up like adults: "Hello, Sarah. How is your mother's ankle doing? Is your father back from Albany yet?"

Three teenagers stalked across the beach. I recognized Daniel from his telephone swearing spree and told Mara the story. When they came close, she waved and grinned, "Hi Kevin, hi Betty, hi Daniel."

They didn't recoil, as Lorden does in public. They waved back and then tiptoed into the water —a tall, buxom blond girl, a short, compact black boy and Daniel, who had a sunset tattooed onto his shoulder blade. In the sun, their bodies looked sleek as seals when they pushed each other into the pond, then rose, and water cascaded along their limbs.

"What's it like, bringing up a teenager in Mohawk Valley?" I couldn't imagine Lorden in such an insular spot. "What do these kids do for fun?"

"Kevin Walsh, I mean *Dangerous* Walsh—"At that, Mara's breath caught. She exploded in laughter, dropped her head to her knees and grabbed her stomach. I wasn't sure what had struck her as funny. Her shoulders shook convulsively, and then intermittently, like hiccups. When she looked up, her cheeks were flushed and her lip was beaded with sweat.

"*Dangerous* is the adopted black boy I mentioned. It's his *handle*. His mom said he's trying to be a DJ on weekends, playing for high school parties.

Which mom, I thought, but didn't ask. I didn't know either of them anyway.

"It's just too funny," Mara went on. "*Dangerous* Walsh spinning discs in the land of old folkies. Besides, look at him, he's such a puppy."

I looked. I studied Kevin-Dangerous, Betty and Daniel as they made their way back up the beach. Kevin wasn't frightening, but he wasn't a puppy either. Maybe it was my perspective. I was a habitual Worst Case Scenario *imaginer.* I could picture Kevin's sullen pout or Daniel's squint sparking to fury in an instant.

It was part of my job description as a mother to see every boy as a potential predator, to worry on Lorden's behalf. There was our neighbor's son Marty, who talked to her breasts. There were baritone boys who called at midnight and hung up when they realized I wasn't Lorden. Their clattering receivers, their ominous stares, spooked me like personal threats.

WE TOOK A BRISK DIP IN THE POND before braving the hot pavement back to Mohawk Valley. The sun had shifted and erased the shade, making each step an effort. On our way to the Common House, Mara led me past the chicken coop, which was designed like a miniature blue-sided townhouse, mirroring the community's architecture. The Rude-ster was strutting out front, bobbling his red wattle, poofing out luxurious black feathers.

But his harem was in nasty shape. A half dozen hens lingered in the pen—their front porch—looking like abuse victims. They were molting, and the broad patches of exposed flesh on their backs suggested violence, as if the feathers had been torn out in anger. I was repulsed *and* impelled to gawk at the raw and prickly skin.

"Hey ladies, meet Dahlia." Mara kept up a steady banter with the hens while I averted my eyes from their bumpy, shiny-pink rumps. "She's my best friend in the entire galaxy."

"I'm going to shower," I said and climbed the hill to my room feeling queasy—from the forbidding-looking skin, from dislocation, from the heat.

Showering helped. I stood under the cool, pulsating water and washed my hair, imagining my worries swirling away with the suds. Drying off, I heard mumbling and shuffling in the guest room across the hall. It was reassuring to have neighbors, and to not need to know who they were. It was more like the city, like home.

I dressed, but couldn't find my Seattle Public Market ring. Everything else was there: watch, earrings, the pointless wedding band. I looked under the doilies and lifted the rug. I stooped to check below the bed and beneath the dresser. Gone. I was still searching when Mara came to find me for dinner.

"One of the ghosts has snatched my jewels," I complained.

She frowned in sympathy. "I'll help you find it after dinner."

"Okay," I agreed.

"Meanwhile, are we hungry?"

"For anything but chicken," I said.

WE CHOSE A LITTLE MEXICAN PLACE for the size of its window unit. We sat in the a/c, drank margaritas and picked at chips. The food was irrelevant. The greater pleasure was relaxing inside of our lifelong friendship. Mara had known me through puberty, dating, college. She was there when Ben had made me swoon, and when his passivity, flickering in the blue light of cable, had made me livid. We had buried each other's fathers and our intimacy had outdistanced marriage. I hoped that Lorden was forging the same kind of friendship right then, in the shelter of a pine bower, or skipping stones in a quiet cove.

Still, no friendship satisfies everything. I confided all to Mara but my constant worries. Those I entrusted to Ben, who found them as tiring as I did, drowning them out in the murmur of the TV.

Mara lifted a chip and examined its surface, flecked with black spots.

"Dahlia, I miss men," she said.

"Yes." I had a twinge of regret about Trevor. Why hadn't I parted my lips, shifted my hips to test the rhythm of our bodies? Desire and regret twanged at me.

"Not only the sex." Mara read my thoughts. She broke the chip into halves and then quarters. "Just leaning against someone sturdier than me. Or watching Cliff sleep, or mowing the lawn, or toweling down after a shower. Watching him pick tomatoes with his shirt off. There was nothing more gorgeous than that. You know?"

I knew. I reached across the red checkered oilcloth and squeezed her hand. Without a wedding band, without the ring that matched Lorden's, even my fingers looked lonely.

IT WAS AFTER 10:00 when we returned to Mohawk Valley. Oddly, the motion-detecting lights along the walk were lit like Christmas.

"Sweltering," Mara said, then went quiet. Two police cars and an ambulance were parked at the Common House steps, on the path that's off-limits to cars.

I braced myself, waiting for Mara to crack a lame joke about it and relieved she didn't. Instead, she hurried her step. At least a dozen adults were clustered on the porch. Some were weeping.

We didn't have to ask what happened; the crowd was fluent with disaster. Someone cleaning the Common House had found Betty naked and unconscious in the empty guest room. The cause—overdose, suicide attempt—was pure speculation. Kevin Walsh and Daniel were being questioned.

I added up the time since the pond: henhouse plus shower plus dinner. How did disaster come so quickly, stealing in and out like a thief? Mara gasped and I clutched her arm. We sat on the porch steps and I eavesdropped on all the people I'd avoided since yesterday, avid for some clue to *why*. It was gossip, a premature wake. I learned that Betty was fifteen and an award-winning flautist. She had babysat most of their kids over time. Sometimes she smoked pot in the guest rooms, though it was firmly forbidden.

In turn, each adult tripped over *she is, she was*, wondering if Betty was still unconscious or dead. Then a cop stepped out of the Common House and into the porch's yellow light.

"Well folks, you should all go home. The paramedics have stabilized the girl and are taking her to the E/R. Call me—Detective Clausen—if you remember anything we should know. Meanwhile, we'll contact some of you tomorrow."

Mara raised her hand, like a kid in school. "Can my friend get her clothes from down the hall? She was in the other apartment." We all waited for the answer, hushed and reduced to childlike obedience.

Detective Clausen narrowed his eyes, then escorted me to my room. The doorway opposite was wide open to my fears. I glimpsed it all like lightning: Betty lying nude on the bed, two paramedics, her mother weeping—fist at her mouth. Betty's head flung back, her skin seeming bald, paler that she'd been at the beach. I gagged. She looked as much like the molting hens, in their cruel nakedness, as a teenage girl.

In my room, my eyes ranged around the furniture unseeing, my heart full of Betty and dread.

"Did you see anything unusual, ma'am?"

I took a moment to grasp that he didn't mean Betty. He meant the afternoon's events.

"No. She was just at the beach with her friends."

"What about afterward, did you come back here?"

"Yes. I took a shower, then I hunted around for my ring. I lost it today." A recollection of sounds next door flitted across my brain. "There was someone in the other guest room. I remember vague noises, thinking I had a neighbor."

He nodded as if he understood, as if *understanding* was possible when the rest of us were still struggling to comprehend.

I SPENT THE NIGHT, SLEEPLESS, AT MARA'S. The foldout couch sat in a haze of paint fumes and heat, and I was vaguely feverish with nausea and fright. Each time my mind grazed a dream, death was lurking inside. I'd confuse Betty with the drowned cheerleader Cynthia Braverman, or Lorden, and wake in a sweat—horrified and relieved all at once.

As the minutes limped past, I covered my head with a pillow, or gazed at Mara's photo collection on the side table. There we were, the two of us, toting saddle bags outside the Camp Superior stables after a pack trip. My hair was spilling out of braids. Hers was cropped short, much like now. But then we were laughing with glee and exhaustion, secure inside our cowboy boots and lean, fourteen-year-old limbs. It was before men, before sex.

Propped beside us in a tooled silver frame was Mara's wedding portrait with Cliff. A crown of pink roses sat atop her blonde bob. It struck me that Ben was still snug in my wallet, dancing with Lorden, in a snapshot from the 7th grade Father-Daughter dance. We were both hoarding relics, Mara and I, archaeologists of our own lives.

IT WAS BREAKFAST TIME IN MICHIGAN when I called Camp Superior to say I was driving in that night to commandeer Lorden and drag her home. I would tele-commute for the summer, and order in groceries. There were movies on cable. We'd be safe behind our deadbolts and barred windows.

"I'm sorry," the director said. "She's canoeing in the Boundary Waters until the end of camp. Short of a helicopter rescue, she's not leaving early."

I pictured her dangling from a rope ladder, whipping over the tree tops.

"Thanks," I said. I didn't mean it.

THE SECOND DAY that Betty lingered in a coma, they announced that she'd been drugged and raped. Daniel and Kevin were questioned again. I guessed at the line of attack *(Tell me again why they call you Dangerous?*) and felt an unexpected sympathy and urgency to know they weren't culpable. Or Mohawk Valley could lose three teens to one tragedy, an obscene toll, their Eden in ashes.

By nightfall, Mara's neighbors were filtering in and out of her living room, to watch the news on *her* TV instead of gathering at the Common House. It was off limits now, a crime scene. The television was our magic mirror, reflecting heartache; verifying, broadcasting and amplifying pain. A sweaty reporter thrust a microphone at Detective Clausen's face and we stared, mesmerized.

THE NEXT MORNING I left Mohawk Valley and made a stop over to visit Amelia, my mother, outside of Pittsburgh. We didn't talk much, but we never had—our words were too flammable when they rubbed together. She was happy to treat me to gifts, to dinner, and to amble through museum exhibits. We trotted her beagle Churchill around the subdivision in the crickety evenings, with an eye out for fireflies in the sprawling lawns and nouveau heirloom gardens.

I was on my best behavior; when she placed a dahlia bouquet at the breakfast table in my honor, I kissed her and said *thanks*.

I admired the display of old photos she had mounted along the stairway to the second floor. It was a fourteen-tiered chronology of her life: high school graduation photo, wedding portrait, Dad's Navy head shot, my baby picture, the family portrait from my wedding, Lorden's dance recital photograph, Amelia and Dad's 40th wedding anniversary panorama. She only nagged me about my divorce once, and she looked so grieved that I didn't argue. Since my father died, Amelia likely missed men, too.

One morning a dark dream about bald women and plucked chickens woke me before dawn. Over breakfast, I told Amelia about Betty. She asked me a dozen questions I couldn't answer, even with the trivia I'd collected on the Common House porch. Was Betty an only child? Were her parents divorced? Did her mother work? Was she a good student? How revealing was her bathing suit? Was she a fast kind of girl? It was the same game I played with myself; if I could sort the data, find enough ways Betty wasn't like Lorden, maybe Lorden was safe.

I looked at my mom and thought about Betty's mother, probably sitting in her own kitchen, gazing at an empty chair and negotiating with God to wake her daughter.

That night, I called Ben to see if he'd heard from Lorden. I suffered an undeniable pang of longing when I heard his *Hullo*. He read me Lorden's two brief letters: She'd learned to ski; she'd lost her tennis racket. I weighed commiserating with him about Betty, until I heard the television's laugh track swell in the background. I was done competing for attention.

Well, I thought, at least he has company. I was never much company for Ben.

I toyed with the idea of Trevor, considered if he'd hear out my fears and say something astute, instead of reaching for the remote.

AFTER THAT, I NEEDED SOOTHING; I made some tea. The whole ceremony—boiling water, inhaling minty steam—was a calming distraction. I carried my mug past the photo gallery to my childhood room, still plum with floral wallpaper and a frayed rag quilt. While Amelia puttered around the house, I leafed through high school yearbooks, marveling at all those teenage selves preserved, as if in amber, along with bad hairdos and grandiose dreams of celluloid or athletic fame. I dropped back on the collection of pillows and took in familiar sounds: the dishwasher's rhythm, Amelia's creaky bed-

room floor, her slippers tapping across the bathroom tiles, the hot water pipes singing as she performed her nightly ritual. It was womb-like music.

She rustled up the hall in her blue silk robe and peeked in the door. "Sweet dreams. Looks like you never left."

I smiled and she inched toward the interior edge of the doorframe and leaned against it. I tried to wish her closer to me, to sit on the mattress and hold my hand like Mara on the porch swing. I couldn't remember the texture of my mother's hands.

"I worry about Lorden," I said, trying to lure her in. "I'm tired of worrying."

"Save your strength," she snapped. "I still lose sleep over you." I'd miscalculated. She was irritated, straightening her posture and pulling away from the door.

"I'm an adult, mom. So far I've managed to take care of myself."

She sighed, as if my infractions were too numerous to list. "Losing a child is no less tragic in the suburbs as in Mara's fancy commune. This was supposed to be our little paradise, you know."

It sounded like a non sequitur, yet it wasn't. I could see her flipping her mental calendar backwards, from my worries about Lorden, to Betty's rape, to my own teenage transgressions that set her on edge. I flashed on the kids whose pictures never made it into my senior yearbook: the junior prom queen who died of carbon monoxide poisoning, making out in her garage; the neighbor's son, crushed in a motorcycle wreck.

"Yes, but doesn't it fade? The constant worry?"

Her eyebrows bobbed up and down like a marionette's. "Sure it fades. Like labor pains or old newspaper. They yellow; your whole life goes sepia." She waved her hand, swatting away some fossilized anxiety. "Then new ones come up. All these men you date. AIDS. Whatever kind of example you're setting."

"Fine, mom. Never mind."

"Dahlia, I want you to be happy. But the things that make you happy, I don't understand them." She shook her head, lurching toward conciliation, then lurching away. Her neck was splotchy with red, like those

distant nights when I'd forget to call, or come home late, or smelling of *boy*. She would interrogate me and I'd avert my eyes from her face and concentrate on her collar.

Now, we glared at each other, silent. I thought of boxers, circling, waiting for the right moment to strike. I concentrated on staying in my pillowed corner, not throwing a punch.

I hesitated. Then, "It makes me happy to be here."

Slowly, she sized up my olive branch.

"Well, I'm glad to know that." She unstiffened. "It's a comfort, having you here."

She allowed a tentative smile, migrated back into the hall and shut the door. Her shushing steps receded, and I closed my eyes. I tried to recall how it felt to lie in that same bed more than half a life ago, back when the fantasy of forcible sex with my sophomore biology lab partner was purely titillating. I remembered the naive desire for experience without culpability. I remembered being relieved that my mother couldn't read my thoughts through the walls.

Now, I guessed, she probably could.

THE NEXT MORNING, before I left for the airport, Mara called. Betty was still floating in a coma. The police had cleared the teen age boys, and charged a carpenter named George Pickett with rape. The rumor was, they had him nailed.

"I hear they've got a mountain of evidence," she said. "He had her clothes in his van, Dahlia. He even took Polaroids of her."

"The guy from Newton Lumber who was building the deck?"

I shuddered at my memory of him, the picturesque centerpiece of bright-handled tools and sprawling red flowers. Later, on the plane, every time I glanced out the window, I saw him, rummaging in his toolbox and sweating in the sun. Halfway to Chicago I closed the shade.

BACK HOME, I EAGERLY SORTED THE MAIL on the kitchen table. Among the papers and circulars I found three letters from Lorden with hearts and flowers scribbled in orange ink, and a manila envelope with a Mohawk Valley Law Enforcement return ad-

dress. I tore the last open first. There, in a small cellophane sleeve, was a photograph of my missing ring, twin to the one that Lorden, even then, would have on her hand.

Folded inside the envelope was a hand-written note from Detective Clausen: *Is this your ring? Please call me.* On the back of the picture someone had printed: RECOVERED FROM GEORGE PICKETT JULY 15.

I placed the photo of the ring with its embossed feathers and half moons on the table, and my hands shook, opening Lorden's first letter. The envelope sliced into the flesh inside my thumb. Sitting down, I pushed the letters aside, and sucked at the paper cut's sting. My blood was salty on my tongue.

I pictured George Pickett casing my empty room, and moving on for fresh prey.

Suddenly, the house was too quiet. Everything felt too brutal to bear alone: my visions of Betty's slack limbs, my incessant worries over Lorden, the George Picketts in the world. I tried blinking away the statistics I knew about rape; they were dispiriting numbers. I slumped back in my chair and wished for a sturdier body behind it, to lean against. I thought of calling Trevor from Portland, to thank him for the sampling reference, to talk about measuring fear. To press in his direction, however far, and to see if he'd press back.

I kicked the table leg. There was plenty of time for that later, time to see if Trevor was a comfort or a threat. But then I had just hours—to splash water on my face, to meet Lorden at the YMCA. I reached for her open letter. Before I took it out of the envelope, I drew my fingertip across her chubby orange script, and was flooded with longing to hold her. I considered which daughter might climb down the steep bus steps: the bronzed, blasé, alluring one; or the bug-bitten one with her hair a-tangle, her braces glinting. I couldn't wait to be surprised.