Away, Behind, Ahead

JONATHON ATKINSON

5/25
7:48pm

Hey Wendell. Quick question for you. It's nothing serious, don't worry; I'm just wondering. Do you remember, when we were kids—I was eight or nine, maybe—seeing this old, whitewashed building on the way out of town? We'd see it on our way to Point Reyes, to the left of whatever that road's called, whatever D Street turns into just across the county line. It looked like a chapel. It was originally a one-room schoolhouse, and stayed open for a long time, longer than you'd imagine that sort of thing would, so that when we were really young, there were still students there, although in the end they only had, like, eight, total.

I'm not sure what's happening with it now—some rich person bought it, probably—but after the school shut down, the building and grounds were used as a farmstand for a while. I remember seeing it, wondering about it as we passed by. We never talked about it, but why would we? But we went once, Mom took us. And although I wouldn't have expected us to have bought anything, would've expected us to drive out there without intention of bringing anything home, operating on the premise that whatever they sold

there would've been way too expensive for—

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5/25
7:51pm

Hey, sorry. The machine cut me off. Or I guess it's not a machine anymore: but the voicemail thing. Anyway. On this particular day, instead of going out there only to look around, kill time, we bought stuff, and not just that, but a lot: vegetables for the week, a loaf of bread, eggs, cheese.

There was a crooked white fence, which I remember because you started climbing on it and broke off one of the pickets' tips, it was all crumbly with dry rot, and you were terrified you'd get in trouble. And a line of oak trees that looked, I remember us saying, kraken-like. And we went and sat in this one shady area that had some picnic tables and ate these apples Mom had just bought, which, unlike any other apples I'd ever seen, had white skin and pink flesh. So that they looked like they came out of a fairy tale. And as we sat eating these fairy-tale fruits, Mom went on and on about them—not these apples in particular, but apples as such—and she claims, by the way, not to remember any of this now—but I remember her saying if you have a particular variety of apple you like, the only reliable way of reproducing it is to graft a branch of the tree it came from onto another existing tree. It doesn't matter if the grafted-upon tree already produces the kind of apple you want. This is just how it works. And then, if you do this, she said, that graft will continue bearing the kind of apple you like. But if you instead plant a seed from your beloved apple in the ground, the fruit of the tree that grows from that planted seed will be, as she put it—and this I remember because I'd never heard the phrase, never heard anyone use it, let alone her—a sport of nature—

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5/25
7:54pm

Yo. Sorry. Don't worry, I'm almost done. Anyway, yes—in the vast majority of cases, the fruit of the tree that grows from your beloved seed will turn out to be a complete disaster, but now and then, she said, it'll produce a marvelous new type.

I don't know where she would've learned this, or why. I don't remember her talking about apples otherwise. All I remember is sitting there with you as she delivered this little lecture. And—yes, that's the memory. Any clue what I'm talking about?

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We moved again, we keep having to move, and I haven't memorized this new layout of rooms, can't yet walk through them automatically. Our apartment is the second story of an old stick Victorian and has high ceilings and tall windows, unlike anywhere else I've lived, so at night the contours of the walls look vast, depthless. And there are still unpacked boxes all over, so when I get out of bed to make sure the front door's locked, I move very slowly, leaving all the lights off. I don't know why. I'm not thinking. I fell asleep really early in the evening without meaning to.

Josie's at Andrea's this week and Mom's not on the couch or anywhere else in the apartment. I go to the front window and open the blinds. The moonlight is silver and misty and makes the empty street look newly conjured up. And there's Mom, climbing onto a bike I've never seen before and wearing a backpack and dark, baggy clothes.

I run downstairs. Alameda's small, but even after driving around for an hour, I can't find her. Few other cars are out, as is typical at this hour, even on a Saturday. The moon's almost full. The city's started replacing the old murky orange streetlights with LEDs, and their respective shadows expand and contract before me. And the radio's on, playing that show that forecasts what to look for in the night sky, the stars and planets, etc. Earth, the host says, is currently passing through a dense ribbon of comet dust, some of which may also have been found at the bottom of the Rio Negro, the implications of which, his tone implies, are marvelous. And maybe so. His voice sounds old, ancient. *More on that in a minute,* he says, just before I turn the sound off.

*

"Where'd you go last night?" I say when Mom appears in the kitchen in her regular clothes: a gray sack dress, a gray hoodie, a plain black baseball cap, scuffed cherry-red Danskos, thick wool socks. She smiles and sings a little of the Leadbelly song: "*My girl, my girl, don't lie to me. Tell me where did you sleep last night?*"

"Ha," I say. "Yeah."

"To the ARCO," she says. "You see my new bike? I got it on Craigslist for a *song*." But the ARCO station's right around the corner; you could get there in five minutes on foot. "For some scratchers," she says.

"But you were gone for so long," I say, still aiming to sound breezy and failing.

"I couldn't sleep."

"I didn't know you like to play the scratchers."

She shrugs.

This whole time, neither of us have moved. The way we're standing, with her in the doorway and me at an odd distance across from her, we look as if we want to keep each other from going anywhere. Of course, if she actually started toward me, I'd step out of her way.

She's lying, I'm almost sure. She's always been a terrible liar. But I have to go.

"I lost, by the way!" she shouts as I head downstairs.

I stop. "You what?"

"The scratchers!"

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I almost call Wendell on my drive to work, but he won't answer, I know this almost for sure, and unless I leave a voicemail saying I need to talk to him, he won't call back. He has to believe there's an emergency—but all that's happened, as far as I know, is that Mom went for a bike ride in the middle of the night, and there isn't anything obviously wrong with that.

I've worked at the hospital for long enough now that to spend twelve hours passing through its long halls, up and down on the transport elevator, in and out of patient's rooms, can feel almost lulling. Sometimes, near the end of a shift, when the coffee has begun to wear off, I start to feel weightless. As always, the kids are exuberant, despondent, stoic, terrified. I don't know, I don't take anything in. I wheel the x-ray machine from room to room, saying hi, how are you, hold still please, okay, great, or actually, no, let's try that again, really still this time, okay, we got it, great, goodbye!

My rhythm falters only once, while scanning a two-year-old girl with a broken collarbone. She's just started sleeping in a toddler bed instead of a crib, and fell, half-asleep, when she got up in the early morning to crawl in bed with her parents. She wears glow-in-the-dark skeleton pajamas, the cartoon bones faint

green under the pale lights, and that she's worn them here is surely a coincidence, but I almost ask if she put them on for the occasion.

"She'll be okay, though. Right?" her dad says.

"Oh, I've seen this many times," I say, even though x-ray techs aren't supposed to comment on scans. "She'll be fine. She'll pull through."

She's their only kid: I'd bet money on it. The three of them squint, gauging my trustworthiness.

"She'll be fine," I say again, nodding now at the girl. "You know, my daughter had those same pajamas," I say. "The exact same ones, I think. We used to get Halloween costumes that could double as pajamas, so she could wear whatever we bought for more than just one day. And she was a skeleton one year. Because she was into x-rays. Because…" And now, surprised as anyone to hear what's coming out of my mouth, I gesture at myself: my black scrubs and faded hoodie with its embroidered icon of another cartoon skeleton over my heart. "And she used to say it was so amazing that inside of everyone is a *skeleton*. And liked to pretend, in a crowded room or whatever, that she had x-ray vision. And would picture everyone as a jabbering skull. She thought that was hilarious."

They stare at me still, apparently unconvinced. They probably live in a newish subdivision an hour and a half outside the city, I think, maybe Pleasanton, or Pleasant Hill. Their house contains more bedrooms than people, and they say grace every night and vacation in Hawaii once a year.

When she realizes I've finished talking, the little girl frowns, glances at her mother and father, and then turns back to me. She sticks her hand in the air and waves stiffly, as if she's just learned to do this.

"Okay! Bye-bye!" she says.

*

Before she left Petaluma, Mom worked at the Target that was built where the old junior high used to be until she got fired for talking to her coworkers about unionizing. She used to laugh relating the details of that brief campaign to me—the same barking laugh I remember hearing as a kid, when she'd describe the idiocy and cruelty of her bosses, or our landlords, or our teachers, or the managers of Whole Foods, who threw huge amounts of food in the dumpster every evening, which she, Wendell, and I would retrieve later that night. It was a laugh like a shiv. It seemed to function as a dare, or a demand, urging you to

concur with her regarding the cruelty and the idiocy of the objects of her scorn.

Andrea used to call her the Mussel. She got the nickname from a poem she said we read in twelfth-grade English. I didn't remember it, but then, I missed a lot of school that year. Its gist was that some people open up, so to speak, as they age. They don't weaken, although something that may resemble weakness grows in them, until it—this seemingly-weak-but-actually-not quality—comes to define them.

Andrea printed this poem and posted it with a magnet to the fridge. She'd glance at it meaningfully whenever Mom visited. *The Mussel!* she mouthed when Mom's back was turned.

As this poem has it, the apertures of certain people's eyes widen as they age, and instead of continuing to cling to their illusions of control, they embrace what's outside them, i.e., the world. Which, the poem implies, is the preferable scenario for getting old. Alternatively, though, some aging people grow increasingly frightened, becoming like mussels, or clams, hiding from what surrounds them, seeking to repel it, and the only way these people will ever open up is if they get steamed, or pried open with a knife.

The Mussel! And back then, I called her that too.

Mom stopped working when she moved here. We use some of her SSI to pay the rent. Several days a week, she walks to the library, as she did in Petaluma, to sit for hours reading the periodicals, and, because the library offers a service where anyone can print five dollars of material per day for free, she prints articles from *Mother Jones* and *In These Times* and *Dissent* and *Truthout*, which accumulate throughout the apartment in tall stacks. And as she did for years in Petaluma, she stands on a busy street corner every Friday afternoon with a sign, which in the past would've said things like REGIME CHANGE BEGINS AT HOME, or IT'S WE THE PEOPLE, NOT WE THE SHEEPLE!, or WE DESERVE A HUNDRED YEARS OF SADNESS, or OUR GRANDCHILDREN WILL NOT FORGIVE US, or ONE EARTH, ONE GLOBE, ONE WORLD, ONE PLANET. Since she moved here, though, her sign always displays the same message, a question Grace Lee Boggs asked in a speech Mom saw her give years before I was born. The letters are painted in frank ambulance colors, red on white: WHAT TIME IS IT ON THE CLOCK OF THE WORLD?

*

Wendell likes to say that Remember When is the lowest form of conversation, which, I eventually learned, he plagiarized from Tony Soprano. But back when he'd call me from Dartmouth and then afterwards, when he was starting at McKinsey, he loved playing Remember When, as long as it was on his terms. It was late in California when he'd make these calls and so even later for him. Remember those awful places where we lived as kids? he would say. Remember the awful food we ate, and the awful clothes we wore, and the awful cars Mom drove? Remember the fleas, the cockroaches, the mice, the rats, the black mold all over the drapes and the walls? Remember how cold it got in the winter, and how hot in the summer? Remember how Mom would lock me in the bedroom when I was little, because, she said, I was being impossible and she needed a minute to think? And how she'd lock herself in the bathroom, also supposedly to think? Remember the holes I kicked in the bathroom and bedroom doors? Remember how I used to shit my pants all the time, when I was way too old to be doing that? Remember the psycho rescue dogs she adopted, including the pitiful one—what was its name, again?—that leapt out the second-story window and somehow survived? Remember the endless vigils and marches and rallies and boycotts, and the constant, interminable meetings? The unyielding emergency that, apparently, was life on this earth? Remember how we were always sunburnt and late—with the rent, for school: everything—and coughing, feverish? And how we learned not to stay up too late—you taught me this!—learned to go to bed before we got too hungry to do anything but lie for hours in the dark, horribly wakeful, staring at the ceiling, or the wall? Remember how you and I slept together on the foldout couch? Remember how, later, we took turns sleeping on the floor, except most nights you'd let me have the bed?

And I'd say yes, of course. I was there too, you know.

At one apartment, I taught him to shove the clothes he planned to wear in the morning into a drawer at night, so they wouldn't absorb the apartment's smell. Then, for good measure, we got up early, lay the clothes on the floor, and misted them with Febreze. "I still dream about giving some of those places a deep-clean," Wendell said once on the phone from Manhattan. "I'd like to go back and scrape those baseboards clean with, like, a credit card." I wasn't sure if he meant *dream* literally or figuratively. I had only a vague notion of what baseboards were.

"Look, he hates us," Mom said around this time, and when I asked what she meant, she said I already knew. "Come on, stupid! Use your brain." She laughed. "I don't even think it's personal. He hates us because we're poor."

*

He often sent money after these phone calls, as he did on Josie's birthday and sometimes mine. He said he wanted to help pay for Josie's college or contribute to a down payment. I told him I'd save it but that was mostly untrue. After one of these checks arrived, I usually drove to Golden Gate Fields. Josie was young, in elementary school, and she'd gotten into horses. I'd wake her up early and tell her we'd be playing hooky today. *Maybe we'll strike it rich,* I'd say. I was kidding, of course. I always made that clear. Today was opposite day, backwards day. We were taking a chance. It was a game, after all. I wanted to seem unaffected, *playful.* We'd drive to Berkeley, and I'd let her pick a horse to bet on. Then, high in the grandstands, I'd spend the afternoon drinking marked-up cans of Hamm's and Josie would munch on a hot dog as, down below, horses dashed around the track.

*

On Monday, Josie comes to stay with us. She spends the week preparing for a debate tournament from which she returns on Saturday evening with a trophy. Mom adds to her stacks of paper from the library and goes dumpster-diving twice behind Whole Foods.

One afternoon I see her on the corner with her sign. And for a moment—because I'm not expecting to see her, I guess, even though it's Friday, so of course she's here—I don't recognize her. Sometimes she chants, though less so than years ago. Today she just stands there grinning as cars drive by, the bill of her hat shading all of her face but her mouth, making her smile look weird, distended.

She hasn't noticed me. No one honks in approval of her, but neither does anyone lower their window and yell, the way they did in Petaluma. This sign is more gnomic than the ones she held in the past, less likely to elicit a drive-by response. "What time *is* it on the clock of the world?" I asked her once, and she rolled her eyes and said, "Very funny."

She looks very old—dazed, shrunken. When the light changes, I honk and she turns, nodding at the oncoming traffic. But she still hasn't seen me. She stares straight ahead, adjusting her grip on her sign.

*

She doesn't sneak out again until Josie is back at Andrea's. This will prove to be the pattern: she only goes when Josie's not staying with us, when there's less of a possibility of someone noticing her.

I put on weight when things with Andrea were falling apart, so now, riding my bike, I'm breathing hard, pedaling slowly enough to stay at a distance from Mom but fast enough to keep her in sight. Following her like this is less conspicuous than driving, I think. She moves with surprising speed, headed south, toward the beach. When she gets there, she leans her bike against a squat, leafless tree so plastered with seabird shit, its branches seem to glow in the dark.

The beach is empty. I set my bike down and crouch behind some dune grass. Twenty yards ahead, Mom drops her backpack and takes off her sweatpants and sweatshirt.

She has a wetsuit on underneath. The moon has waned since the first night I saw her leave on her bike, but I can just make her out in the dark, her bare arms and shoulders, which, it occurs to me, I haven't seen since Wen and I were kids. They look smooth, not flabby or crepey as I would've expected. Muscly. She pulls on a swim cap and walks toward the water, fiddling with something at the back of her head, a strobing red light.

She wades in. And then she pushes out and starts to swim.

People swim at this beach all summer long. I used to wade here with Josie, although every time my main thought was that we should get out as soon as possible. The water is muddy-looking, greenish brown, its surface iridescent with oil or some other filth. It looks roiled for some reason; you can't see anything in it.

Within a few minutes she's farther out than I've ever gone. I had no idea she could swim like that—cutting cleanly through the dark water, leaving almost no wake. For just a moment I think of taking a photo of her or trying to film her on my phone. But even if you could see her in the dark, you'd never be able to tell it was her. I can really only see the red light strapped to her head. But eventually, maybe a hundred yards out, she stops, treads water for a minute or so, then turns and swims back.

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I don't feel tired, not now, but my thoughts have a pre-sleep grain, as thoughts do on the edge of sleep, when each one melts into the next. I watch Mom get out of the water and towel off, then follow her back to the apartment, but when she goes

inside, I keep coasting down the street and open the driver's side door of my car.

I have no real sense of how deep the bay gets. Plus, of course, she could've gotten robbed coming or going from the beach, or could've drowned. I'm not really thinking about any of that, though. What I'm thinking, if you can call it thought—it's nervier than that, spooked—is that if I go inside right now and try to ask her what's going on, what she thinks she's doing, I might not recognize her. I mean this literally. I have the weird sense that if I go find her in the kitchen, say, with her back to me, and tap her on the shoulder, the person who'll turn around somehow won't be her.

She brought Wen and me to the public pool in Petaluma sometimes but never got in. I remember her sitting in a strip of grass by a chain-link fence, standing and carrying her plastic chair to follow the shade when it moved. The only relevant memory I can think of is when she taught me to swim when I was a kid, not even two, probably. I say she taught me, but that must've happened later, when I was slightly older; back then, she was just trying to get me comfortable in the water.

This was an indoor pool on 19th Avenue, before we left the city. She walked me back and forth in the shallow end, holding me in front of her, facing her, and sometimes, to startle me into holding my breath, she blew a quick puff of air in my face and dunked me underwater for a second or two. None of these are firsthand memories, of course. If they seem that way, it's only because when I was a kid she told me this story, if it's even a story, so many times.

The pool building was at least a hundred years old, constructed of pale concrete. The light inside had a green tint, something to do with how it reflected off the water and the mildew on the walls. What's stayed with me most is her confidence moving through the shallow water, her assuredness; although of course, as I said, I must not actually remember.

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6/3
4:06am

Hey, Wendell. Sorry it's so early. Well, I guess it's not that early for you. Anyway, call me back.

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"Another ride last night?" I ask Mom before leaving for work.

She nods.

"More scratchers?"

"No," she says, her voice light, indifferent. She pours herself a mug of coffee, pulls back the chair across from me, and sits. "What keeps happening lately is, I can't sleep," she says. "And so I get up and go for a ride, and before I know it, I'm on the other side of town. And it's funny—I've started doing something I did as a kid. I talk to myself." She really does seem to find this funny: she lets out a small, perplexed laugh. "When I was a kid," she says, "if I had to walk somewhere, to or from school, I'd make an elaborate argument against, like, the war, rehearsing what I'd say to Aunt Ada, or whoever, sort of practicing for if we got into a debate. And I got very vehement. Then, later, when I actually saw Ada, I'd use some of what I came up with before."

It's true that she's always been a terrible liar, but she isn't obviously lying now. She doesn't seem twitchy, eager to change the subject. No—what she's saying, or how she says it, sounds so plausible, I almost doubt my own fresh memory.

"Anyway," she says, "who wants to know?"

*

The Mussel, the Mussel! Andrea and I used to say. But I'd forgotten about that until earlier this year, when Josie joined the debate team. Her coach, a twenty-nine-year-old who decided after graduating from law school that she had no interest in being an attorney, had begun sending Andrea and me excited emails about Josie's prospects. "*I believe in Josie!*" Ms. Polley wrote. She was on track to go to the state and maybe even the national championship. Ms. Polley had lobbied the school board to pay part of Josie's tuition at a summer debate camp in Michigan and wanted to know if Andrea and I could pay the difference. We could work out a payment plan, Ms. Polley said. And if Josie got good enough, many colleges had semisecret means of fast-tracking admission for talented debaters, and even semisecret scholarship programs. "Almost no one knows this," Ms. Polley wrote, "but at the top schools, being a college debater is basically like being a college athlete."

Andrea called me after Ms. Polley wrote that Josie was "quite possibly the most intellectually mature student I've ever met."

"Isn't this only this woman's second year teaching?" Andrea said.

"Maybe she's counting students she met when she was a student too," I said.

"I'm not sure how comfortable with this I am," Andrea said. "When Jo talks now, I keep hearing the Mussel's voice. Your mother," she quickly added, as if suddenly worried I wouldn't remember what she was talking about.

But Josie hadn't begun to harden the way Mom was hardened, if indeed Mom was. I wasn't convinced of that anymore. Anyway, I was glad. Hey, the problem with me, I almost said, is I'm not nearly hardened enough.

"What is this really about?" I said.

The tournaments that Josie attends on weekends take place all over California, mostly within a couple hours of where we live but sometimes as far as Los Angeles. The cost of attending these is also partially covered by her school, and Andrea and I take turns paying the difference, which I, at least, put on credit cards. At each tournament, Josie pushes around a luggage card that holds two extra-large plastic tubs filled with evidence, organized into dozens of manila folders, and wears a navy-blue pantsuit that we bought on clearance at Ross that makes her look like an embattled female politician.

"Spit it out," she says when I take too long to get to the point. In conversation she ostentatiously deploys words she's recently learned: *ignominious, indefatigable, preterition, amphibology.*

She and Mom fight constantly. The story of the twentieth century, Josie has taken to claiming, was fundamentally about the elimination of the masses' ability to affect, let alone effect, anything: anything concerning their lives, their country, the world. "Take the New Deal, for instance," Josie says. "It has two parts, right? And the first part is the part from the thirties, which everyone, or at least everyone who's white, likes, where they create the WPA and get us out of the Great Depression and give everyone jobs. But then there's a second, much less talked about, part, from the late forties, where the government establishes all these new agencies—the National Security Council, the Department of Defense, the Council of Economic Advisers—which are created, in essence, to ensure that ordinary Americans will have zero say over what the US does in the world, or over their own lives."

It's early evening and they've both just gotten home, Josie from preparing for her next tournament at the high school and Mom from the library. They sit on the couch, Mom's pile of blankets pushed to one side, their respective stacks of papers set on the floor. "And so yeah," Josie says. "One way of telling the story of the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries, at least when it comes to

the administrative state, is that the same thing just keeps happening in more spheres over time. Which is one big reason everything feels so fucking weird now. Because regardless of what we say or do, we have no actual impact on anything."

"This is satire, right?" Mom says. Josie just laughs.

"You're joking. Please tell me this is a joke."

Another pinched laugh.

"God. I wish you could hear how you sound."

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6/14
7:59pm

Hey Wendell. I just wanted to say: when I've been calling you lately, I haven't been secretly wanting to ask about money. Just in case that's how it seems. Really. I just want to talk to you. Like, what are you doing right now? Right at this moment? Where are you?

Okay. Call me back.

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6/17
8:02pm

Hi again. Also, I wanted to say that sometimes, when you'd send money before, all I'd do was use it to take Josie and Andrea out to a restaurant, or take Josie to the movies, or whatever. Or we'd go to Target and just walk around, and I wouldn't try to, like, usher her past the aisles where I knew there was stuff she'd want or plan my route through the store to avoid certain areas. We'd just stroll around. And if she spotted something and said she wanted it, instead of negotiating with her, or trying to distract her, or straight up denying her, I'd say sure, yes. And she'd stare at me in surprise, confusion, as if she'd just pushed at a door she thought was locked or would otherwise offer a lot of resistance and it swung open. And I loved that—being able to say yes to her. It was basically just nice—

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6/17
8:05pm

Sorry, got cut off. But yes. To feel like that, like I could do that. It was really, really nice. Not having to think, or having that spell of not-thinking eventually bite you in the ass. And again, my point here isn't to ask you to send me money now, or even to ask to borrow anything. I just wanted to tell you that. I think it's important for you to know. I'd go to the racetrack, but that wasn't all.

We'd go out to eat. Or order takeout, even. And what I'd do was I'd overorder significantly, just in terms of how much I knew the three of us would eat. So if we were getting pizza, I'd get not just one large pizza but two, or three, even, thinking that way we'd have a lot more than enough and plenty of leftovers. That, at least, is what I would've said if someone'd asked. Oftentimes what actually happened was I'd make myself finish it all, or else I'd throw away whatever we didn't eat. Which felt good, too—to waste it, if that makes sense, and to feel like I could, and that it really didn't matter. And so yes. I'd get more than enough pizza, which freed me but also Josie and Andrea to have more than we ordinarily would, and not to keep thinking of it—freed us, that is, not to keep mentally gauging how many pieces we'd each already eaten, and whether we'd had more or less than our share, and, therefore, potentially, to leave the last slice or two for someone else, at least until the others said, Oh, no, go ahead, I'm full.

And I'd get appetizers also, and a salad, even when I knew the salads weren't that good—

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6/17
8:08pm

Sorry. But yes. I just liked that feeling. And it was also, if I'm being honest, a bit of an aphrodisiac, I have to say. Not the food so much as the surplus of it all.

Um. Yes. All I know is after these feasts—that's what Andrea and Josie called them: Oh, my god, look at this feast!*—after we'd eaten and cleaned up and put Josie to bed, Andrea and I would be let's say quite a bit more charged up than was usual by that point.*

Ha. I'm kidding, sort of. But also not.

Anyway. Call me back.

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6/22
7:51pm

Hi. So, I guess I figured that at some point, the sheer number of missed calls and messages would be too much even for you to ignore. But I guess it's just very clear that you're so wrapped up in whatever you're wrapped up in that you don't have five minutes *to acknowledge something's up.*

I'm trying to imagine it. Do you look at your phone and see that it's me and put your phone away and wait for it to stop buzzing? And then delete the message I leave? What are you doing*? Honestly—*

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6/22
7:54pm

Hi. On the other hand, though, part of me thinks, Is he okay*? Like, where are you? And if you're truly incapable of dealing with me right now, why not just text me later and say, I don't know, that you're sorry, you're not ignoring me, you know that's how it seems, but you've just got so much going on right now, you're completely overwhelmed, and you kind of can't deal with whatever I'm calling to tell you, but you promise when you can you'll call me back. Or even just that everything's great, your life is wonderful, very full—so full, in fact, that you've been horrible about getting back to anyone, but you will, you promise. I don't know. Just* lie.

*

I used to drive up to Petaluma about once a week, partly to check on Mom and take her to appointments and partly to convince her to come to Alameda. Afterwards, I'd drive around town for a while instead of heading home. By then, Wendell had stopped answering most of my calls, so I'd try not to call him, though more often than not, I did, and when he didn't answer I'd leave a message, usually of the Remember When variety. Remember when we brought home those tadpoles we caught at Lynch Creek and let them swim in the sink, wanting to

keep them as pets? And we tried to fill a fishbowl with water, but the bowl didn't fit under the faucet, and, struggling with it, we knocked aside the plug and the tadpoles all drained away? Remember when we came home one day to see a crew of men cutting down the trees in front of our apartment building, which shaded our front window, because without telling us, the landlord had arranged to have them all cut down, and Mom ran out of the car screaming at them?

I'd drive by different places that we used to live, and the elementary school and the high school, and where the movie theater used to be, and the Phoenix (originally an opera house, Houdini supposedly performed there), where punk bands from around the county would play. And I'd drive through the subdivision that backed onto one of our apartment buildings, on Western Avenue.

The houses there took forever to get built. There was some holdup, construction stalled for a while, and the whole time we lived there, the half-built houses stood empty. I used to walk through them after school and on weekends. I was Josie's age, maybe slightly younger. Sometimes I'd run into other kids, or people camping out there, and I definitely found their sleeping bags and tarps tucked between the bare beams, but generally I didn't see anyone else. It's as if whoever started building the development had forgotten about it, or lost interest. The frames of the houses looked flimsy, as if a strong wind would topple them, and people had written their names with Sharpies on the cheap exposed wood and sometimes their phone numbers and little messages.

Eventually I started bringing Andrea with me. We hadn't had sex yet or anything. I mean, we probably hadn't even kissed yet. We waited for what felt like a long time to so much as kiss because we said we were afraid of ruining things between us. We'd stop at Fairwest Market after school and buy samosas and a half-pint of chocolate milk and a few rolls of sour candies. Andrea bought them, I should say. And sometimes we brought some shitty weed that Andrea stole from her older brother's bedroom or a bottle of cheap red wine from her mom's wine cellar, which we'd drink in rough swigs, taking turns, spitting out bits of cork that broke off while she or I fumbled with the corkscrew.

Petaluma gets windy around three in the afternoon. It's like clockwork. The winds off the coast rush inland as the temperature there drops, which was really something to hear in the weird acoustics of those half-built houses. A given room would be both echoey and not, so many different resonances. We'd walk around listening to the wind rustle and whistle and hum, and sometimes we'd sing loudly, at the top of our lungs, trying to be funny and later almost unthinkingly. We

sang whatever came to mind: pop songs that were new then, corny classic rock, TV jingles for insurance companies, fast food. Or songs by bands that played at the Phoenix a handful of times, then disappeared. What I realized then was I only really knew all the words to a paltry number of songs. Sometimes it seemed as if the only songs whose words I really knew were ones Mom sang me when I was little: Leadbelly, Jean Ritchie, Nina Simone, Neil Young.

I understood that even though these places were being built shittily, whoever would eventually live in them would have to have money, and accordingly, I hated those people, those future people. I remember thinking this as we walked over a stretch of dry dirt on which a small play structure would soon be built. The late light coming through the beams of the houses we passed was complicated, shadowy. I remember imagining we were in a movie, that my head was a camera and whatever I saw was on-screen—that this was a scene in a movie, the opening shots, before the plot kicks in, my favorite part. And walking around thinking like this, I decided to curse the future residents of these houses, for their wealth, their luck. Standing with Andrea in what would someday be one of their garages, I started saying these curses out loud, wishing terrible accidents on them, first whispering, then speaking at a more or less normal volume, then almost shouting. Miscarriages, car crashes, kidnappings: I wished for their luck, all of it, to run out, and my hatred was abstract, schematic, but nonetheless terribly intimate. I tried to be inventive with what I said, both what I envisioned and how I said it, and tried, here too, to make Andrea laugh, and after a moment she did, loudly, and did not seem to be faking it.

And now, driving by so many years afterward, I could see who had ended up living in those houses, which had begun to look a little weathered. Through their windows I saw them eating dinner, watching TV.

*

I open my laptop a little after two in the morning and type: *Can you open water swim at night*. The first answer that comes up is no, not unless you have a death wish. But as I keep looking, I find other, more encouraging answers. Someone with the handle gnome4677 has written that you can't see anything when you're out in the water at night, but the truth is you don't need to. I mean, that's kind of the whole point, what makes it worth doing. Exactly, someone with the handle Dawn_Treader has replied. I say if you're at all inclined, go for it. Just surrender

to the night, let the night take care of you. It's the most incredible feeling. You feel like you're swimming in outer space.

How deep is the SF bay, I type, yielding depth charts indicating that aside from the seafloor directly under the Golden Gate Bridge, which is hundreds of feet deep, the bay is mostly quite shallow, twelve to fifteen feet on average. *How many sharks in the SF bay,* I type, which, unsurprisingly, receives no definitive answer, although a website for a business called Pacific Open Water Swim Co. states that the most commonly found sharks in the bay pose almost no risk to swimmers, and that there's been no confirmed reports of shark attacks in the bay's history. I try to decide if the fact that this information comes from a business promoting open water swimming makes it more or less reliable. *Common urban activities like driving or cycling,* the site explains, *and even lightning strikes statistically present greater risks than encountering sharks in the bay.*

How cold is the water in the SF bay, I type, even though as I do, I register that, first of all, whenever I've seen her swimming Mom has worn that wetsuit, and also that instead of looking up these answers now, in the morning I can go feel the water myself. I don't stop reading, though. *The ocean off San Francisco is at its warmest from mid-August to late September, when the temperature averages 60 degrees Fahrenheit (15.5 degrees Celsius),* one website says. *The coolest months are January and February, when the sea temperature is typically at 53 ˚F (11.7 ˚C.)*

*

"Or look at colonies of rodents," I hear Mom saying the following evening, when I open the front door. "Or the migration of birds. Or how many different herds of deer will converge from across vast territories to ward off predators or cross rivers together. Or how pods of whales—sperm whales, I think—form a ring around their young to protect them from orcas. And the rings they form, if you could see them from overheard, look like flowers, a flower shape. And they face inward, their tails swatting the orcas away."

The table between her and Josie is covered with olives and pickles that she's scavenged from behind Whole Foods and the trophy Josie won at a debate tournament earlier that day. The trophy is a consolation prize, Josie will tell me in a few days, after I receive an email from Ms. Polley about the payment plan for debate camp in Michigan. Josie fell just short of qualifying for the state championships this year. She drew a blank in the middle of her last round, she'll

tell me. She doesn't know what happened—she just choked. "But it's not gonna happen again," she'll say, and I'll smile, trying to decide if she believes this herself.

Mom reaches for another olive. The driver of evolution, she says, isn't actually competition but instead mutual support, cooperation. "*Not* love," she says. "That's really important to make clear. That's not what I'm saying at all. It's not *love* that moves a herd of horses to form a ring to fend off a pack of wolves, or kittens and lambs to play with each other, or birds to gather in flocks. Nor is it love that would move me, if I saw our neighbor's house on fire, to run and try and put out the flames. Because I don't love them, and I don't need to."

She chews, swallows. "And—yes," she says. "None of this impulse toward cooperation, or whatever, has much of anything to do with *love*. The relevant feeling is more capacious than that and, I think, more profound. Because when you stop and think about it, love is actually very *personal*. Very small."

*

In the morning, I push the x-ray machine into another patient's room, where a ten-year-old who broke his leg playing soccer lies in bed, his mother on one side and his grandmother on the other. The boy's eyes shift between me and the machine. "Are you a robot?" he says.

It sounds like a joke, but that's just his voice. "Yep!" I say without deciding to, and everyone but him laughs. "*Beep boop!*" I say, making some stiff robot movements. More chuckling. "Wow, you're so realistic!" the grandmother says.

On the radio driving home, the ancient scientist says that on other planets, storms last for hundreds of years. On Saturn, they last for centuries, he says, although the title of the longest-lasting storm, at least in our solar system, goes to the Great Red Spot on Jupiter, which has been observed for over three hundred years, a massive anticyclone so large that Earth could fit inside it. *But how is that still a storm? What's the definition of a storm?* I think, except I realize I'm speaking out loud in the otherwise empty car.

In Alameda I drive to the beach. I park in the South Shore Center, in front of Sushi House and Big 5 Sporting Goods. The vast parking lot is almost empty. The days have gotten long enough now that the sun won't set for another hour. I hurry across the street, onto the beach, where a cluster of seagulls hovers maybe ten feet off the ground, all trying to fly away but held in place by the wind or else veering sideways, downward.

It's strange seeing other people here: two old, preposterously fit men running by, and some barefoot kids by the water, pawing at the sand, trying to catch the tiny crabs that surface when a wave withdraws. I pull off my shoes and socks. I'm still wearing my scrubs, but no one seems to notice or care. I roll up my wide pant legs as best as I can and step into the water, which isn't nearly as cold as I'd expected it to be. My feet sink into the wet sucking sand and, for a second, I wonder if I'm going to swim here too: right now, if I'll crash back onto the beach, take off my clothes, then head again for the water.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. It's Wendell, finally. When I answer, still standing in the water, facing out, he's saying my name, only that, as if he's already said it many times.

"Finally!" I say, aiming for sarcasm but missing.

"My guy," Wendell says. "What's up? I just got home and I'm seeing all these messages from you."

He sounds exactly like himself, except very slightly deeper, raspier. Because he's older, of course, I think.

"You just got home?" I say.

"Yeah, man," Wendell says. "I was at this retreat thing, upstate. No phones or internet or anything. And it was silent, a silent retreat. I just got back. Hey, where *are* you? I can barely hear you. It's so loud."

"And how long?"

"What's that?"

"How long was it? The retreat?"

"Oh. Two weeks. You okay? You sound off."

I look down at where my shins disappear in the water. "I thought you couldn't hear me," I say.

In the short silence that follows, I turn and slosh back to the beach and sit on a snarl of driftwood, leaning on my knees to shield the phone from the wind.

"No, I can," Wendell says. "Listen, I'm sorry. I am. I know you've been calling. There's been all this stuff at work. On top of which, I moved again, right before this retreat. I really am sorry. But hey!" His voice brightens, and suddenly a chuckle runs through everything he says. "What's up? I haven't listened to these messages yet. Do I have to? Can you give me, like, the thirty-second summary?"

"Um."

"I'm kidding, of course."

"I know," I say. "But also, you're not."

"No, I am!" he says. "I'll listen to them. Look, I'm *sorry*. But just to give you an idea of my busyness lately—I have this friend who wants to run this *triathlon* with me, which he's done a shit-ton of times, but I haven't ever, and inexplicably I said yes, but haven't been training, or barely, and it's in two weeks."

His voice has gotten louder; he's almost shouting. I'm sure there's a lot I'm unable to hear against the wind, but in the background, I think I can hear two or three other voices.

"Yeah, don't worry about it," I say. "They're basically all just me saying hi, how are you, a million times."

"Well, I *am,* though. I am worried." Then he lets out a sharp laugh. "God*dam*mit! Hey, hold on."

His voice recedes, becomes unintelligible, though I can hear the music of him bantering with whoever else is there, his high, playful voice.

"Hey, sorry," he says after maybe a minute. "God, it's *weird*, using my voice again. I literally just got back to the city an hour ago. But I should probably go. *Stop* it!" he says, laughing again. "Not you. Sorry. Can I call you tomorrow, maybe?"

*

He isn't the kind of person who goes on silent retreats. And he's moved again, though presumably not out of New York. I could call him back, I briefly think, and ask who's there with him in the background, what they're all doing. Or I could tell him about Josie, whom he didn't even ask about. Or Mom. But suddenly, the idea of describing the situation with her seems out of the question. He wouldn't understand what I was trying to say, I mean that literally somehow. He wouldn't comprehend it. And even if he did, he wouldn't believe me.

It just seems, I think, dusting off my bare feet with my dirty socks, so *private*. Not like a secret but almost. As if I'd overheard her praying—as if I'd stood outside a door, listening in, then asked her to explain.

*

6/28
6:38am

Hey, ass-wipe. You never called me back! I knew you wouldn't.

*

7/1
7:41pm

Hey, I've been meaning to ask—where'd you move to? What's your new address? I want to look it up on Google Maps. And what floor are you on? And do you have a view?
Okay. Bye.

*

7/3
6:50am

Hey, Wen. Hope you're doing okay. I was just thinking. Remember how at the beginning of the month Mom would sometimes say: The calendar pages just keep flying off the wall*? Well, she said that again today, this morning, and I thought of you. And also, remember how, on the first really hot day of summer, she'd say:* Winter is suddenly so far away, behind, ahead*? She said that too, the other day. What is that, even? Is she quoting something?*
Okay. Call me back.

*

Or maybe it *is* a secret: our own minuscule society. A week passes, then another, and a letter from the leasing company arrives, informing us that in the coming months our rent will increase drastically, which means we'll have to move again. During the day, Mom and I email each other apartment listings on Craigslist, and at night I follow her whenever she leaves and she never notices me, unless she does and acts like she doesn't. Sometimes I wonder if that's what's actually happening. In any case, we don't discuss it, address it, acknowledge it. She keeps swimming farther out into the bay, and I keep thinking I'll say something to her, but don't, because I don't want to. What I really want is for this to keep going on.

Sometimes I wonder if she won't come back. Not because she'll drown, but because she'll make it all the way across. This is impossible, probably, that part of the bay is so wide, but still. Or some nights, watching her draw back in

toward Alameda, I imagine she might never come ashore, that somehow she'll never arrive.

*

The bay's choppy tonight, wind-whipped, and mostly dark, though in places the light off the clouds forms fat columns on its surface, making the water seem like something living. I crouch and watch. The fog is so fine it seems less like a texture than an odor—of seaweed, night-blooming jasmine, wet sand. And you can see the surf and it too seems to glow, rapid but unimpressive, *swish-swish-swish*.

She keeps getting smaller. I've lost count of the number of times I've watched this now. But soon she'll turn and swim back. She'll scramble out of the water, peel off her wetsuit. Often, she just stands there for a while, her back turned, hands on hips. Some nights I can hear her laughing.