

AVA DELLAIRA

in

SEARCH

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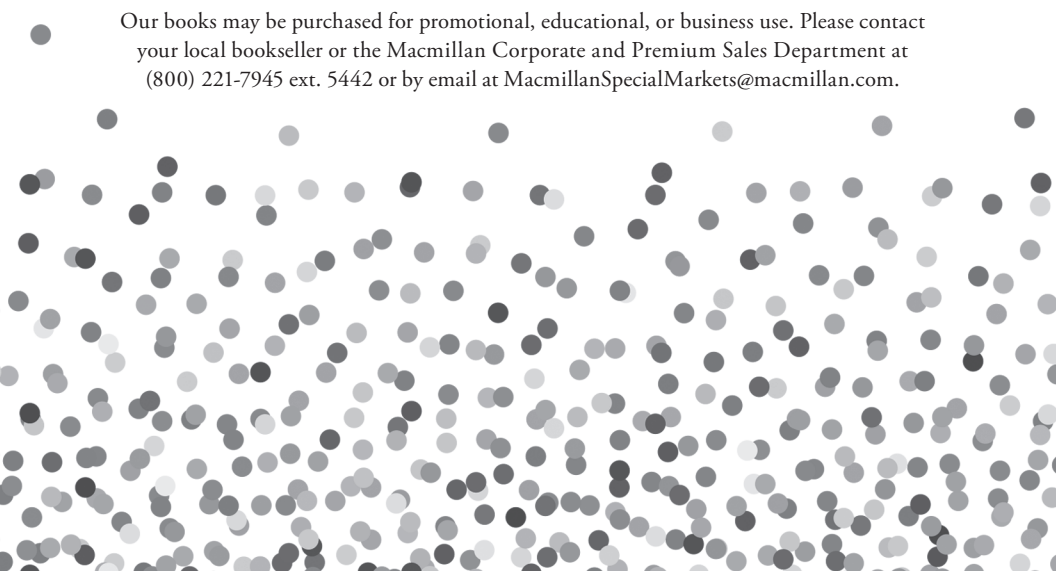
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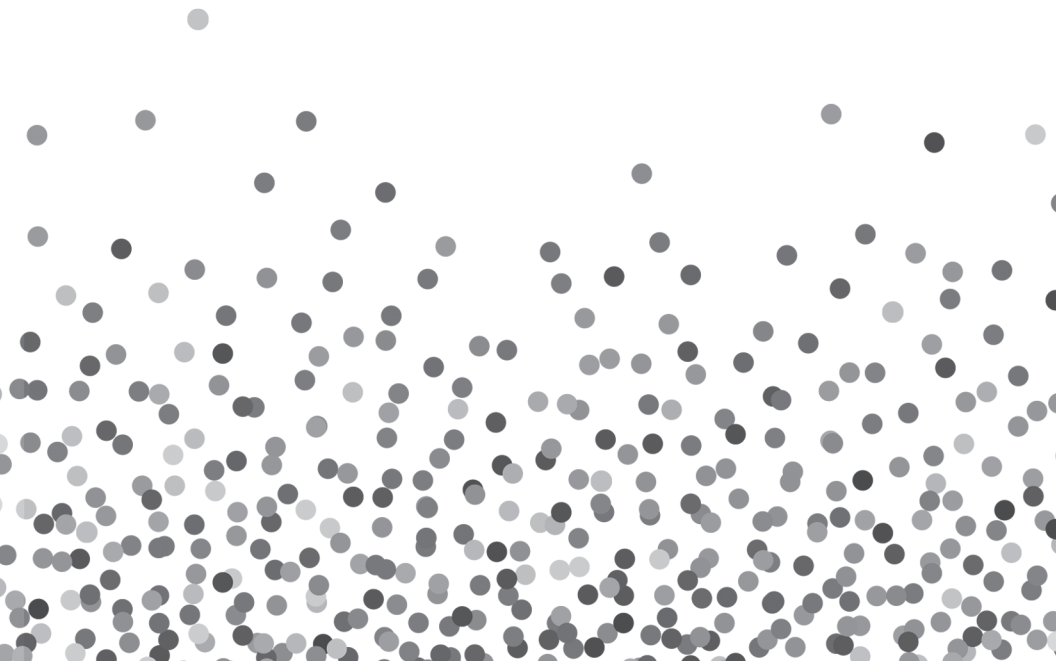
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For my husband, Doug Hall





Prologue

ANGIE

Behind every man now alive stand thirty ghosts, for that is the ratio by which the dead outnumber the living.

—ARTHUR C. CLARKE, 2001: *A Space Odyssey*

The living are catching up with the dead. Back when Arthur C. Clarke was writing in 1968, they had us outnumbered by thirty to one. But now, we living humans have multiplied so quickly, we're down to fifteen ghosts apiece. Angie knows the facts: there are over 7 billion people alive, and 107 billion who once were.

Angie's dad is one of the dead, or so she'd believed. She'd often imagined him beside her, the leader of her little ghost tribe, fifteen strong. She pictured him the way he is in the photograph with her mom. He looks the same age she is now: seventeen. His smile wide and bright, his skin dark and his teeth white, his body muscular and long. He wears a backward baseball cap, like a '90s dork, she thinks. In the photo, he and her mom, Marilyn, are at the ocean, on a boardwalk. Her mom's wearing overalls over her bikini, hoop earrings glinting, long sun-gold hair falling around her pale face. She's leaning against him like she belongs there, her head thrown back in laughter, his arm draped over her shoulder. All that blue water behind them, seeming to go on until it meets the sky.

She first discovered the picture a year ago, while she was getting ready for Sam Stone's sixteenth birthday dinner. She'd been rifling through her mom's drawers looking for lipstick while

Marilyn was at work, and at some point the search expanded. She found herself digging, though she didn't know for what. Then, at the back of her mom's underwear drawer, she found a wooden box. Inside was a worn manila envelope stuffed full and sealed, and beneath it, the photograph.

Angie stared down at the grinning black boy who was staring back at her, and though she'd never seen him before, she knew her father instantly. For a split second, she wondered who he was with. As it came into focus, Angie saw that, of course, the girl was her mom. She looked so carefree. Young. Full of possibility. Happy.

Suddenly Angie's chest felt hollow. She wanted to pull the boy out of the photo. To make him grow up into a man, to make him be her dad. To make him make her mom smile like that again.

Instead she tried to put herself inside of the picture—to imagine what it would have been like to be there with her parents—how the sun would have felt, how the ocean might have smelled. And though she's never even been to the beach before, she could almost hear the far-off sound of the waves under their bright laughter.

Angie has one more year of high school, and then comes The Future. She has no idea what she wants to “do with her life,” where she belongs, or how she'll ever be enough to make good on everything her mom has given up for her. When she finds herself struggling to breathe, her chest tight, the anxiety nameless and uncertain, Angie thinks of the seven billion

humans and counting living on earth. The unfathomable numbers ease the panic, and she starts to feel light—the kind of light-headed that you get from laughing too hard or staying up too late, or both at once. She’s smaller than a drop in an ocean. So what does it matter what one girl—Angela Miller—does with her life?

She considers herself average, unremarkable: she likes history and science (particularly biology), running hard, grilled cheese with burned edges, soccer, coffee with soy cream, vinyl records, hip-hop blasting in the privacy of her headphones; she comes armed with lists like this, prepared for the necessary profiles, meant to give some practiced but tenuous definition to “herself,” whoever that is. The feelings that loom inside her, threatening to spill over, she had diligently learned to keep at bay. But today, everything will change.

Angie holds the photograph of her parents in her hands now, listening to Janet Jackson sing “I Get Lonely” on a Walkman she found at a Goodwill for \$2.99. The song plays from a mixtape labeled FOR MISS MARI MACK, LOVE, JAMES in faded blue pen. The early-morning sun is already turning too hot, piercing, chasing Angie into the shaded part of the porch. Flecks of cotton drift through the warm air, pooling in the gutters like summer snow. In front of her sits a duffel bag with T-shirts and socks, underwear, and her two favorite dresses carefully folded inside, along with the envelope from her mom’s drawer and the listings for Justin Bell between the ages of twenty-four and thirty-five, or of unknown age, living in the Los Angeles area.

Marilyn left for work almost an hour ago. When she comes back, she'll find her daughter gone.

Angie has lived in this house with her mom since the day Marilyn picked her up from fifth grade and told her she had a surprise.

"What is it?" Angie asked, when Marilyn didn't produce any of the usual treats—a Milky Way, gummy bears, a chapter book, or a new set of colored pencils.

"Just wait," her mom answered, "this is the best surprise yet."

She got on I-40, then pulled off and drove through Albuquerque's Old Town, a part of the city they visited only when Angie wanted to go to the natural history museum. Were they going now? But no, her mom was weaving through streets with huge cottonwood trees and ivy-covered houses. And then, as they reached the edge of the neighborhood and the houses started to get smaller—little flat adobes with nicely kept yards—she parked in a driveway. The house was short and squat, with a blue roof.

Angie turned to her mom. "Come on!" Marilyn urged, girlish excitement in her voice.

Angie followed her mom up to the front door as Marilyn fumbled with her key ring. Whose house were they at?

As the lock clicked open, Marilyn looked at Angie and said, "Go on, go inside. It's ours."

She was only ten, but Angie understood then that her mom had given her what she herself had never had—a house to grow up in. The two of them painted it together: blue in the

living room, yellow in the kitchen. Ocean green in Angie's bedroom.

Angie's always loved the thick walls that stay cool through the summer mornings, the rounded archways, the worn paisley couch where she and Marilyn would stay up on weekends watching romantic comedies, eating popcorn sprinkled with Parmesan or frozen root beer float bars.

When she was little, Angie believed she had the kind of mom other kids ought to be jealous of—one who packed the best lunches, with carefully made sandwiches cut into triangles, and made the best brownies for bake sales. She'd wake Angie in the mornings when Angie didn't want to get out of bed by blasting "Dancing in the Street," and together they'd spin around the house laughing in their pajamas. Her mom decorated for the holidays, including New Year's and Halloween. Every Fourth of July she'd make red-white-and-blue cupcakes and cook hot dogs in the pan. She'd buy sparklers, and once it got dark enough, Marilyn and Angie would stand outside in their garden, writing their names with the glittering wands. It didn't strike Angie as strange then, when she was a kid, that it was just the two of them. That they didn't go to other people's barbecues, that when her mom would drop Angie off at friends' houses, she never stayed to socialize with the other mothers, who often spoke to Marilyn in patronizing tones. That at parents' nights at Montezuma Elementary, she was the youngest mom by far, and though Angie would notice some of the dads being nice to her, Marilyn always turned away to search for her daughter. Even when her mom

eventually shut the door on Manny—the first (and last) man to come to their house for dinner—Angie had learned to accept the loss.

Ever since Angie was a little kid, Marilyn has told her she's her beauty, her light, her reason for life. Her precious little angel. But sometimes, when she thought Angie was busy with a coloring book or the television, Angie would see her staring out the window, tears running down her cheeks.

As Sam's Jeep turns the corner and parks in front of the driveway, Angie presses stop on the Walkman and pulls off the headphones. She thinks of her mom coming home to an empty house tonight, and she almost turns to go back inside. But instead, she picks up her duffel and heads toward the car.

Sam wears a rumpled white T-shirt, a pair of cutoff sweatpants that hang on his tall, narrow frame, and mirrored aviator shades. His hair is the same kind of messy it's always been.

"Hey," Angie says, wishing she could see his eyes.

Sam merely nods in greeting, takes her bag from her, and stuffs it into the back seat. Angie climbs into the car, which smells vaguely of marijuana and seems to be storing several weeks' worth of breakfast burrito wrappers. The '90s Cherokee that Sam named Mabel gives an unhappy rumbling noise as it starts.

As they roll down Angie's street, Sam remains wordless and turns up the music. Angie glances back at her home disappearing behind them, and then she looks down at the girl in the picture with her dad. The one who must have sped through the night with the windows down and the music loud, inhaling the

scent of the sea, the one who must have known the feeling of freedom and air rushing into her lungs and a life, a new life, about to start. The one who must have known the way that falling in love brings the world closer, as if everything were in reach. At least that's how Angie imagines it.



MARILYN

18 Years Earlier

• • • • • *Marilyn is seventeen today. She stares back at her own eyes reflected in the car window, transposed over the man on the corner wearing a CASH FOR GOLD sign and a woman pushing a shopping cart full of clattering bottles. They pass an Arco station where a crew of boys with backward baseball caps carry away cigars and sodas. The backs of her thighs stick to the seat, and she can feel sweat beading around her hairline. The classic end-of-summer Los Angeles heat wave has hit. It has to be at least a hundred degrees out, and the '80s Buick, loaded down with boxes, has no working AC.*

“It’s just for a little while,” her mom, Sylvie, rambles on. “Until we get another break, you know. You have your appointment with LA Talent in a couple weeks.”

Marilyn nods without turning her mother’s way.

Her last audition (where she was to be one in a family of four out to buy a television) was a downright disaster. She’d understood the stakes, and all morning, sitting in the waiting room with the other girls, her chest had felt tight, her stomach queasy. She tried to concentrate on her book—*The White Album* by Joan Didion—but she’d been stuck on the first paragraph, unable to focus, rereading the same opening sentence: *We tell ourselves stories in order to live.* As she’d gotten in front of the camera, she found she could hardly breathe.

When her mother came to pick her up, Marilyn didn't mention the sense of panic, the dizziness, or the casting assistant who'd brought her a glass of water and shot an *oh god* look to the director across the room. She endured Sylvie's look of deep disappointment—brows arched in tension—when a week later their supper of Lean Cuisines was interrupted by the news that Marilyn had failed yet again. As Sylvie hung up the phone and stared out the window at the pool and its plastic lounge chairs, Marilyn pushed a piece of wilted broccoli around her plate.

After a long moment of silence Sylvie poured herself a third glass of white wine and turned to Marilyn. "It's a wasteland around here, really. I've been thinking we should move up near Hollywood, get closer to it all," she said, too brightly. "I mean, who knows, you could run into a casting director in the grocery store." As if they weren't fleeing the apartment they hadn't paid rent on in months.

Marilyn knows her mom would let her go ass-first in a photo (like the girl sprawled on the billboard over the freeway, advertising jeans) if it meant the money that would get them into a shiny new house in the hills above the city, above everything, where she believes they belong. As far as Sylvie's concerned, a new and better life is just around the corner, the revolving door to the future a mere step away.

As a child, perhaps Marilyn believed in Sylvie's dreams of a better place, but by now, she's given up on ever walking through the door in her mother's fantasies. She holds tightly to the thought that it's only another year until she'll be eighteen, moving away for college, beginning a life that belongs to her. She sees the future

like a little diamond of light at the end of the tunnel; she's learned to fix her gaze on it, to struggle toward it, to keep that diamond in her mind.

A car honks at Sylvie as she holds up traffic behind her to make a left turn onto Washington Boulevard. Marilyn takes in the sunburned look of the streets, the smell of meat drifting from a taco truck mixed with the faint scent of the ocean, the bright bougainvillea growing up a chain-link fence.

Sylvie ignores the honking and navigates the Buick onto South Gramercy Place. Marilyn vaguely recognizes the residential street lined with dilapidated apartment buildings. LOW DEPOSIT advertises one banner. She notices a red flower box hanging out of a window, a laundry line where clothes wave like flags. A man leans against the building below, dragging from a cigarette.

"Marilyn, look. You can see the sign from here." The car swerves through the middle of the road as Sylvie turns around in her seat to point to the white letters: H-O-L-L-Y-W-O-O-D on the mountain in the distance, standing stalwart through the haze of smog that comes with the summer heat.

"Mmm-hmm." Marilyn does her best to ignore the dread building in her chest as they continue down the block and pull up to 1814—a two-story duplex at the corner, with crumbling pink stucco and an unkempt yard, where a few orange trees survive nonetheless.

Lauryn Hill's voice drifts up from a radio in the apartment below: *How you gonna win . . .* Sylvie fumbles for the key under

the mat, the curls in her dyed blond hair falling loose in the heat and sticking against her pale cheeks. As they enter, Marilyn is transported back in time by the familiar scent—some odd mix of cigars, Febreze, and cooked meat.

Pieces of furniture lie haphazardly about the room—the couch slightly askew from the wall, the coffee table butting diagonally against it, holding a candy jar filled mostly with butter-scotch wrappers. Late-afternoon sun streams through barred windows, casting spots of light on the shag carpet.

For a moment they both just stand there.

“Well, this could be worse,” Sylvie says with forced cheer. Marilyn wishes that somehow she’d been able to do better. That she could have managed just one more commercial, one more success that would have kept them away from here.

In the tiny bedroom that was once hers and will be again, Marilyn opens the windows, letting in a burst of hot air. It’s already past five o’clock, but the heat hasn’t let up. She stares out at a distant line of skinny palm trees, their tops wavering. She thinks they look like scattered soldiers, the last ones still standing in the battleground of the city, and raises her hands in two opposing L shapes in front of her eyes—the frame of a photograph. With a blink—her imaginary shutter—she freezes the image in her mind.

“You’re so beautiful.” Sylvie’s voice startles her. She turns to see her mom watching her from the doorway, as the radio from below goes to commercial and a voice instructs her to *double your pleasure, double your fun*. Marilyn wants to collapse on the floor, suddenly exhausted.

As Sylvie moves to wrap her arms around her, Marilyn remembers the day—almost ten years ago now—that they left Woody’s and moved into the then-brand-new apartment they’ve just left behind in Orange County. Sylvie loved the pool and the fresh carpet, but Marilyn’s favorite part was the air that didn’t smell like anything. She’d been in her bedroom putting her clothes away neatly in a new pink dresser when she heard her mom scream her name.

She rushed into the living room to find Sylvie in tears and her own face on the TV. Marilyn-on-screen opened the top of a My Little Pony and pulled out a jeweled bracelet, exclaiming *There’s a surprise for me!* before kissing the top of Twilight Sparkle’s head. The image of herself gave Marilyn an uneasy feeling—that wasn’t her, was it? Not really. No. She found herself wanting to back away from the screen, but when Sylvie pulled Marilyn to her and said, in whispered awe, “You’re so beautiful. My baby girl. You’re on TV,” she couldn’t help but revel in her mom’s pride.

Marilyn now lingers in Sylvie’s arms, engulfed in her perfume—Eternity by Calvin Klein? Sylvie’s scent is a rotating kaleidoscope of samples from the counter at Macy’s, where she spends her workdays convincing customers that a bottle of Chanel or Burberry is a potion powerful enough to transform them into the kind of women they want to be.

“It’ll all work out. You’ll see,” Sylvie says, almost to herself.

She releases Marilyn from her grip just as suddenly as she’d embraced her. “Let’s unload now, so we have time for the birthday dinner.”

Marilyn can see her mom is working, even harder than Marilyn herself, not to crumble.

“Great,” Marilyn replies, and kisses her on the cheek.

Moving boxes up the flight of stairs goes slowly. By the time the sun drops and the day starts to give up, the Buick’s two-thirds empty and they’re both sticky, struggling with one of the heaviest boxes in the load, containing Marilyn’s books.

As Marilyn backs up the stairs, the muscles in her arms burning, she sees a man’s figure—tall, broad-shouldered, dark-skinned, head down—crossing the street toward them. She blows a strand of hair away from her face and regrets that her hands are full, because she wants to lift them into a frame, to take a picture of him in her mind as he steps beneath a jacaranda tree and into its puddle of purple petals collected in the gutter.

As he walks quickly up the pavement toward their building, she can see that he must be close to her own age: though he looks physically grown, he still has the wide eyes of a boy. He wears basketball shorts, sneakers, and a white T-shirt, soaked down the front with sweat. Tattoos cover his left arm.

“Marilyn! Stay with it! The time to go on one of your little journeys is not while we’re carrying a load of your bricks,” Sylvie complains. And, perhaps hearing the noise, he turns and sees Marilyn staring. She watches him as she struggles with the weight of the box, manages a backward step up the stairs.

He looks away, but after a moment, he’s climbing toward them.

“You need help?” His voice is different than she would have

imagined. Softer, shyer. The sound of it seems to match the gentle blue of the early-evening sky.

“My goodness, yes! What a darling. Someone must have sent us an angel.” Sylvie immediately drops the box, never one to refuse the charity of others.

“I’m Sylvie, and this is my daughter, Marilyn. It’s her birthday.”

Marilyn is grateful for the exertion, which has undoubtedly already turned her cheeks pink, disguising her blush.

“Happy birthday,” he says simply. She thinks she can feel the heat radiating off his body.

“Thanks.” She lets her eyes drift upward to the gulls floating high against the pink clouds. She tries not to look at his shirt sticking to his muscular body.

“And you are?” Sylvie prompts.

“James.”

“James. Good to know we have a strapping young lad in the building.”

“You guys moving in?”

“Yes yes. We’re up there. My daughter’s an actress, we thought it would be better if she were closer to Hollywood.”

Marilyn knows how silly this must sound—she’s obviously not an actual actress, or they wouldn’t be moving here. But James just nods and lifts the box, his body so close to Marilyn’s that for a fleeting moment she can smell his skin. Though she can hear the effort in his breathing, his face doesn’t indicate any strain as he carries the books into the apartment.

“We’ve got a few more in the car, you wouldn’t mind terribly would you,” Sylvie says (more than asks). Marilyn winces.

“Sure,” James says, and she can’t tell if he’s irritated.

Sylvie stays inside, making a show of looking busy as she starts to unpack, but Marilyn follows James up and down the stairs with the lighter boxes, determined to do her part. He laps her on every round and doesn’t make much eye contact.

When they’ve finished, Sylvie thanks James again and Marilyn follows him downstairs so she can lock up the car. The sky’s beginning to darken, and the heat of the day has suddenly given way to the empty cool of desert night. She feels a chill, her clothes still damp with sweat.

At the bottom of the staircase, he turns to her. “So, how old?”

For a moment, Marilyn’s confused, before she remembers it’s her birthday. “Seventeen.”

He nods. “Me too.”

She looks out at the sidewalk, littered with scattered trash—a Coke bottle, a crushed beer can, a Carl’s Jr. bag, of all things. Carl’s Jr. was the last commercial she’d booked, five years ago. Residual checks don’t last forever.

“So where you guys coming from?”

“Orange County. We’re staying with my uncle again. We lived here when we first came to LA.”

“You’re an actress?”

“No, not really. My mom wishes I were. I was in a couple of commercials forever ago . . . it’s her thing, but I’ve been playing along for so long I guess it’s become routine.”

“Yeah, I feel that. I mean, you gotta be what you gotta be for the people you love. It’s not always *you*, unfortunately.”

Marilyn nods. She can smell someone's dinner cooking, can hear a distant siren.

"Thanks again for helping us."

"No problem."

She smiles at him and for the first time he seems to be really looking at her.

"Later," he says.

As Marilyn watches him disappear into the apartment below her own new home, her skin feels prickly, her senses uncannily acute. The building at 1814 South Gramercy suddenly seems beautiful.

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Marilyn's uncle does not look happy to see them when he comes in an hour later to find Marilyn unpacking dishes and Sylvie on the phone with Domino's. Woody's a slight man, with long graying hair pulled back into a ponytail and a tiny gut.

"Hello, ladies," he says dryly. "Welcome back."

Sylvie hangs up the phone and turns to him. "Thank you for letting us stay," she gushes in her best Sweet'N Low voice.

"You were my brother's wife," he says remotely.

Sylvie hides her wince fairly well, but Marilyn catches it. To Woody's credit, he *did* agree to give up his bedroom for Sylvie and sleep on the couch. Marilyn's tiny room, it seems, had mostly been storing boxes, which now litter the hall.

"Like we talked about," Sylvie adds quickly, "it will only be for a bit. In the meantime, we'll make lovely housemates. The place will be spic and span. You won't have to worry about a thing."

“I do love your mashed potato casserole,” Woody hints.

“I’m planning on making it for you tomorrow. I’ve just ordered us a pizza for this evening. You know, it’s your niece’s seventeenth birthday,” she prompts.

Woody looks at Marilyn, sizing her up. Since they moved out, Marilyn has seen him only a handful of times, the last of which was two Christmases ago when he came down to the OC with a twelve-pack and passed out on their couch.

“Well,” he says, “you sure have grown up since last you were here. Even since the last time I saw you. Grab me a beer, would you, doll?”

She goes to the fridge and pulls out a Miller Light, briefly pressing the cold bottle against her cheek. She feels vaguely feverish. Though it’s cooled down outdoors, Woody’s apartment seems to have caged the day’s heat.

“Get one for yourself if you like, it’s your birthday,” he says.

Marilyn does not.

When the pizza arrives, Sylvie insists they put birthday candles in, which she’s managed to fish out from one of the unpacked boxes. Marilyn leans over the flames that are starting to drip spots of pink wax onto the cheese: *I wish that by this time next year, I’ll be far away from here, in college in New York City, beginning a life that belongs to me . . .* But as she closes her eyes to blow out the candles, it’s James she sees behind her lids, the image of him tugging at her like an undertow.

Lying awake atop the creaky single bed, between the worn My Little Pony sheets her mom bought her years ago, Marilyn hears

muffled voices floating in through her window. One of them sounds like James's, and there's another, a kid's voice. She strains to hear what they're saying, but they talk softly and she can only make out words: *Nana . . . shoes . . . school . . . promise . . .* A faint bit of laughter.

The voices go quiet, and she's alone with the emptiness of the room where she once spent her first sleepless nights in the city. She stares up at the familiar patterns in the ceiling as a helicopter circles overhead. Then, moments later, there's music. She thinks she recognizes the melody, and the sweet voice that comes in from the night. *Try me, try me . . .* She imagines James in bed listening, and the sound becomes an invisible bridge between them. She finally drifts off, sharing his song.

• • • • • *Marilyn wakes in a sweat to early-morning light* flooding in through her window. Outside an ice cream truck plays its song, over and over. She surveys the boxes strewn around her, her chest tightening. She takes a deep breath and holds her hands up to frame a photograph of the detritus of her life, blinks, and takes a picture.

She'd discovered her love of photography when she joined yearbook last year, mostly as a means of having a worthwhile extracurricular to add to her college apps. But instead of simply photographing her fellow students, she soon found herself using the school-issued 35-millimeter camera at every chance she got—capturing a child struggling to be released from his father's grip, a girl tucking a white rockrose behind her ear, the streaks of a plane left behind in the pale blue sky, Sylvie on a plastic lounge chair at the apartment pool leaning down to paint her toes. As Marilyn looked through the lens, her surroundings had become something worth watching. Worth keeping. She began to go to the library to look through photography books, studying the work of Robert Frank, Carrie Mae Weems, Sally Mann, Gordon Parks. She'd discovered that by learning to click the shutter at the right moment, you could make art out of anything. But, of course, she'd had to return the camera to school at the end of

the year. In its absence, she's begun taking mind-pictures—an effort to salvage the much-needed connection to the world around her.

When Marilyn slips out of her room, she finds Woody shirtless, smoking a cigar, planted in front of an old computer with a Planet Poker logo on the screen, above a green card table and several animated players.

“Morning,” she says.

He coughs. “Dear,” he replies, an edge in his voice, “you’ll have to make yourself scarce when I’m working. Can’t afford to break my concentration.”

“No prob—” she starts to say, but the look on his face suggests it would be better to opt for silence.

Woody’s made money at cards for as long as she’s known him, but apparently “work” now extends to online poker. When he first moved to LA he’d landed a job at the Ford factory, her mom once explained, but when it closed down he gave himself over to gambling full-time, hoping to become the next Amarillo Slim—onetime winner of the World Series of Poker who appeared on talk shows, charming the country with his slow Texas drawl.

Marilyn pockets the twenty-dollar bill Sylvie had slipped under her door along with a list of groceries to pick up for dinner. She steps outside, relishing the slightest lift of a breeze against her skin. The hot air smells of a mix of faint flowers and exhaust. She has no idea where the nearest store is, so she sets off wandering and finally finds a bodega, where she purchases

her mom's dinner ingredients plus a Mexican Coke and a banana—her breakfast. By the time she makes it back to the apartment an hour later, she's sweaty and sticky. As she crosses the street toward 1814, she sees James step outside, his shirt off, carrying a hummingbird feeder. As he moves to hang it near a window, she notices a tattoo of the dark outline of a bird on the back of his left shoulder. Without thinking, she sets down the heavy bags and lifts her hands, framing his V-shaped back, the shadow-bird on his shoulder, a real live hummingbird hovering uncertainly some distance above it. Just as he starts to turn, just as his eyes become visible, she blinks and snaps the imaginary photo.

It takes her a split second to reemerge into reality and realize how odd she must seem, standing at the edge of the driveway staring at James through her rectangular hands. She quickly drops them and waves. He frowns and does the same. His gaze leaves her feeling naked, as if with a single glance he could strip away her layers of defense.

As he turns and goes inside, the hummingbird that was hovering descends on its feeder, tiny wings fragile and fluttering.

Marilyn tiptoes past Woody, who's exactly as she left him, and spends the rest of the day cleaning and unpacking. Still looking at the image of James behind her eyes, she scrubs away the layers of dust on the sills, the hidden grime on the floors. She scours the bathroom with bleach, and is oddly soothed by the smell that erases the scent of the house, creating a blank chemical slate. She puts her mom's clothes into drawers and then unpacks her own.

She lines her books in neat, single rows against the walls and tapes up her photographs—favorites she'd copied on the Xerox machine at the library.

From the bottom of the last box she pulls out a stuffed lion with matted hair, holding on to a red heart, now just by a thread. Though she doesn't remember getting him, she knows Braveheart (as she'd named him long ago) was a gift from her father. She tries to recall his face, as she often does, and feels the usual sense of vertigo. He can't be seen head on; he's like a turning kaleidoscope, a boat drifting farther out to sea. Her memories of her youngest years all feel that way—fuzzy and fleeting, as if she were recalling a childhood that hadn't belonged to her.

When Marilyn thinks of her father's death, it's Sylvie's scream she hears. He'd had a heart attack while he was at work. In the following weeks—or months, she couldn't know—there was the murmur of the television, their small Amarillo home filling with the scent of Sylvie's Salem Lights, possessions sold off at a yard sale, neighbors with uneasy smiles who came to wish them farewell. The quiet dread that crept in and nestled in Marilyn's chest as she stared out the window of the car moving over the sun-bleached, wide-open desert landscape—an earth without borders. On the second day of the trip, she fell asleep beside the boxes and woke in the night as the car climbed a dark road, revealing an ocean of dotted lights spread in the distance. For a moment, in her half sleep, she was disoriented, thought she was seeing stars. Were they upside down? Had the sky fallen to the ground? The touch of her mother's hand, squeezing her own. "Look, baby. We're here. City of Angels."

•••••

Sylvie's starting supper—the mashed potato casserole Woody's so fond of—when she turns to Marilyn, who's sitting at the table peeling potatoes. “You forgot the milk!”

“It wasn't on the list,” Marilyn says, sure of it, because she'd checked the basket against her mother's scrawl twice.

“Yes, it was. Now what? Woody will be back any minute . . .”

“I can go get some,” Marilyn offers, though she resents being blamed for the oversight.

“There's no time. It'll take you half an hour at least. Go ask that boy—the one who helped us with the boxes.”

She's embarrassed by the thought of knocking on James's door asking for milk, but Marilyn knows her mother's worried Woody will have had one too many drinks during his “shift” at the casino, that she hopes to keep things calm with the promised casserole.

So she steps into the sticky twilight and hurries downstairs. As she stands in front of the door next to the hummingbird feeder and knocks, she's surprised by the intensity with which her heart pounds against her chest.

A few moments later a boy answers. He looks maybe eleven—on the very precipice of adolescence, without having yet crossed its border. His features are a near-perfect copy of James's, minus the self-possessed reserve, plus a layer of baby fat.

“What's up?”

“Hi. I'm Marilyn. We just moved in upstairs.”

“I know. My brother said.”

“Oh.” Her heart rate doubles. What exactly had James said? Enough for his brother to recognize her at least.

“You live with the weird old dude.”

“Um, yeah. He’s my uncle.”

“Justin? Who’s there?” A man’s deep voice comes from inside.

“The girl!” And just like that, Justin takes her hand and pulls her through the doorway.

An older man in his late sixties sits on the couch watching *Jeopardy!* He’s tall, broad-shouldered, with a bald head and a warm smile. Their grandfather, Marilyn guesses.

“Hi, um, I’m Marilyn. We just moved in upstairs?” For some reason it comes out as a question.

He nods. “Alan Bell.”

“James! The girl’s here!” Justin calls out. He drops Marilyn’s hand, leaving her standing in the center of the living room, smells of dinner drifting in. The colorful furniture is worn in a nice, lived-in way. The bumpy walls, so ugly at Woody’s, are hardly noticeable beneath the family photos, children’s handprints in clay, and carefully arranged artwork.

Alan looks at her expectantly. “You’re here for James?”

“No, I—I was just, um, I forgot milk at the store today and my mom needs some for her recipe, just a cup and a half. I didn’t know if you had any . . . we could borrow.”

“Of course,” Alan says, just as James emerges. The way he eyes her makes Marilyn feel like an intruder.

“James, get her a glass of milk,” his grandfather instructs. A woman in fuzzy pink slippers and a matching pink robe shuffles

in from the next room, her eyes creased with smile lines, hands covered in flour.

“And who’s this?” she asks. Marilyn’s surprised by her voice, which is soft and high, like a young girl’s.

“Marilyn. She’s just borrowing milk,” James says.

“You’re a pretty girl. Don’t let him get after you.” The woman grins as James disappears into the next room. If he heard his grandmother’s comment, he doesn’t acknowledge it. “I’m Rose,” she offers, and then calls out to Justin to set the table while Alan calls out to the television: “Gin!”

Marilyn turns to see the clue on the screen: *It’s the liquor you might drink while playing a card game of the same name.* When a bespectacled contestant guesses the same right answer, Alan slaps his hand on his knee.

Marilyn feels a hot kind of longing arise in her chest. Longing for a family like this one, a family that laughs and shouts and sets the table for dinner together, a family that lives in a place that smells good, that feels like a real home. She can’t help but let her eyes drift toward the photos on the wall. There’s one of James and Justin as young boys, with a woman in a red flowered dress and a brilliant smile.

James approaches with the glass of milk and catches her lost in the picture.

“Here.”

“Thank you.”

As his hand brushes hers, she feels a spark. But he looks away, toward the TV: *A fisherman tricks one of these creatures into letting itself be trapped in a bottle.*

Alan is stumped.

“What is a genie,” James says quietly.

Marilyn studies his face.

“Later,” he says.

“Bye!” Justin calls.

“Nice to meet you,” Marilyn stutters out to the room, but James is already opening the door to let her out.

• • • • • *Early-morning sun dapples the sidewalk, the smell of exhaust mixing with the sweet scent from the doughnut shop across the street. Marilyn peers into the stream of traffic on Washington, searching for the bus she hopes is about to arrive, and tucks her freshly blow-dried hair behind her ear. She wears jeans and a white T-shirt, black Converse, face free of makeup—a carefully crafted look she hopes will make her appear normal enough to get by without question, but plain enough not to solicit much interest.*

After a week at Woody's, she's begun to look forward to the beginning of school, daunting as it may be. Anything seems better than being cooped up in that apartment. She's spent most of her time with her door closed, reading and rereading *The White Album*. After she'd failed to get through the first essay during her last audition disaster, she hadn't been able to bring herself to return the book to the Orange County Public Library when it was time to pack up and go, so she'd tucked it into the bottom of her suitcase.

Joan Didion describes, in the title essay, a time in which she felt she was merely going through the motions of life—she was giving an “adequate enough performance” but had “mislaidd the script,” no longer understood the plot. Marilyn understands—she

studies for the SATs, buys the groceries, does the laundry at the coin-op down the street, but she feels as if the invisible thread that's meant to attach her to the world has been severed, if it were ever there.

When she steps onto the campus of Los Angeles High, she sees an endless stream of kids pouring into the building, dotting the lawn, sending shouts and laughter ringing through the air. The school must be twice as big as her old one in the OC. All the better, she thinks. Among two thousand students, it will be easy to be invisible.

And it's true. From the moment she steps through the doors, she becomes only one of many in the packed hallway. She frames imaginary photos of the girls pushing and giggling in midriff shirts, in short shorts, in baggy pants, owning their space, owning their bodies and what they are becoming. She feels passing stabs of jealousy toward them and their vibrancy, but there's no point in trying to make friends. Marilyn's here for just a year, then she'll be gone.

Even at Orange High, she'd often had the sensation that she was standing behind an imperceptible screen, separating her from her surroundings. But at least she'd had a group to hang out with, a place to sit at lunch and invitations to movies or bonfires on the beach. Tiffany Lu had been her closest companion; they'd bonded over their mutual obsession with getting into a good college, though while Tiffany spent her weekends at debate club tournaments and violin lessons, Marilyn's time was taken up by a stream of failed auditions.

Just one more year, Marilyn tells herself again, as she navigates

the overcrowded cafeteria. She's interested in only one person: James, though she hasn't seen him all morning. Part of her wants to skip the issue of lunch altogether, but in preparation for her meeting at a new talent agency, Sylvie's been making her diet shakes, eyeing every bite of food she eats skeptically until she'll finally admonish Marilyn, "That's enough," and clear her plate. As a result she's been constantly hungry and decides now to take the opportunity to eat all she can in private. Marilyn buys a bag of Cheetos, a bag of Ruffles, a Dr Pepper, two slices of pizza, and an apple. She carries her loot across the lunch yard, then wanders through the main building, opening doors to empty classrooms. The arts budget has been cut and along with it the photography class (she'd inquired during registration last week), but there's still a small darkroom, which Marilyn discovers at the end of a long, empty hall. She inhales the scent of the chemicals lingering in the air, slumps down against the wall, and spreads her lunch before her, staring into the glow of the red safety light.

As she eats, Marilyn calls up images of the great buildings of Columbia University from the brochure she keeps carefully pressed between the pages of her dictionary—students poring over books on the lawn, leaves falling along brick pathways, city skyscrapers. She imagines the people she'll speak to across the tables of New York restaurants one day—artists, gallery owners, magazine editors—and takes comfort in the idea that this moment in her life, sitting alone in the defunct Los Angeles High School darkroom, and all the moments she's lived thus far, will disappear into a remote past. She will no longer be the child who played with My Little Ponies in the commercial, nor the preteen

grinning at a Carl's Jr. cheeseburger. Not the girl who lived in the boxy apartment in Orange County, nor the girl going home to the musty, shag-carpeted space where she stays with her mother and her alcoholic uncle. Not the child who was once trapped in a talent agent's office, ostensibly to work on her "audition skills," not an aspiring model, not even her mother's daughter. Instead, Marilyn imagines a self, a hard, brilliant kernel, waiting patiently somewhere in her depths to be revealed when she arrives into the future.

• • • • •

Still. There is another year left to survive, and James, in the apartment below, becomes her private life raft. She sees him coming home in the afternoons wearing navy slacks and a pale polo top—a uniform, clearly—so she's gleaned that he must go to a private school. But her days—blurs of classroom lessons, bus stops, still-stifling summer heat, homework done on her single mattress—are punctuated by the sounds of him. She learns to pick out his footsteps, the light, purposeful clip he makes when walking up the drive; the particular jangling of his keys as he unlocks the apartment door; the way his voice drops deep when calling out a name; the softer murmurs of conversation, often accompanied by Justin's playful laughter.

He appears sometimes in the mornings, taking down and rehangng the hummingbird feeder, which Marilyn finds devastatingly charming. He often goes out in the early evening, dressed in sneakers and shorts, and comes home an hour later, T-shirt soaked through with sweat, the light of the sky dimming to a pale

glow. She routinely peers out the window, watching him walk up the drive, his body singular in the dusk, the *Jeopardy!* tune leaking out as he opens his apartment door. But her favorite time is just before she falls asleep, when his music drifts into her room with the night air. She imagines he's playing it for her to hear, that the voices of Erykah Badu, 2Pac, Wyclef, Prince, are his way of speaking to her.

Two weeks go by before Marilyn finds the courage to manufacture another encounter with him, but finally, dizzy from the crash diet Sylvie has her on, last night's song still playing in her head on repeat, she decides to take action. She waits as the sun drops and the sky turns soft; when at long last she sees him walk out (later than usual today), she jumps up. But by the time she gets outside, he's already at the end of the block, taking off in a jog. She can't exactly run after him, can she? So instead she continues to the bodega and buys a Mexican Coke, a much-needed rush to her blood sugar. She sips slowly, soothing herself with the pleasure of the fizzy taste mixing with twilight. It's on her way home, when she passes the park, that she sees James sprinting back and forth over a section of blacktop, his body slicing through the air, before he bends to catch his breath. *My god, he's beautiful.* She stops, stares.

Finally, she calls out, "James!"

He lifts his hand, waves. In a burst, she runs over to where he stands.

"Thirsty?" Marilyn asks.

She can hear his panting breath (the heat of his body, so close). She offers the Coke.

“Thanks.” James takes it. Tilts his head back. Chugs. She watches his Adam’s apple moving up and down his throat, exposed.

He hands the bottle back and looks at his watch, and again, he explodes into a run.

• • • • • *Marilyn and Sylvie sit in a giant waiting room with leather chairs imposing enough to swallow them, and wall-size windows offering views of the mess of traffic on Sunset Boulevard. Sylvie flips through a magazine with Drew Barrymore on the cover, shot to look as if she's topless, and the headline "Secrets to Hollywood Survival." Drew Barrymore is one of the actresses Marilyn admires—she's adored her since she saw *E.T.* as a girl—but she could do without Sylvie's running commentary: *Did you know Drew uses lipstick on her cheeks—for blush! I thought I invented that trick . . .* Marilyn knows exactly why they are here, what they've come for, and yet part of her feels that it is utterly pointless, that there's no reason at all for them to be in these chairs, in this waiting room, in this city, on this planet. When she catches her reflection in the glass, she sees someone she doesn't recognize—her pale blue eyes painted smoky, lips a deep berry color that Marilyn thinks makes her mouth look like a gash.*

Sylvie's rubbing a perfume sample from the magazine on her own wrists and Marilyn's struggling to breathe through the tightness in her chest when a girl with a pencil skirt and pouty lips appears and calls Marilyn's name. The girl escorts them up an elevator, gives them glasses of water, and seats them on a less

imposing leather couch in an office full of orchid plants—five to be exact.

“Well, this is very classy,” Sylvie comments when they’re left alone in the room. “I love those flowers. We should get some of those, don’t you think, Mari?”

Because the question seems rhetorical, Marilyn only nods in response.

This place is certainly a departure from that of the previous talent agent she’d worked with in the OC, the one who booked her first commercial, the one who began to lose interest in her as she grew out of childhood, the one who Sylvie finally fired after the last audition didn’t pan out. He’d been a short, round man, who always wore a three-piece suit, had an office with ’70s wood paneling and a yellow paisley couch that Marilyn never wanted to sit on, due to its subtle but suspect stains. Marilyn can still recall his prickly, pungent smell, which, as a child, made her think of porcupines; she can still recall the dread at entering his office, the feeling of spiders crawling under her skin, the way she wished she could curl into a protective ball like the roly-polys she liked to play with in the grass outside their apartment.

After some time a small-boned woman with an expensive-looking pantsuit, a close-cropped pixie cut, and a no-makeup face comes in, all at once, as if she’d blown the door open.

“Hello, hello, hope I didn’t keep you waiting. I’m Ellen, obviously.” She speaks quickly, so that the words blur together, Ellen-obviously sounding like a single name.

Marilyn wipes her sweaty palms on her skirt and stands to shake Ellen-obviously's hand. Sylvie launches, automatically, into a too-eager soliloquy on her daughter's value and merits, but Ellen-obviously quickly interrupts and directs her attention to Marilyn.

"Tell me about *your* aspirations, dear. How hard are you willing to work?"

Marilyn thinks of waking up to the smell of Woody's cigar smoke, of his eyes following her around the kitchen, of his voice demanding that Sylvie clean the bathroom, and takes a deep breath, willing herself to focus. At once, she floats successfully above herself, watching as she performs her role (which is possible, she's learning, even if she's mislaid the script, even if it's only an improvisation).

"I'm willing to work as hard as necessary," Marilyn hears herself saying. "As for my aspirations? I want to make money."

Ellen-obviously laughs, an abrupt laugh that stops as quickly as it began. She studies Marilyn, letting the silence hang in the air for a moment before she says, "Well, you're honest. I like that. I saw your reel, of course—very cute. Clearly you've grown out of the kiddie stuff." She makes a circular gesture in the direction of Marilyn's face. "No Disney here, uh-un. But you've got a rather interesting look. Blond but not blond. I can work with that. And you have a vibe—a *je ne sais quoi*. You should lose ten pounds, but not more—don't lose your glow—and we can start putting you up for some modeling gigs."

"Terrific!" Sylvie says. Ellen merely nods in her direction, indicating they are free to go.

“Just like Marilyn Monroe!” Sylvie squeals as soon as they step out of the building. “She—”

“Started as a model, you’ve told me.”

“Baby, it’s all happening!” Sylvie squeezes Marilyn’s hand, and Marilyn smiles at her weakly in return.

“I don’t know, Mom.”

“What do you *mean* you don’t know?”

“I mean, I’ll try, I know we need the money, but it’s not . . . I just don’t want you to get your hopes up . . .”

“Oh, Marilyn, where’s your optimism? Positive thinking is half the battle. You have to believe it to make it real. We should be celebrating!”

As they arrive at the old Buick, Marilyn pulls an ad for a local BMW dealership from the windshield. It’s not an uncommon thing, flyers like this one left on dusty, beat-up cars parked in the lots of fancy hotels, pre-furnished condos, talent agencies—the assumption being that here, in this city, your life can change overnight. Yesterday you may have been broke, living in your uncle’s run-down apartment. Tomorrow, you could be “someone,” someone ready to buy a new car to fit your new status. She balls up the paper, tosses it in the nearest trash.

Sundaes from Dairy Queen are her and Sylvie’s usual celebration treat, but those are a no-go based on the weight-loss recommendation. It’s just as well, because Marilyn feels like throwing up. Instead, Sylvie suggests, they ought to celebrate by looking at houses.

Not up for protesting, Marilyn sits in silence as they turn into

the narrow streets of the Hollywood Hills. Sylvie drives slowly, precariously, as she leans out the window, making running commentary on each of the homes. A BMW honks, speeds around her. Sylvie pretends not to notice. When she spots a house with a for sale sign, she pulls into the driveway. Little white statues—identical replicas of Michelangelo’s *David* in miniature—are lined up and spaced at even intervals at the edge of the lawn.

“Oh my god, they’re so cute!” Sylvie exclaims, and tells Marilyn to hop out and grab one of the brochures beneath the image of real estate agent Rod Peeler’s smiling face. Marilyn does, as quickly as possible, hoping this means they can go home.

But Sylvie idles, studying the brochure, which tells them the asking price is eight hundred grand. There will be an open house the following Sunday. Sylvie declares, with delight, that they ought to go. Just to “see what’s out there,” so that they’ll be “educated” when they’re “ready to buy.” Marilyn shuts her eyes, reminding herself that there is one thing she must focus on: the diamond at the end of her tunnel. Next year. College. Getting the fuck out of here.

• • • • • *Saturday morning Marilyn sleeps as long as possible* and wakes to the relentless sound of the ice cream truck, which has taken to parking regularly outside the apartment. Sylvie's already at work, and Woody's at the casino. Marilyn tries calling Tiffany, and listens while she recites updates about their old group—who's dating who, who hooked up at the beach, who'd gotten suspended for weed in their locker. Marilyn's side of the conversation consists mostly of a bunch of *uh-huhs, oh cools, no ways*. It's painfully obvious that whatever her connection to that world, it was fleeting. Now that she's lying on her single bed in her stuffy room at Woody's, none of it seems to matter.

She hangs up with Tiffany and fishes for change at the bottom of her purse, ready to give in to the call of the ice cream truck. She steps outside, and there, sitting at the bottom of the steps, is Justin, reading a comic book. When he sees her, his round face lights up with an open grin.

"It's hot as a devil's butt." He giggles.

"Yep," Marilyn agrees.

She gestures to the ice cream truck. "Any recommendations?"

"Get Pink Panther. That's the best."

Marilyn does, but instead of eating it herself, she gives it to Justin.

“Thanks,” he says, eagerly devouring the panther’s ice cream ears.

“So, what grade are you in?” Marilyn asks, sitting down beside him on the steps.

“Sixth.”

“Do you like middle school?”

Justin shrugs. “I guess.”

“It’s a little scary?”

He pauses. “Naw.” He turns to her, his mouth full. “You gonna kiss my brother?”

Marilyn laughs. “Um. I don’t think so.”

“You want to, though. I can tell.”

“And how’s that?”

“You were all nervous when you came to our house that night.”

Marilyn feels herself blush.

“He kisses lots of girls,” Justin says. “Once I made him tell me all the names, and I counted. There were twenty-nine.”

“Oh. Wow. That is a lot.” Marilyn supposes it shouldn’t be shocking. He’s beautiful, after all, even if he’s reserved. But in all the time she’s spent listening for him, she’d somehow imagined him as hers alone.

“He’d kiss you too if you want to.”

“And how do you know that? What if he doesn’t think I’d be nice to kiss?”

“I asked him.”

“Oh.” Her cheeks go hot again, her heart swerving like a car speeding around a sudden bend.

“I’ll start kissing soon. James started in middle school.”

“Well, that seems okay. But you don’t have to kiss that many girls. Maybe you’ll wait and find someone you really like.”

Justin shrugs, seemingly unconvinced. “Me and James are going to the beach.”

“That sounds so nice.” She imagines waves, and the smell of ocean air breaking through the suffocating heat.

“You wanna come?”

She does want to, very much, but she remembers James’s face when she walked into his apartment without invitation, and worries about intruding again.

As if on cue, he steps out the front door, carrying two bath towels and a boogie board. He pauses when he sees Marilyn, gives her a sidelong glance. “What’s up?”

Before she can respond, Justin chimes in, “Can she come?”

Marilyn smiles nervously. James raises his eyebrows, and turns to face her.

“We’re leaving now. You ready?”

“Just one sec.” She runs back up the steps and hurries into her room, quickly digging through her dresser until she finds her only swimsuit—an old black bikini whose elastic is starting to give out. She puts it on and throws a pair of overalls over the top, grabbing her shower towel off its hook on the way out.

James’s eyes follow Marilyn as she rushes down the steps, but his gaze is a closed door and she can’t tell what he’s thinking. She follows him and Justin to an old red Dodge, dented on the side. Justin moves to jump into the front seat, but James stops him.

“Where’s your manners. Let her get shotgun.”

Justin pouts.

“It’s okay—” Marilyn starts, but Justin gets in back as James opens the door for her.

She turns in her seat to offer Justin a smile, hoping he’s not regretting inviting her along. He punches her lightly on the arm. “Slug bug,” he says, and points to an old Beetle parked up the street.

James turns “California Love” up loud on the radio, eliminating the need for conversation, and they speed down the 10 freeway, the windows down, her hair blowing around her wildly, sweat collecting under her thighs. James is a sexy driver, she thinks. He goes fast, weaving around other cars, but not too fast; he’s focused, in control. Marilyn tries not to stare. Instead she searches the road, and when she finally finds another Beetle she turns around and taps Justin on the shoulder. “Slug bug,” she shouts over the music.

As they get closer to the ocean, the sky goes white, a layer of marine clouds blocking the sun. By the time they park, fog rolls off the water. Bodies move, ghost-like, in the near distance. Justin jumps out and tears across the sand, disappearing into the fog. Marilyn and James follow, set their towels out on the crowded beach. A moment later, Justin reemerges, dripping water.

“Are you coming in?” he asks Marilyn, not waiting for her answer as he grabs her hand and pulls her toward the sea. She laughs and struggles out of her overalls, throwing them down on the sand behind her.

A shot of electric happiness overtakes her as she dives under a wave and rides it, Justin beside her, to the shore. They do this over and over until she's finally exhausted and shivering, having forgotten completely the feeling of heat that's overwhelmed her for the past few days.

When they walk back to James, who's lying on one of the towels, eyes closed, Justin jumps on him and they wrestle until James has Justin pinned, but he quickly lets him up. Justin grabs the boogie board and heads back out. Marilyn stays beside James, her towel wrapped around her body, strands of long wet hair sticking to her face.

"He's so cute," Marilyn says, and then thinks the word sounds stupid. Cute is too inconsequential—Justin's wide-open charm is more than that.

"He likes you," James says. "He's not like this with everyone."

Marilyn smiles and for a while they're just quiet, James looking outward, seemingly hardly aware of her presence, though his body beside hers causes a rush of warmth to run under her goose-bumped skin.

Eventually he turns to her and says, "So tell me something about yourself."

"Um. I don't know. Like what?"

"Whatever you got."

"I was born in Amarillo, but I barely remember it. We came here when I was six. My full name is Marilyn Mack Miller."

James cocks his head at her.

"I know, it's odd. Apparently, my dad had been hoping for a boy. He was so sure I'd be one, he'd already picked out the name.

Mack seems a little unfortunate even for a guy, but it was my great-grandfather's name. When I came out a girl, my mom let him use it as a middle name—a sort of consolation prize. She got her way and named me Marilyn after Marilyn Monroe, who she was—well, still is—basically obsessed with. She forgets about the tragic death, and uses Marilyn as proof that anyone, from anywhere, can be beautiful and famous . . .”

Marilyn trails off, worried that she's in danger of saying too much, but James is still looking at her, as if waiting for more. “Anyway, since the commercials aren't working out anymore, my mom wants me to do modeling now. She'll be like, ‘*Marilyn* started as a model, and it helped her get discovered.’ My mother isn't exactly stable. She believes in fairy tales.”

It occurs to Marilyn that it's been a long time since she's talked to someone like this. Even with Tiffany, she hardly divulged anything about her family life.

“What about you? What's your full name?” she asks James.

“I'm James Alan Bell. Alan's my grandpa's name. My mom named me after James Brown, who was her favorite.”

Marilyn thinks of the picture of James and Justin with the beautiful woman in red hanging on their wall.

“So we're both named after famous people. But yours is cooler,” she says.

James gives her only a half smile in response. Marilyn thinks of the voice that drifted through her window the first night at Woody's, and retroactively recognizes it as James Brown. *Try me, try me . . .*

She wants to touch James. Instead, she studies the patterns

of tattoos on his arms—roses winding around each other, flames morphing into ocean waves, the hummingbird on his shoulder, the name “Angela” on his bicep surrounded by stars.

As she’s considering asking who Angela is, Justin dashes back toward them, boogie board under his arm. Without thinking Marilyn lifts her hands into a frame, and in a blink she snaps a mind-photo of the grinning boy emerging from the fog. James turns to her before Justin’s on top of him, tackling him once again.

“Come on! Race you!” Justin exclaims, trying to pull his big brother up. James puts him in a playful headlock, which Justin squirms free from.

“He’s afraid of the water,” Justin tells Marilyn gloatingly.

“I’m not afraid of it.”

“He can’t swim. Not like me.”

James gives in. “True. Not like you.”

Justin smiles back, dashes off.

“What’s that thing you do?” James asks. “With your hands?”

Marilyn feels her cheeks burn. “Um, it’s just, like I’m taking a mind-picture. . . . That sounds stupid. I love photography, but I don’t have a camera to use anymore. So I practice just framing moments, and snapping the shutter at the perfect second . . .”

James’s gaze is now fixed on her in his impossible-to-read way. She’s never told anyone about her imaginary photos before, and she begins to wonder if it was better that way.

But then, he breaks into a smile. She realizes that this is the first time he’s smiled at her—really smiled with teeth and all—and it has to be one of the most beautiful things she’s

ever seen. His whole face comes alive, bright enough to burn through the fog.

“That’s really cool,” he says. “I admire that.”

Marilyn feels herself beaming at his approval.

“If you want to be any good at anything, the only way is to practice,” he continues.

“Yeah. I’ve always been in front of cameras, for commercials or auditions or whatever, and I’ve always felt like . . . I don’t know. Like I wasn’t really there. When I started taking my own pictures, it was like I was getting these pieces of myself back.”

“Because you’re looking instead of being looked at. Because you’re in control.”

“Yes.” She hadn’t known how to say it so plainly, but that was exactly right.

When they pull up to the apartment hours later, the smell of salt water still in her hair, sand stuck between her thighs, shades of electric pink across the sky, Marilyn does not want to get out of the car. She does not want the day to end, does not want to go back inside to the reality of her life.

“Where have you been?” Sylvie asks when she walks through the door.

“At the beach with the neighbors.”

Sylvie frowns.

“You know, the boy who helped us?” Marilyn prompts.

“Yes, I remember.” Sylvie pauses. “I didn’t know you were socializing with him.”

“Okay, well, I guess I am, as of today.”

Sylvie is silent. Woody's still at the casino, so they don't cook, instead eating cold cuts for dinner.

Marilyn doesn't shower before bed, doesn't want to wash the ocean from her, the quiet proof that, at least for the afternoon, she had belonged somewhere.