

DOG DAYS OF WINTER

The accidents began softly, surreptitiously, as soon as she had Alistair put down. Paper cuts, cooking burns, slipping in the shower like some doddering octogenarian who had not had the foresight to lay down suctioned rubber roses and toadstools in the tub. “Christ, what the hell,” Evelyn muttered to herself. She had lost one dog before—Griffin, a rescued Doberman, when she was in her thirties—but somehow this loss was different, harder, more elusive. Her dailiest routines betrayed her. She tripped over furniture, gave over Word documents to the infinite ether, shocked herself plugging in lamps that she had forgotten were left on. She lost her reading glasses in the lining of her wool coat. One night she was simply drawing the curtains when she felt a sharp prick in her big toe. Perhaps a thistle or the tip of a pine needle in the carpet, she thought in the fraction of the moment, dragged in from outdoors. The pain was so slight she didn’t even stop to check her foot. It was only when she plopped herself down on the couch that she first noticed the trail of bright red dots blooming on her ivory carpet, marking the short path she had traveled. The perforated vector of a fresh wound.

111

Evelyn had read about grief crippling the widowed in the most trivial ways, but this seemed ridiculous. She had lost her dog, not her husband. Indeed, Evelyn had never had a husband to lose.

Taking her office mate’s advice, Evelyn requested some time off work and rented a cottage up in Cape Cod. She had never been there, even though she had lived on the East Coast, in central Jersey, for the better portion of her life. All the town names sounded so quaint to her—East Sandwich, Falmouth (which she pronounced “Foul Mouth”), Chatham (Chat’em), Mashpee, which conjured up a cozy image of peas smushed into mashed potatoes with the tines of a fork—but in the end, Wellfleet, home of the famous oysters, won out. It was the off-season—a cheap time to rent—and the notion of hot clam chowder heavy with cream and oyster crackers comforted her. She would eat by the ocean, she thought, a salt spray against her face from the wintry waves. She could grieve and heal, a stranger to all. No fear of the indignity of running, weepy-eyed, into neighbors and colleagues at the grocery store or the mall who wanted to know if there was “anything they could do to help,” whatever that meant.

But it was turning out to be an unseasonably mild November. And the cottage she had rented was far from the sea. She would have to drive out to the beaches or rent a bike. And the waves would lap at the sand only modestly. There would be no dramatic salt spray, no distant black storms. It wasn't going to be Melvillean after all.

Instead, the house she had rented from Max and Alexis Turner was small and sweet with a gambrel roof and a sign nailed above the freestanding garage at the end of the gravel driveway that read, "Our EsCAPE." In the few pictures she had seen online, the house was flanked and partially hidden by trees, but what she saw when she pulled up was a rather different landscape. Innumerable scrub pines and red cedars had been lopped off at their bases, leaving small, flat-topped stumps poking out everywhere you looked, and on either side of the house, the resulting limbs had been piled neatly, ready to be carted away. The house now stood stark and naked amid the arboreal genocide.

112

Tree killers, Evelyn said aloud, surveying the scene with her hands on her hips in contempt. Goddamn enemies of oxygen! What kind of people were they? On the phone, they had sounded so warm-hearted, so hale, so hearty. Max, in particular. She had pictured him with a bristly white beard, leathery red skin from years of sun and windburn, knobby, rope-like knuckles. The kind of man who shook your hand with fervor and grabbed your shoulder with his other hand when he met you, as if he had known you since forever, since you were but a wee lass. The kind of man who loved nature and owned a house on the Cape because he wanted to be close to the sea. Now she had to revise her image. Just a couple of wealthy retirees, with too much time and money on their hands, greedy for the dumbest kind of beauty: an unobstructed view of the pavement, the house across the street, other people's yards.

The inside of the house was no better. A careful study in aggressively sweet cliché, it boasted baby-blue sand dollars stenciled onto the oak cabinets in the kitchen, picture frames with desiccated white starfish glued to their surfaces, and corked bottles of sea glass along the mantle. On the coffee table lived a conch planter. Even the plastic tissue-box holders throughout the house had been stenciled with seahorses. Evelyn imagined Alexis flying through the house in a mad, menopausal flurry, a wet paintbrush in one hand and a stencil in the other, looking for ever more virginal surfaces to brand with cheer.

She chuckled to herself.

Then she said aloud to no one, “Woman Passes Judgment on Stranger’s Design Compulsion.”

It was an old, if lonely, habit of hers—making up headlines for whatever inconsequential little scene she found herself starring in at any particular moment. She had first started doing it in her twenties while living in Japan, as a way of managing her culture shock and language faux pas (Woman Finds Heated Toilet Seat Vaguely Arousing; Woman Accidentally Calls Boy “Tampon”). Later, it seemed only apt that she had begun to talk about herself in the third person in a place where young people were renowned for trying to estrange themselves from themselves, walking the streets of Harajuku with outlandish bleached gray hair and white lipstick, giant platform wedges and furry neon capes. While her Japanese colleagues at the university where she taught would shake their heads in wistful disapproval at the mention of this subculture, Evelyn was fascinated. She immediately saw what these kids were drawn to: that singular pleasure of being other, of being able to shed the prosaic burden of being oneself all the time, without respite.

In the story of Evelyn’s life up until this moment, however, Japan was merely a distant, planetary thing, another dimension of her submerged past refracted in infinite regress. Almost five years with Taro, a fellow English teacher, and she had had to come back home to the States alone—to her father’s progressing dementia. To a new, revolving-door life of hospitals and Catholic nursing homes; rehabilitation centers with well-meaning bird hutches and infantile Simon Says games; the stale warm scent of applesauce and passed gas perpetually commingled in the air; whiteboards on which the nurses’ names changed from one day to the next like soups du jour; case managers who liked her, case managers who didn’t; power of attorney.

A year and a half later, on Halloween, her dad had died in his sleep, with an unopened straw stowed in his pajama shirt pocket, and Taro had never come to join her. It took Evelyn four weeks of chasing him down on the phone to find out he had met someone else. That summer, she moved out of her mother and stepfather’s house into a modest studio apartment one town over by herself.

She was back in the U.S. for good.

In the morning, a boatlike GMC Denali swung into the next door neighbor’s driveway, its tinted windows rolled halfway down and a couple of brightly banded LIVESTRONG forearms perched atop their rims. Evelyn heard a dog

bark, then human yelps and chatter, the scuttle of feet on the gravel path. She looked. A border collie and a quartet of preadolescent and teenaged girls dressed in short, puffy jackets with fur-lined hoods and skin-sucking jeans were tumbling out of the car. From out of the driver's side, a woman climbed down—the mother hen, Evelyn assumed. She was a young mom: her figure taut, her waist small, and her chestnut-colored hair drawn up into a high, curly ponytail. Only her skin—lined and heavily freckled from sun—betrayed her age. All of them slung well-stuffed weekend bags over their shoulders or carried beige plastic sacks of groceries into the house. The collie wove between their legs, panting with anxious joy.

Evelyn watched them from the safety of the bathroom window at the side of the house, trying to anticipate the potential noise factor. Without trees between them, the view was naked, utterly exposed. So long, privacy, Evelyn mused to herself.

She was about to turn away when the screen door sprang open, and one of the smaller girls emerged without her coat—in a thin henley shirt, her long locks of straightened hair flying behind her—and raced back to the car.

114

“Mom, you locked it!” she shouted, pulling at the door.

No answer from inside the house.

“Open the door, will you?” she yelled over her shoulder.

Still no answer.

“Mo-om! I'm going to kill you! OPEN the door!”

The screen door opened a crack, and the young mom emerged. She pressed her key remote, and *whooshk-da-dum*, the car door was unlocked. The girl pulled it open and then rifled around the backseat, her rear end in the air. “It's not here, oh my God, it totally isn't here!”

“What?” her mother asked, coming over to help.

“Mom, my yellow bag, the Aeropostale bag. It had all my leotards and footless tights and stuff in it.”

“Did you check the trunk?”

“YES, of course. Mom, didn't I ask you to check before we left if I had everything? Didn't I ask you to get that bag? I had my laptop and my backpack. I asked you to carry it.” She jutted her chin out, put one hand on her canted hip.

“I'm sorry, Carrie. Let's check inside one more time.”

“You check. You lost it.” Carrie slammed the door closed.

Evelyn turned away from the window and swept the curtains shut with some force. She had seen enough. Perhaps there was a point in her life when such a scene would have provoked her to draw unforgiving, incisive comparisons between American teens and Japanese ones, to devise elaborate theories about overt and latent forms of rebellion and how each culture cultivated them. And perhaps at that time she would have also marveled at the way suburban American mothers passively accepted their statuses as beasts of burden, and then proceeded to take some shallow solace in the fact that she herself would never be treated this way. But not anymore. She didn't have the patience or the energy or the cultural interest for such fruitless analysis anymore. Now she simply stewed in a brute, puerile annoyance, mimicked the offenders ("You check, you lost it. Mo-om, I'm going to kill you," she went around the room repeating), and went on with things.

When the coast was clear, Evelyn got in her own car and drove out to the ocean with her lunch. She had a thermos of hot clam chowder she had bought at one of the only shops that was open on the main drag—a small grocery that sold live lobsters in two large vats on either side of the cash register as well as their own famous clam chowder (she'd gathered from all the roadside signage that everyone's clam chowder on the Cape was famous), which she had reheated at the house.

115

She parked the car in a sand-brushed lot and grabbed her blanket and picnic basket. She was alone, save for an older couple walking hand-in-hand in the distance, their nearly identical short, silver hair tossing in the wind. The sand was hard and firmly packed beneath her feet as she trudged past the driftwood fences and toward the water in her tennis shoes and watched the low waves roiling in. The sea was choppy today. White boats dotted the horizon. Behind her, the dunes loomed, high and brittle, fatally eroding.

Against her better judgment, she dropped her folded blanket down in the cold sand and sat down. But it was no use. The wind picked up, bitter and fierce, whipping her hair about her face. It practically knocked her over.

She returned to the car to settle in with her soup and turned on the radio while the steam from the open thermos fogged up her glasses. On NPR, a man with a slow, anemic voice was answering questions about a novel he had translated. His answers were careful but authoritative, with a touch of self-deprecating wit. He was saying that he had translated much of the novel while in Japan, in Kanazawa, a town he had first visited and fallen in love

with years ago, while studying abroad. Evelyn's ears perked up. She leaned in close to the radio. She knew who this person was, from a former life. It was Michael Pennington, a classmate of hers. They had dated very briefly in college, where they had both been East Asian Studies majors.

Now as she listened, she matched up his voice with her memory of his broad, apple-cheeked face, his eyes—green and slightly protuberant—which blinked a mile a minute behind antiquarian gold-rimmed glasses. She remembered his pigeon-toed amble, how he used to pad silently through the cold, dark hallways of Pyne Hall in his well-worn Chuck Taylors, like an Arabian dromedary with his ponderously overlaid backpack. She remembered his ascetic dorm room, from which he had had Maintenance remove the bed so he could sleep on a futon he rolled out every night, his Japanophilia already setting root. She remembered the way he had ruffled her hair around the ears when he kissed her, all wet and clumsy, because somehow they could never quite sync to each other's rhythms. She remembered that Michael was one of the few people who had ever called her "Evie."

116

And then, three weeks into their burgeoning courtship, his mother had died without warning, of a pulmonary embolism. Evelyn barely had the chance to utter a full condolence before Michael had mumbled that he had to go and hung up the phone. Before she knew it, he had left school. A year went by before he returned, and when Evelyn finally saw him again on campus, he walked right past her on the quad as if he had never known her.

It was the kind of thing to which Evelyn would grow accustomed in her life with the opposite sex. Somehow, something would always happen to draw them from her, some overwhelming circumstance over which neither of them had control. She came to believe she was the kind of woman from whom men—the few of them she had been with—would slip away like unteathered sails, as if she had been careless, had not made something memorable of herself to keep them attached. Certainly she was nobody's idea of a catch. She had always been plain—her face unremarkable, her body as feminine as a bottle of dishwashing soap—and overserious, given to heavy brooding and paralyzing bouts of social anxiety. Worse, her health had always been poor. Her surgery—at twenty-three, which she felt sure ranked her as one of the youngest patients in the history of modern medicine to have to undergo a hysterectomy—was the absolute nail in the coffin, rendering her not merely deficient externally, but essentially. Indeed, without a womb, could one even

really call oneself a woman? On Evelyn's lowest, darkest days, her answer tended to be no.

Naturally, the novel Michael had translated had just been awarded a translation prize, hence the interview. Evelyn did not recognize the name of the young Japanese author who had written the book, but Michael's next project was a translation of a more established, well-known novelist—Ichiro Hamano, a favorite of Evelyn's. She had read every novel, short story, and personal essay the man had ever written. At first, she felt a thrill of admiration for her old friend, not to mention a proud delight in her proximity to him; but slowly, as she continued listening to the interview and eating her soup, she began to feel worse and worse. She could not help but think that, by comparison, she had nothing to show for her own years of diligent study, only ESL textbooks—her name listed among a handful of others—and a few freelance translations of magazine articles. And even those projects were long in the past. She now worked at a testing company editing ESL exams for high school students, work for which her name never appeared in print anywhere.

When Evelyn got back to the house, she continued to dig her emotional hole deeper by Googling the man. Hit after hit, page after page appeared, with his name in bold script. A few also brought up Michael's grave author photo—a black-and-white half-body shot, with him looking mild-mannered and scholarly behind heavy black frames, a mahogany library of tomes sprawling out behind him. He had earned his PhD in Japanese literature at Stanford. He had won various awards. He “currently divided his time between Yokohama and Santa Cruz,” where he lived with “his wife, the composer Claudine Sayre, their son, and their two cats, Schoenberg and Mishima.” He was also an “accomplished classical guitarist.”

Evelyn rolled her eyes and stood up from the table. “Woman Tries Not to Vomit,” she said.

At least Evelyn's streak of small accidents was lessening in the rented house, as she had hoped, although she still saw Alistair out of the corner of her eye all the time—the shadow of his sway-backed tail would travel behind the armchair, or his head would sink down on the far side of the bed—and for an instant, she would swear some mistake had been made. Then there was always the sense that she had forgotten to do something—change the water

dish, walk him, feed him. Her day was littered with blank stretches of time, the old consolation of companioned routine vanished.

She took walks by herself now, on the cold, gusty beach, around the neighborhood.

One afternoon, passing by the neighbor's house on one of these walks, she saw the girls conducting what looked like a photo shoot in the street in front of their house. The older girl was wielding a fancy Canon SLR with a hefty professional lens, and the three younger girls were taking turns leaning against a tree, against a fence, jumping off large rocks. They were dressed for summer, immune to the chill, with an ecstatic collection of names and symbols—the hieroglyphics of girlhood—graffitied onto cropped tanks and sweatpants whose waistbands they had folded down to display their midriffs. Evelyn's attention focused on the girl who had run outside the first day—Carrie, the prettiest one, with the alabaster complexion of a pre-Raphaelite. She wore her not-shirt askew on her white shoulders and tugged at it every so often to ensure maximal angle. Asymmetry appeared to be a theme with her, as her hair, too, was pulled to the side in a gnarled, artfully messy bun, plopped atop the right side of her head like a roly-poly chrysanthemum.

118

Evelyn walked past, giving them a wide berth. But for all her irritation at their vain pastime, Evelyn found it difficult to stop staring. The girls, especially Carrie, were beautiful, almost painfully so, with their long athletic limbs, nascent breasts, honey-skinned pubescent stomachs—nothing like herself as a kid, or, for that matter, her colleagues' kids, the only kids she was ever in any real contact with—awkward, bespectacled, acne-spangled geeks, their teeth trussed with metal. Like Evelyn, her colleagues were former expats who had finally resigned their dreams of exceptionalism and returned to the States, the lucky ones—or the unlucky ones, depending on the marriage—with foreign spouses in tow. They were the constitutionally sensitive of their generation, the aggrieved weirdos, bookish but aimless, seeking refuge from ambition. Nowadays, these sorts of people became yoga instructors. Or organic farmers. In her day, they taught English abroad.

Evelyn continued her walk, but even when she was well past the girls, she could not shake them from her mind. Nor could she when she was back at the house, still tortured by envy. It seemed ridiculous that a forty-something woman could still be tormented by such comparisons. Hadn't she outgrown this? But of course, age had only made things harder. In the place of beauty, she was supposed to have planted achievement, and she had not. For the

loss of youth, she was supposed to have gained the bounty of motherhood, or at least the companionship of a partner, and she had not. Her well of inner resources, in this moment, felt thoroughly dried up, caked and muddy, flyblown and futile. She had exhausted whatever supply of Zen wisdom she had ever had to wield against jealousy, and now only the bitter truth shone through—that she was suffering and these girls were not. She could already see their adult lives panning out just as they expected them to—with husbands and houses and children and well-paying jobs in public relations, or marketing, or the cosmetics industry. Their lives as they desired.

She took a long, scalding bath that night. Afterwards, she found a small white tube of Alexis's White Diamond body lotion—"Body Radiance," it said in an art deco, all-capitals font—and slathered it on her hands and forearms. She sniffed her wrists. The fragrance was florid and cheap, overpowering in its graceless expression of femininity.

Without her glasses, she regarded the soft-focus reflection before her. It looked like the beginner's foreign-language version of oneself, simplified to basic features and contours, all the sunken colors and wan hills. She held her hands in front of her face and turned them in the light, their slickly oiled surfaces shining. She felt an odd, arrogant sort of strength suffusing her blood, like a magnetic field, equally powerful in its force to attract as to repel.

119

Over the next few days, Evelyn saw the girls everywhere. They were taking more photos, or they were walking the dog. Sometimes on her walks in the evenings, she would see the girls through their living room or kitchen windows, lit up as if in a diorama. The father was home then, another car in the driveway. They were setting the table or clearing it. They were self-consciously tossing their hair, or chewing gum, or flouncing onto the sofa in front of the polar glare of a wall-mounted plasma TV.

On her last day on the Cape, her car all packed up, she was making a quick stop at the Superette to buy a Diet Coke and some dried cranberries for the road, when she saw Carrie there with a teenaged boy. The boy had a mop of brown hair that flattened around the face, as if he had mashed a baseball cap down to mold it that way. They were both dressed in Patagonia polar fleeces, standing at the magazine rack, flipping through a copy of *US Weekly*.

Evelyn watched them out of the corner of her eye, wondering if the girl recognized her. But when Carrie looked up and made eye contact, there was no light of recognition whatsoever.

She didn't recognize her? *What a shock.* Compelled by this renewed hatred, Evelyn went on spying, making her way slowly up and down the store's short aisles. With one eye on the young couple, she feigned fascination with a can of Clabber Girl baking soda, then fondled a bag of circus peanuts as if trying to ascertain their freshness. She spun the postcard rack, musing over purple Cape sunsets and glistening close-ups of steamed lobster dinners.

The couple was talking very loudly. They had the bright, unembarrassed voices of people who believed their words were amusing to everyone. They wanted to be overheard, to be looked at. They felt entitled to it.

These were the kind of people, Evelyn felt sure, who would forge through the better part of their lives saying such things as "between you and I" and not knowing the difference between "its" and "it's." Who stupidly tossed their greasy, cheese-stained pizza boxes in recycling, or upgraded their 51-inch TVs to 53-inch ones, or cranked their AC to full blast when there was the slightest whiff of heat. They were the buyers of scratch tickets, the readers of success and management books. Superbowl Sunday meant something to them. So did buying things personalized with their initials.

120 At the cashier now, lost in her private tirade, Evelyn hardly heard the man. "Ma'am? Excuse me. Four eighty-five?"

"Oh, I'm sorry." She fumbled through her mess of a wallet, engorged with frequent customer punch cards and receipts. She handed him five dirty bills.

Today she was leaving, her retreat in Cape Cod over. Tomorrow, back to life as usual, back to work. The usual resignation to a force greater than herself began to coil tightly in her stomach. She took the brown paper bag and hugged it close to her chest.

The sleigh bells on the glass door jingled, merry and bright, as she exited.

Outside, a collie was prone, tied loosely to a bike rack. It regarded Evelyn with alert eyes, the palest, longest tongue.

She recognized this dog. Yes, of course she did. It was Carrie's collie.

Evelyn's first instinct was to mentally chide the girl for doing such a careless job of tying up the dog—her shoddy, half-hearted knot in full evidence. But her second instinct proved far more interesting.

Behind her, through the glass doors, the girl and her boyfriend were still engrossed in their magazine, their polar-fleeced backs to her.

"Good dog, good doggie," she said, patting the collie's warm head. Her heart was thumping wildly in her sternum. She hurriedly weighed the options. She could let the dog go, let it scamper into the piney woods behind

the Superette, but that could prove dangerous. What if something happened? What if, say, later this evening, some idiot, yammering on his Bluetooth while hurtling down a side road, hit the poor animal by accident? Say he saw a pair of reflected, razor-white eyes and swerved at the last possible moment, but still it was too late? That could happen. Evelyn could hear him now. *From out of nowhere*, he'd blubber. *It came out of nowhere*. He'd be kneeling in the middle of the night road, caressing the dog's neck, watching its breath slow. *There was nothing I could do*, he'd say to whoever pulled up. *It's not like I wasn't paying attention*.

No, there were dangerous idiots out there—beefheads and jackasses and worse, sickos. That was not the best course of action. *Let's use our head here, Evelyn*. It would be better to just take the dog herself. That way, there'd be no risk of damage—at least not to the innocent party.

Yes, take the dog herself. That's what she would do.

She set her brown bag and purse on the curb. Quickly she began to worry one end of the leash out of the knot. It was easy; it was already partly unraveled, and the collie was panting up at her, decent and trusting.

As she worked, she checked behind her, over her shoulder. The couple was now at the sandwich station, talking to one of the workers behind the counter. There was an ease and familiarity about the relaxed way in which they leaned toward him. Carrie was drawing on a receipt with a ballpoint pen topped with a tuft of hot pink fuzz, the boy absentmindedly playing with his fleece zipper. They were catching up with an old friend, shooting the breeze, having a grand old time.

121

It went without saying that Evelyn had never done anything like this before. True, as a poor college student, she had acquired a few library books by X-Acto-knifing their spines and extracting the magnetic bar stickers inside. And once, after being invited to a colleague's family's Passover seder, she had gotten in her car, a notch or two or three beyond tipsy, and driven herself home. (As it turned out, liberating oneself from Egypt took an excruciatingly long time, and all she had wanted by the end of the whole thing was to race home to Alistair, her bed, and *Masterpiece Mystery* with Miss Marple.) And not that this was even worth mentioning anymore, but as a kid, she used to sample two Brach's nougats from the display at the grocery, instead of one. Barring all this, she had pretty much spent her life being an unfailingly good citizen.

But now, flying down Route 6, there was no denying what she had become: Thief. Dog-napper à la Cruella de Vil. Woman of Malicious Intent.

The collie itself had begun to cotton to her evil. He was in the backseat, whimpering in the most pathetic way, his head resting on the shoulder of the passenger seat.

“Aw, there, there, baby.” Evelyn stroked his neck and tried to calm him down. She checked the silver, lozenge-shaped tag on his collar and learned that *he* was probably a *she*: Paris. Paris “the collie” Berland. The Berlands’ address and phone number were engraved on the back.

Dear God! What a terrible name for a dog, one of the worst she’d ever heard. Weren’t these people aware that the collie was an Anglo-Scottish breed? And that the English despise the French, and have always despised the French, hence their willful mispronunciation of every consonant in the French lexicon?

“Poor thing, I probably did you a favor,” she said. Her left hand was on the steering wheel, her right on the dog. “Clearly your owners know nothing about dogs. Who the hell did they name you after? Paris Hilton? Good grief.”

122 At the first rest stop she saw, Evelyn pulled over and rooted around in her trunk for an old water dish of Alistair’s. She swore there was one in there from their last road trip. Yes, here it was, under a broken navy blue umbrella and a mysteriously stained canvas shopping bag. Here, too, was Alistair’s black Kong, still smelling of its last smear of peanut butter, and a pinecone he had chewed to near oblivion—the sight of which caught Evelyn off guard and caused her to well up a bit. She couldn’t bring herself to toss the thing, simply left it on the carpeting toward the rear, its scales disintegrating in a ring around the spine like a dead man’s chalk outline.

At the gas station, she bought a large bottle of water, took a few swigs herself, and then poured half a dish full. Paris stopped whining long enough to lap at the water.

When she was done, Evelyn presented the dog with the Kong that Alistair had loved to death. But Paris just regarded it curiously, cocking her head to one side.

“It’s a Kong, Paris! Don’t you know Kongs? They’re doggie crack!”

Paris stuck her neck out and sniffed it.

“Don’t be dumb, Paris. Collies are supposed to be a very intelligent breed.” Still, Paris remained suspicious.

Evelyn looked at the fat, beehive-like object in her hand. There was something vaguely sinister and S&M-reminiscent about the Kong; she had always thought so. Now, as it rolled in her hand—a swollen, hard-rubber freak of a Kara Walker phallus—she wondered if Alistair’s scent was still territorially marking the toy and rendering it unappealing.

The dog barked twice in response.

“Well, too bad, baby, that’s all I have for you. Take it or leave it.” She tossed it on the backseat and shut the door. Then she slid back into the driver’s seat and adjusted her rearview mirror. “It’s gonna be a long drive home.”

The drive was long. About six hours, maybe longer, given the occasional clots of traffic. As she drove, seizing up whenever she spotted a cop car, Evelyn tried to imagine what Carrie was doing, moment by moment. Were she and her boyfriend calling the dog’s name down the road? And now was she searching the woods, her hands in her hair, her face flushed a florid pink from cold and panic? Surely, she would eventually give up and go home, be scolded for her carelessness. Together the family would place some calls. Then someone would find a recent, red-eyed photo and make a stack of fliers. Carrie would unearth a staple gun from the junk drawer, pull her black fleece back over her head, and head out with her sisters to assault unsuspecting telephone poles and trees...

123

Around this point in Evelyn’s speculation—the image of the girls tramping down the night road, not a single one of them wearing a reflective piece of clothing—she stopped herself. She was not interested in letting her imagination proceed any further. The truth was, Evelyn merely wanted Carrie’s pain to be abstract, conceptual. Complete, but featureless. It was too troubling to think of her own impulsive actions bearing themselves out in the world; she merely wanted them to manifest themselves in the precincts of the heart.

It was better to have tunnel vision from here on out. No looking back. No grim guessing.

In this respect, Paris’s crying helped immensely, rendering any sustained train of thought impossible. And how that dog could cry! By the time they crossed the New Jersey border, Evelyn was about ready to tear her own hair out. Paris’s whimpering jag had lasted nearly the entire trip—interrupted only by the time it took her to consume half of Evelyn’s ham sandwich and a chicken thigh from Boston Market, and relieve herself twice.

Yes, clearly this was the karma of her crime—total mental ruination by her homesick captive. She feared the days ahead.

Thankfully, by the time Evelyn had lugged her bags into the house, turned the heat on, and sorted through her mail, Paris had worn herself out. For a moment, Evelyn could not believe her ears. She was in the kitchen, staring at the tins in her pantry, trying to figure out what she could cobble together for a late dinner, when it happened. Could it truly be? She froze, afraid that any sudden movement would set it off again. She turned around, as slow as a mime. Yes, unmistakably, there it was, a sight that filled her with unspeakable glee: the dog had fallen asleep at the foot of her velveteen armchair, curled up in a whitish-brown ball.

With silence reigning in the house, Evelyn fixed herself a tuna melt and heated a can of tomato soup, then set her matching polka-dotted plate and bowl down in front of the TV. The sight of her simple meal—one of maybe seven or eight in her extremely limited cooking repertoire—saddened her, reminded her ungently of her station: a forty-eight-year-old woman still eating like a college student.

124

She could hear Taro now, himself a fine, passionate cook, making fun of her lazy dinners: “An onigiri for dinner!” or “Another prepared bento box tonight?” He called her Kraft macaroni and cheese (purchased at super-inflated import prices) “orange American curls.” Right away he had set to rectifying the situation by teaching her how to make sushi rice in a big wooden tub, then grilled octopus, potato croquettes, pork katsu, wakame salad with roasted sesame seeds. Once they had even made their own udon noodles. It went without saying that, in the years that they were together, Evelyn ate better than she ever had in her life.

How quickly those skills fell from memory and those kitchen tools disappeared into the deep recesses of a never-opened cabinet! Once back in the States, without him, she easily slipped back into her comfortable habits, her American tastes. If she wanted Japanese food, she went to Osaka on Route 1 or Ichiban Sushi on Market Street. At most, she made miso soup from instant, individualized packets from Whole Foods.

As she ate her sandwich, trying to ignore the metallic aftertaste of the tuna, she suddenly recalled reading somewhere that Patty Hearst had been eating a tuna sandwich and can of chicken noodle soup when she was kidnapped from her apartment. It was a Didion essay, wasn't it? The parallel

was hilarious to her now. She and Patty Hearst, two peas in a pod, sharing a love of processed American foods and a life of sudden, inexplicable crime!

Evelyn was laughing as she placed her plate on the glass coffee table. It struck the surface harder than she had meant it to. *Klunggg.*

The dog stirred in her headless ball.

Evelyn stopped chewing for a second. She braced herself.

Don't wake up, don't wake up.

Paris opened her eyes, regarded Evelyn warily, and then tucked her head back under her tail.

Evelyn should have felt relieved, and yet she did not. This dog—who, after all, could never be Alistair—was missing her family, and that family, however gauche and undeserving, was missing their dog. And on the level of the practicalities of the crime itself, Evelyn was clenched with a sense of not-rightness. Something was not quite adding up, although she could not yet put a finger on what. Had she forgotten to do something? Had she dropped something in the parking lot? Was there a security camera perhaps that she hadn't noticed outside the Superette? She certainly hadn't seen one. No, she was very sure she had not. And yet the dull, subterranean fear continued to nag at her.

125

Then it came to her, all at once, a flash of white, nether-region dread. The Patty Hearst detail had apparently jogged some part of her consciousness, and she suddenly realized that the dog's address, when she had glanced at its tag hours ago, read "44 Patricia Lane."

She had thought nothing of it at the time. But Max and Alexis's address was Everson Drive. It was Everson Drive! Their next-door neighbors couldn't possibly live on a different street. They were right next door!

Now that she realized this, all the pieces began—horribly, horribly—to fall into place. Because no, upon entering the store, Evelyn had definitely *not* seen a collie tied up at the door. Only when she had left. But Carrie and her boyfriend had already been in the store, at the magazine rack. They had gotten there before her. So it was simply not possible that the dog belonged to them. It had to belong to someone who had arrived at the Superette after Evelyn.

An innocent someone else!

Paris the Collie belonged to someone else.

Four days later, the man who showed up at Evelyn's door was colossal in size. Spherical and Hitchcockian of silhouette. Not just big, but tall, like the men's

clothing store so aptly and unimaginatively named. The sides of his face, silvered with stubble, were dewy with perspiration, as if it had been a trek, a real climb, to get from the driveway up the walk. When Evelyn invited him in, already spewing her catalog of apologies—sorry for your inconvenience, sorry for your worry, sorry for the drive, she smelled in his wake something damp and fertile, mushroomy, like a waterlogged shoe. His name was Peter. He was a New Yorker. He extended his great bear paw, which Evelyn accepted gingerly. His hand was moist and gave off a terrific heat.

Paris wasted no time, her nose in the air, her ears perked in disbelieving recognition. She was immediately in the foyer, jumping all over Peter in greeting. Man and man's best friend lost in a tornado of wet tongue and joyful exclamation and freckled, doughy hands tousling fur.

As she learned on the phone, however, Paris did not belong to Peter but to his sister Esther and her children who lived in Wellfleet (on Patricia Lane!). He had just been visiting them. He flipped open his wallet to show Evelyn some badly cut school photos in plastic sleeves—a small, towheaded boy with gleaming cherry-red lips, as if he had just been sucking a freeze-pop, and strapped around his head, the kind of kid glasses that resembled goggles more than frames. Then two older kids, Asian, a girl and a boy, a handful of teeth missing between them. Peter whipped out his cell phone and showed her more: a shot of all three in crafty homemade Indian and pilgrim costumes; the other two, black hair slicked seal-like over their heads in a gloriously azure pool surrounded by cacti. "Tucson," he'd said. "Their grandma's place." When he inhaled, Evelyn noticed that he slurped in the air, gurgly and labored.

"All adopted," he added for good measure. "Good kids, great kids. All of them. They were just torn up when Paris went missing. God, were they heartbroken. And then you called! We can't tell you how overjoyed we were. I mean, you see those puppy factories on TV, those poor, abused, wet dogs, crouching in dank corners...I couldn't help imagining the worst. Thank God for good Samaritans, huh?" He put a hot hand on her shoulder.

"Oh, that's hardly—" Evelyn said, sheepish. "I mean, I'm hardly..."

But the explication went on. He said he had just popped into the store for a minute that day to pick up the day's paper, a roll of TP. It was so careless of him to not tie Paris up properly, but he honestly hadn't thought it necessary. Normally she was such an obedient thing, he didn't even think she had it in her to hightail it off. He had felt so bad, he'd said, he couldn't bring himself

to tell the kids what had happened, had driven around for hours, looking, praying, calling for her, before he had finally given up and gone back to his sister's to break the terrible news.

Evelyn felt awful. Who could have guessed that her act of petty, impulsive vengeance would take such a shape? She was so ashamed. She wanted to tell the truth. But she couldn't bring herself to do it. What would he have thought of her? What would anyone have thought of her? No, she couldn't say. Instead, she pulled herself together quickly and offered, in a pathetic attempt to dispel suspicion, that perhaps a delivery truck had left its doors open and somehow Paris had wandered in. Or maybe some hoodlums, playing a stupid prank, had picked her up and then dropped her off on the highway? She felt it important to provide some explanation, however unsatisfactory, however lame, for the distance the dog had traveled in just a few days.

But the man was simply too grateful and too unsuspecting to concern himself with such hypotheses. In fact, he wanted to offer Evelyn a finder's reward of two hundred dollars—and, if she would consider it, to have her come to the Cape sometime. In the summer, if she didn't already have plans. Had she ever been?

Evelyn panicked for a second—what story was best, most plausible, yet still cohered with her alibi? Finally, having no time to decide, she shook her head, tentatively, vaguely; you could hardly call it a shake. “No...”

“It's decided, then!” he said, clapping his hands together. He told her she definitely had to go. They had great views where they were, excellent lobster, impeccable beaches. And the clam chowder, he said, well, you know, the world-famous Wellfleet clam chowder just couldn't be beat.