

## Jacqueline

Jacqueline and I became friends the year the village went to work building houses. Our world had frozen over. The winter started in November like usual, but then it kept going. The snow stayed on the ground and the ice hardened and built up in layers. The houses weren't built to withstand it. They started cracking at the eaves. Light from the lamps spilled on the ground like butter and warmth escaped, as if everywhere someone had left a door ajar and parlor whispers drifted into the air, smallnesses that were supposed to be kept locked under the earth of families broken out and gone drifting between the trees, where anyone could turn their cheek to them like moisture in the air, like spring.

The adults in the village agreed that this could not go on. The town council met and issued a mandate: starting next Sunday, everyone who was able would leave behind their other work and set themselves to building houses. In the morning, my father had tended the vegetable gardens, and in the evening he cooked for us and read from the large row of botany textbooks on the dark wood mantle of his study. Now he would abandon his rows of earth and his evening

studies. When she returned from weaving and cutting cloth in the center of town, my mother had gone for long runs around the lip of the lake and, returning flushed and breathing hard, her eyes sparkling, held us close against her quickly rising and falling chest. Now she would put aside her runs for two extra hours with the hammers and nails, making sure the boards of each house came together and lifted off the ground. I was twelve years old, so I wouldn't have to work for one more year. I would keep going to school.

The night before the mandate went into effect, my family ate together at the dinner table. We washed the dishes, then my mother took my brother down the hall for a bath. I went upstairs to my bedroom. Passing the open door to my parents' room, I saw my father sitting at his desk in the yellow lamplight. He had his hands in his hair, the dark, curly locks coarse with gray, poking from the gaps between his fingers. There was a book open on his desk, but his arm lay across it; he wasn't reading. I was startled by the stillness of his face, which was usually eager and mobile, loosened from years in the sun and elastic with the desire to run and meet the demands of another person's expression. He now looked carved from stone. He saw me in the doorway and straightened. He took off his glasses. Then he put them back on. Then he took them off again and put them to the side for good.

“Come inside, dear.”

His voice was the voice I had known my entire childhood, the voice of comfort I had sought booming across the lot of the schoolyard, that told me he was here to take me home. I stepped immediately through the doorway and he took my face in his hands. I was accustomed to this gesture—he often squeezed my face as he kissed me on both cheeks, his beard and mustache scratching, me squirming and laughing. Tonight he only held me, his gaze passing slowly over my face. He must have seen the look in my eyes.

“It’s okay,” he said quietly. “I wouldn’t have been able to get any plants to grow, anyway. It’s too cold.”

He pushed a lock of my hair behind my ear and turned his hand, pressing his knuckles against my cheek. At his touch I felt the earth floor of my stomach give way, rotting leaves and beams sinking down with a sudden, vast creak, for tenderness is conferred only by the possibility of loss, and his gesture was soft enough against my cheek that he could not have been telling me the truth, though I had no words for this knowledge; it came to me only as fear.

My father dropped his hand and reached for his glasses, putting them on. Then he kissed me on the forehead and I felt the whisper of his beard.

“Go on now, time for bed,” he said, turning me gently around to face the door. I went. Children have no other choice. In our lives there are only the rafters of the house we are born to, and the earth below. In my room, I lay on top of the covers and turned to the window as my brother slept. The frost had crept across and spangled the pane. I pressed my index finger to it, traced its patterns briefly. In the morning the wan yellow sunlight would burn it away and in the evening it would return. I stared at it until my mother passed by the door and blew out the light in the hall, urging me softly to go to sleep.

The next day, my father and mother walked me and my brother to the schoolhouse in the center of town. Usually they left the house in separate directions, my father towards the fields and my mother further into town, and my brother and I went to the schoolhouse alone. Now we

all walked in the same direction. When I was six years old and my parents left me at schoolhouse for the first time, I refused to go inside. I stood there, crying, clinging to the doorway. Eventually my parents left, reasoning that if I couldn't physically see them anymore, I would have no choice but to learn to tolerate our separation. The teachers urged and begged, but I wouldn't go in. They would have had to remove me by physical force. When my father returned at the end of the day, he found me still there, hinged to the wood, and he was the one to pick me up and put me over his shoulder. The next day, when I realized that if I wanted to fight this I would have to do the same thing every day for the rest of my life and nothing would change, I went easily and did my sums and read. I was twelve now and had not felt that way since. But as my parents leaned down to kiss us goodbye, the feeling clawed its way back into my body like a living animal, red panic at my ribs, like my stomach was a room it had been let into by accident, and it didn't recognize the door out.

My brother went inside the schoolhouse, but I didn't follow; I stood on the threshold, watching my parents' backs retreat. I wanted to go after them, but I was twelve years old now and knew I could not. But I found I could not go inside, either.

That was how I found myself watching Jacqueline as she approached. I knew her name because the village had whispered about her when she and her mother arrived—months ago, in autumn, huddled together, her mother in a yellow wool coat and bulging green scarf, Jacqueline in brown. They took up residence in one of the houses at the edge of town. The other girls at school said there was something wrong with their family, that no-one ever saw her mother, that for some reason she could not work. I paid them no mind, as I had seen Jacqueline's mother several times, if only at church or in passing at the market, but I did not silence them either.

Jaqueline reached the schoolhouse and stood at the bottom of the steps and looked at me. She was wearing a little red coat with black fastenings and a hat that crested over the tips of her ears but didn't cover them. Her black curly hair poked out from under it. Her nose was tiny and pink from the cold. I was wearing my green coat. Jacqueline's resting expression was of appraisal, arch; she held her gaze at a natural level with the world, and with me. She had acute dark eyes with tightly curled lashes. Her features were small but resolute, with a delicate, spindly strength like a black bare branch poking into the ice-grey sky. She wore glasses. Her eyes were liquid.

"Hello," she said. "Do you want to go to the forest with me?"

"What?" I could barely hear her, the terrible feeling still pacing the walls of my stomach.

"Do you want to go to the forest with me?" She didn't seem frustrated to be repeating herself, though her bearing suggested a temperament prone to impatience. She glanced over my shoulder, through the open door into the tiny schoolhouse. All but two of our teachers had been assigned to work on the houses, and there were dozens and dozens of children to care for. "I don't think they're going to care what we do anymore."

I followed her gaze and knew she was right.

"Okay," I said, and we walked away from the schoolhouse and into the forest together.

In the coming months I learned things about Jacqueline. She didn't like hardboiled eggs because of the smell. When I ate them—and most days I did, bringing them in my pockets from home to keep my hands warm on our walk—she wrinkled her nose and said, "If we were still in school and you ate those, I wouldn't sit next to you until you were done." I peeled them sitting next to her on a log or a rock, where the smell escaped her detection, and when I let the shells fall to the ground they sat pristinely curved on the surface of the ice. Every day Jaqueline

brought two small oranges from home and gave one to me. We kept the peels in our pockets until we got home, and our hands were fragrant for hours after. At night sometimes I would stand at the sink brushing my teeth and find bits of the pith lodged still in my cuticles. Jacqueline didn't talk much about her house, but she told me that every room had a rug in a different color. There was a gold-colored one in the living room that was her favorite. It was made of long, thick fibers, and if you moved your hands through it in the lamplight, it looked like a field of wheat shimmering in the wind. She said it was beautiful. I wanted to ask if I could come to her house and see it, but I sensed something in her, brittle and resolute as the strong parts of her, that made me hesitate, and in those early days I could see no reason to overcome it.

That first day, Jackie led the way into the forest. She knew it better than I did; I never traveled out here except on rare occasions with friends or my brother. It felt like a different forest when I was there with Jackie. I doubted my steps a little more and walked a pace behind her. I watched her small shoulders and back move through the plane of white and the dark black reach of the branches. She pushed them aside confidently and held them for me, looking over her shoulder.

“Do you want to see the most important place in the whole forest?”

I felt an instant rise of guilt because I suspected that if I were ahead of her I would forget to hold the branches. The immense, silent universe of the forest had the effect of drawing me into myself, and on that first day if I went inside the pacing feeling was right there in the parlor, which made it harder for me to think of others.

“Yes,” I said anyway, because I did want to see. Jackie nodded.

As we walked the snow opened in front of us like white pavement. I saw Jackie as a small black figure, weaving in front of me, always a few paces ahead, or distant. She wobbled

with the lines and dimensions of the space—when the forest in front of us stretched and changed, her body expanded, and when the trees closed around us, I sensed her narrowing. We climbed over fallen branches and large rocks treacherous with lines of ice gleaming like veins of jewel in the stone. This became our route, which we trudged every day in single file. The entire way was dangerous, laid with ice and other hard things; we could have walked abreast and held hands the whole way to steady each other, but we didn't. We only reached for each other when the rocks rose seriously out of the snow and we couldn't climb them otherwise. I would tap Jackie on the shoulder and extend my hand silently, and she would take it. I didn't wear mittens and Jackie did. My bare hand pressed into her mittened one. I felt the roughness of the wool, and just behind it, the soft resistance of her hand, muscle and bone. I wondered what she felt, holding mine.

Loneliness breaks like the sun over the horizon, or ice beneath your shoe—a sudden crack in the trees. We stood in a small clearing. Before us was the foundation of a fallen house, laid in a dark square of beams sunk into the snow. To the right, one wall still stood, stooped halfway, but the rest was collapsed, except for a long beam on the far side that jutted straight from the earth towards the sky.

“This is it,” said Jackie.

“I guess they don't know about this one,” I said.

“No,” she said. “I don't think they'll try to build any new houses here.”

I sank into a crouch and ran my bare hand along one of the fallen beams. To my right was a window pane. It arched from the snow like a shoulder rising beneath the sheets.

“Watch out, that could hurt you,” said Jacqueline, but I was already lifting it, careful to let the hard edge press slowly into my palm so I could tell if it would cut or not. It was dull; still,

Jackie stood tense beside me. Our faces didn't mirror in the glass; the light that sprayed over it was too hard to reflect any details, opaque and flint-rainbowed over the dirty surface.

“How long do you think it's been since someone lived here?” I asked.

“Years,” murmured Jackie. “Maybe since before we were born.”

I eased the windowpane back into the divet it had left in the snow and ice, where it reflected for us only the color of the sky. Life is long, and years are longer with no light. Back at home, my mother lit candles, thin tallow with an acrid smell. The glow illuminated her. The first day I returned from the forest, I was careful to retrieve my brother from school and come home before my parents arrived so they wouldn't worry. I sat in the kitchen, waiting in the pale grey light of the afternoon, and tried not to feel like crying as the sky darkened, and the shadows in the steel bellies of the pots and pans on the stove grew long and deep, and still they had not returned. The nights were longer in winter, so the entire village used more candles. Soon, the town council would order that they be rationed: two a day per family. But this was before the rationing began, and I lit four, one after the other until at last I saw my parents coming up the path.

My father was buoyed inside by a gust of cold air. My mother took off her scarf in the foyer. In the kitchen, my father smiled at me, kissed my temple. I felt the scratch of his whiskers.

“Hello, dear,” he said. “How was school?”

I had sat athrill all day waiting to tell them about Jackie and the fallen house—had trusted, somehow, that they would not be angry at me for leaving school, or for traipsing about the forest with a child whose mother they had never met. But now as I watched them, felt their bodies move around me—my father to the stove, the flame rasping like breath around his fingers as he extended the match, and my mother to the bathroom to fill a pan with water for her feet—I



felt the words catch and solidify in my throat. My mother stopped and pressed her hand against my cheek, smiling at me.

“How was school?” she asked, as I had still not answered. For my entire life I had known her body to be bright and thrumming from her evening runs. Today her hand felt raw and swollen from the work, and cold. I looked between her and my father.

“School was good,” I said, and leaned into her touch.

I don't know who was the first to imagine the other children. But once we started it was hard to stop. At first there were only one or two of them, and then many, many more. We gave each of them names. Rachel, Owen, Allegra. Marjorie and Luther. Daniel. Thomas and Lena; Amy, Gerald, Mark. When we spoke their names, in clouds of breath rising towards the sky, they became real, skirted and danced around us in translucent winter bodies. At first we were meticulous about their personalities—no, Jackie would say, I don't think Gerald would choose to make snow angels with Thomas, he prefers games with more strategy, like that time he and Amy scratched tic tac toe boards into the ice—but as they multiplied they became too difficult to keep track of and we let them be whoever they wanted. They danced and played, or tumbled around in the snow. They hid among the fallen ramparts of the house, in the corners and behind the beams, peeking their small faces over the dark wood like half-moons, laughing. They never followed us out of the forest, but I thought of them often. I would lie awake long after my parents had gone to bed, watching my brother slumber and wishing I could talk to Jacqueline about them, wondering

if she was awake right now, too, and thinking the same thing, picturing them in her head, their clear bodies lit through with starlight and tumbled towards the earth with their own bright gravity, moving with the magical small clumsiness of toddlers and all the grace and weightlessness of God.

As the winter wore on, they became our only subject of conversation, our only care in the world.

“If we start to rebuild the house,” Jackie said to me. “The children will have a better place to play.”

We were in the clearing. Margaret was sitting in Jackie’s lap and, behind us, Elijah was playing at the edge of the trees, rummaging in the snow. I nodded.

“Daniel has been fighting with Owen,” I said.

“I know,” said Jackie, stroking Margaret’s hair as she rested her cheek on her thigh. “He’s jealous, I think.”

I nodded, remembering the day Owen walked up the jutting beam on the east side of the house, all the way to the edge. He had balanced like a pirate with his arms extended in two straight lines and didn’t fall. Daniel had tried to do the same thing the week before and had fallen twice, and though the other children loved him so much it could not occur to them to think less of him, Jackie and I hadn’t missed the blotch in his cheeks as he rose from the ground. He and Owen were two of the first children we had imagined, and they thought of themselves as important role models to the others, and it hurt Daniel, we realized, to feel that he was falling behind his brother when he believed he was needed and loved as his equal. Jackie and I thought that having new ways to play would distract him, give him a way to recover his confidence.

“Maybe we could bring some wood tomorrow,” I said.

We knew, of course, that there was no spare wood in the entire village—all of it was being used by our parents to build the houses. Still, Jackie nodded and murmured something comforting to Margaret, who was sensitive and often felt dejected when the other children wanted to play a spirited game, as they had this morning, challenging each other to leap over that same high beam and shrieking with laughter as they tumbled again and again to the ground. I smiled at Margaret, too, though some part of me resented her because I felt she loved me less than she did Jackie, and then I turned to Elijah, who was pulling on my coat to show me a stone he had unearthed at the corner of the clearing, sitting bright and round in his palm. Later, when the other children had finished their game, we gathered around the center of the fallen house as though there were a fire lit there. We breathed warmth into our hands, and I told stories that made Jackie laugh as the children gathered around her, tucking their heads into her side, their arms lacing and crossing over her body like the weaving on a basket, like armor.

I began to come home later and later, and sometimes when I arrived it was already dark and my parents would be there in the kitchen, my father at the stove and my mother easing her feet into a pan of hot water. They smiled at me and didn't ask where I had been. For dinner there would be beans, or a slice of cornbread, which my father cooked on Sunday evenings, the only hours he slivered away from the work. The bread easily kept all week in the cold, which meant he did not have to spend any more time cooking. My brother sat on my mother's lap and she stroked his hair. My father would place his palm, briefly, at the top of my head.

“How was school, darling?” he would say.

“Good,” I would say, and again he would smile, but there was a different quality to it. Expression chafes then eases, surrenders; anger begins in the mouth as a coal under the tongue and then without oxygen drops into the stomach, where it condenses and ceases to warm. My

parents worked and worked, and the skin of their faces deepened in creases and lifted in flesh and blood weight like the curtains blowing from windows in emptied rooms. If we doubt the space for grief inside of us, we do not understand that it is actually ice which, when allowed its dominion, expands, and pushes far enough to crack wood beams.

The children were curious about the fallen house. They crowded close to me and Jackie, the touch of their bodies like our own breath fogging out in front of us, and asked questions. Had we known the family who lived there? No, we hadn't. But maybe they had? They shook their heads—no, they hadn't. Did we know what happened to them? No, we didn't know. It was a difficult decision for us to tell them the truth because we loved them and wanted them to stay, and we were both troubled by the fear that, if these children learned all the ways that we were small, too, they would have no reason to love us anymore. We also knew that their leaving would be permanent. We could not simply name more, for now they had lives of their own, a risk as dire and irreversible as it was precious and which we had chosen, implicitly, without once discussing it between us but knowing it was the only thing we would ever want. In this same unspoken way we had forged our agreement to never lie to them, even if it meant that they wouldn't be exactly like us, or exactly ours, ever again. Miracles on this earth are quiet as bare feet and we did not understand how good this was of us, the great mercy that it was, and how improbable, given how little of it we had known for ourselves.

The months went on—April, May, June—and I slept less and less. The short hours between when my parents came home from work and when we turned out the lights didn't make me tired. Lying in my bed, I felt alive and awake, scraped thin like a meager streak of starlight on the snow. The darkness in our house had a paler, thinner quality than it used to, and I could not sink into it anymore. I was lying awake one night in July, thinking of Daniel and Owen,

when I heard a noise downstairs. It could not be my parents, of that I was certain. They were too exhausted from the day's work to be awake at this hour. I felt at once terror, for I knew it could only be an intruder, and delight, for I knew it could only be Jacqueline. Jacqueline, who had finally come to my house, and who after seeing the curtains on the windows, the knobs on the doors and the pots and pans on the stove, would at last invite me to hers and allow me to see the chairs in her parlor, and the soap in the dish in her bathroom, and the golden rug she loved so dearly. I rose from my bed, my heart in my throat, and went downstairs.

Yellow light licked from beneath the kitchen door. I opened it. We had already used our two candles for the evening and I realized, blinking slowly, that dotting the countertops and the kitchen table, the stove and the floor like the legions of a tiny army, were hundreds and hundreds of the ends of our used candles, melted down over countless dark evenings and now lit all at once. My father was standing on top of the kitchen counter, his back to me, wreathed in light. He had his toolbox out and was at work caulking the upper right corner of the ceiling. I knew that corner well, for it was the one I faced when we sat down for dinner, and though I could not see it clearly in the darkness that still clung to the far reaches of the house, I was certain—certain—that it was already thickly sealed, and did not need fixing.

I stood frozen in the doorway. I did not want my father to see me; I did not want to make a sound. I wanted to leave, but I could not move. All I could do was watch him work. This was our home that he was remaking—our home, the only home I had ever had. I wanted to believe that I was wrong and he was right, to agree with him that the caulk was cracked and if he did not work and work and work the cold would get in and freeze us all, that this was what was necessary, that we had to work and work harder, all of us, flurrying our hands and bodies at the broken spaces until they sealed again and we were safe. But I could not. There was a giving in

my chest, a dark sinking soft and inevitable as wet earth. Adults build homes; children accept them. If acceptance comes to an early end, there will be nothing else. Only earth, and sky.

I raised my fist to my mouth and bit down on it hard. I must have made a sound because at last my father turned and gasped, nearly falling to the candles below. For a moment we were frozen, staring at one another. Then my father put down his tools, climbed off the counter, and came to stand in front of me. He took my hand gently in his and turned my wrist, staring at the marks my teeth had left. I had not broken the skin. I was crying silently, great floods of tears, my nose running.

“What are you doing awake?” he said at last.

“I couldn’t sleep,” I sobbed.

He sank to his knees and placed his hands on my shoulders, gently and with the immense barometric pressure of a thunderstorm that held all the rain in the universe and would not release it. A storm like that could not exist in our vastly frozen world, I knew, and yet it did, here in our house, for I could feel in my body the clouds of it boiling on the horizon, pressure itself. I had stopped crying. My father’s face was level with mine and yet I had never felt his stature more looming, more immediate and distant from me, like he was some great and ancient titan risen from his sleep among the roiling, gelatinous fundamental matter of the universe, and at the same time insubstantial, inhuman, an ant, or a peppercorn or a speck of dust, or something that was not even in the world at all, that was not even real.

“Cassie,” he said. “Children need to sleep.”

“I,” I said.

“I don’t know what’s the matter with you,” he said. “But you can’t go out in the world acting like this.”

His eyes held mine.

“Whatever it is, you can get a hold on it,” he said. “If you just decide to.”

Ice is not the element of loss, though we have so often chosen it as death’s attendant that it has come to seem inevitable to us for them to arrive together. Ice is not even an element—water is. Grief flows; ice holds and does not move. Staring into my father’s eyes, I nodded, and he released me and I escaped to my room, where I lay staring at the ceiling until morning came and it was time for my parents to leave for work, and for me to meet Jacqueline in the center of town.

She was in a good mood, chattering brightly as she handed me an orange for the walk. I unpeeled it slowly, stowing the peels one by one in my pocket as we went. I felt like an alien in my body, like everything I said or did was strange, somehow, or wrong or otherworldly, and I didn’t know if Jackie didn’t say anything about it because she was afraid to make me uncomfortable, or if she really didn’t sense anything different about me at all. Meanwhile she told me about Lena and Thomas, who yesterday had found several feathers on the ground and used them to decorate their hair, bright blue and glinting from the bluejays that used to whirl and chirp in the branches of the trees and the low bushes of the undergrowth in summer.

Halfway to the clearing, I tripped on a large rock. This was unlike me, but I hadn’t been looking where I was going, focused on peeling my orange and listening to Jackie. I fell sharp and hard, my knees slamming into the rock and my orange rolling out in front of me.

“Sam!” Jackie whipped around and knelt beside me. “Are you alright?”

I sensed immediately that it had drawn blood; my hands stung, and at this new shock of pain I felt a plug pulled and it all came rushing out of me. In a flood of tears I told Jackie everything, about the sound in the middle of the night, though I did not say I had wished it was

her, and about the candles, and my father, his hands on my shoulders and the caulk in the corner of the ceiling. The hot tears scorched my face and flowed in rivers onto my arms and hands, and as they fell from my fingertips to the earth they began to bore at the ice beneath them. Jackie crouched beside me the whole time, listening, her face impassive. When it was over, I sagged for a moment into the snow, relieved, my face swollen, the blood warm and wet at my knee. Jackie looked at me. I don't know what expression passed over her face. At last she took off her glasses, revealing two purple shadows cast under her eyes like fallen petals.

“Well, yes,” she said, polishing the lenses briefly on the lapel of her coat. “Lots of houses are like that.” Then she put her glasses back on and stood, extending her mittened hand to mine, which was still raw and ringing from my collision with the ice, and streaked with cooling tears. “Can't you get up?”

Later, at home, before my parents returned from work, I drew a pan of water and heated it on the stove, and sat on the floor of the bathroom and eased up the leg of my pants, and poured some warm water over the cut and cleaned carefully away the blood that had long since dried.

A few days later, Owen and Daniel got into another fight. This was the worst one so far. It started because Owen was teaching a few of the other children how to build a snowman. Daniel had watched for a few minutes, his hands in his pockets, then he started to insist that the snowman's smile needed to be bigger. Owen said no, he wanted to do it this way; Daniel said there was a particular way to do it, and the snowman needed more stones in his mouth. When Owen didn't respond, Daniel went and dug up some stones and brought them to him. Owen kept ignoring him, so Daniel tried to fix the first stone to the snowman's face, and Owen batted his hand away. Jackie and I heard the screaming and came running, but by the time we got there it



was already over. We stood with our chests heaving and stared at the chunk of Owen's hair that Daniel had torn from his head, sitting bare in the center of the clearing.

The next day, Jackie and I made sure the children were well-occupied with a game, then we withdrew to a corner of the fallen house to consult.

"Something has to give," said Jackie, the dark liquid of her eyes hard and concentrated like stone.

"I know," I said.

We fell silent. Neither of us wanted to talk about getting more wood. The situation had gotten too serious for us to pretend that something was possible when we knew it wasn't.

I bit my lip, then I said, "What if we cut down a tree?"

Jackie shook her head and I felt immediately ridiculous.

"I don't know where we would get an ax," she said. "And we don't know how to make boards out of a tree. We'd need a grown-up's help."

I chewed my lower lip. She was right, I knew. But thinking of Daniel and Owen rolling in the snow, I was surprised to feel something set in me, a foundation laid resolute in my stomach. I realized I loved them both—Daniel for his pride, his panicked wish to be the equal of his brother, and Owen for his lack of sympathy, his bewildered anger towards this person he loved. They were kids, and it wasn't right for children in this world to be blamed for acting the way that they did. The love in me rose sudden and fierce: I'd die before I chose a world where children like them were blamed for acting the way that they did. This was the first time in my life I had decided I wouldn't do something, and it made me feel like a tree, with a strong trunk and branches that cast wide shade with many leaves. I looked Jackie straight in the eye.

"We have to do something," I said. "I don't want to give up."

Jackie held my gaze—seeing the dappling light in my eyes, I think—and then she turned her face away.

“There are a few old boards in my basement,” she said at last, slow and reluctant.

“They’ve been in the house since we moved in. Nobody else knows about them.”

“What?”

She still wouldn’t look at me.

“But we couldn’t,” she said. “They’re too heavy for me to carry.”

“I could help you,” I said.

I knew I had said exactly what she dreaded I would say. She eyed me up and down for a long time. We weren’t going to get any wood from anywhere else.

“Alright,” she said. “But we have to go quickly, tomorrow, at exactly eleven. Nobody will be home then.”

I nodded. I understood this to mean she was adamant to keep our secret from her parents, and I was unsure whether to feel hurt or not. I still had not told my parents about her, but they hadn’t asked me, either. I wondered, suddenly, if Jackie had felt excited to tell her family about me, too, or if she felt ashamed of me, of the way I did not quite know my way through the forest, of my bare hands and the hardboiled eggs in my pockets. The question of whether she wished I was a different kind of person, which I had glimpsed in my subconscious before but had never outright asked myself until now, sat heavy in my throat. That night, I slipped into an uneasy sleep and woke when my parents did. Jackie and I met in the center of town like usual, but instead of cutting towards the clearing we took the road that led to her house at the outskirts of town. It was the opposite direction that the adults walked on their way to work, and we saw no one on our way. We were able to walk abreast instead of single file, and we moved quickly and

silently; the set of Jackie's body was like a flat mouth, though she had not forgotten our oranges and handed me one to eat as we went, the aroma rising between us as we peeled them.

When we got to her house, Jackie paused at the threshold, one hand on the doorknob. I saw her swallow. Then she looked at me, her eyes darted, tight and intense as tiny arrowheads, and full of reproach towards me, as if I had somehow already done something she found deplorable. And yet I felt that even as she looked at me with what might have been all the thunderous judgment of a schoolmaster, or a foreman, or an old god incapable of love, she was totally helpless, that her demanding was actually a form of imploring, of begging the world to be as she wished, and was so ferocious because she knew, on some level, that she did not have the power to make it so. I felt knocked down by my love for her.

“Quickly,” she ordered, and opened the door.

I saw a kitchen, pots and pans, and windows, and doors to other rooms. Then Jackie cried out, and I saw her mother crumpled on the floor, a small splash of her blood arched across the floor like a streak of jam or a tongue dislodged from the mouth. Jackie wasted no more time on sound; she did not cry. She got to her knees and began busying herself with her mother's body like this was a task as daily as washing her hands before dinner, or as doing the dishes or knocking the headboard three times before bed to keep ghosts and monsters away, which was something I still did, carefully out of sight of my parents and brother because I did not want them to know that this habit I had adopted when I was six years old to survive how afraid I was had, to this day, remained outside of my power to break.

Jackie was on her knees for a few seconds more, passing her hands over her mother's neck and torso. I stood in the doorway. Then Jackie lifted her mother over her shoulder. Her mother's head lolled against her neck and she came slightly awake.

“Jackie,” she said. A little blood was dried and flaked at the corner of her mouth. She raised her hand and wiped at it. I turned my face away.

“Don’t talk, mom,” I heard Jackie say.

“Are you alright?” she said to Jackie, though she was the one leaning against her.

“Yes,” said Jackie. “You just need to rest.”

They went upstairs. How Jackie had the strength to lift her I had no idea. Half her mother’s body still draped across the floor because Jackie was not tall enough to hoist her squarely across her shoulders. I could have helped her. Lifted her mother’s ankles, with the soft black house shoes hanging off one foot. But I was frozen in the doorway. I stood there for ten, twenty minutes until I realized that it might be hours before Jackie came back down. I couldn’t carry the wood myself; I didn’t even know where it was. So I left, closing the door carefully behind me so the heat would not escape. I was twelve years old, and I will be forgiven. But still. But still.

Four days passed before Jackie came back to the clearing. I went alone every day and sat by myself. The children didn’t come out for only one of us. They were ours and we had to be together. I gnawed on my thumbnail, and scuffed my feet on the ice, and rolled my hardboiled eggs around my palm until they grew cold, and then I peeled and ate them, and went home when it began to grow dark.

In the kitchen, my mother filled pans with hot water and my father made dinner, placing a pat of butter in the bottom of our cast-iron pan to heat up slices of cornbread. He moved the slices around the pan with his fingers, and sometimes his hand slipped, and his knuckle or the pad of his thumb bumped against the burning metal, and he jumped away, hissing between his teeth like water on a hot surface bursting into steam. My mother would sigh, shaking her head,

and get up and pull a small tub of salve from the medicine cabinet. She would return to the kitchen, leaving wet footprints in the hall, and smooth the salve over his skin, murmuring that he needed to be more careful. My father nodded, then he turned off the stove and we ate, and my brother and I did the dishes and we all turned out the lights and went to bed.

On the fifth day without Jackie, I came to the clearing and sat in the center on one of the fallen beams. A part of me wanted to go find her, but I could not imagine opening the door to her house again. Then I saw her approaching. She must have come from a completely different direction, or walked behind me some way without me knowing. She was wearing her red coat and had her hands in her pockets. She walked steadily towards me, the trees parting and fading around her, until she stood a few feet away from me.

“Jackie,” I said. A part of me wanted to run and hold her. Another part of me wanted to grab her and hurl her as far away from me as possible, across the clearing was not far enough, I needed her to go flying across this whole winter world, her body soaring far above the black sticks of the trees and the endless white ground, all the way to other towns, other nations, all the way to the other side of the universe.

She reached into her pocket and handed me an orange. I stared at it. She pushed past me and stalked across the clearing, beginning to busy herself with the rafter that jutted into the air, tugging at it even though it was frozen in place and always had been; we both knew it would not budge.

“We have to get this house into better shape,” she growled. “This isn’t safe for the children.”

I tore my eyes away from the orange.

“Where are they,” I said, and when she didn’t respond, I said again, “Where are they, Jackie?”

She stopped her nonsense with the rafter, half turned towards me but with her gaze fixed on the earth, on her hands, which had scabbled around on the wood and ice but were not stung from the cold because of her thick mittens.

“They’re not coming,” she said.

“What? How do you know?”

“Daniel and Owen said they didn’t want to talk to you anymore,” she said.

“You’re lying,” I gasped. Of course she was lying—she couldn’t see them without me any more than I could see them without her, and she knew I would know that. She would not have said such a terrible thing if she had thought I would think it was true, so it didn’t really count as lying. She wouldn’t hurt me like that. As furious as I was with her in that moment, I trusted her still.

“I’m not lying,” she said, because she had to, and lifted her chin, with the small scoop of its slight angle, and held my gaze with her bright, arch eyes and tightly curled lashes—though she did not lift her chin high enough that I did not see the tremble in her lower lip and understand for the first time the effort that her steadiness cost her.

“Yes, you are,” I said, just as firmly, and felt all my insides trembling with the effort of standing still, and staring her down, Jacqueline, my best friend, the only other person in the universe as insane with grief as I was, who I loved and trusted absolutely and whose face I wanted, in that moment, to gouge at with my fingernails until she bled.

She lunged at me first. She knocked me to the ground and we rolled over once, twice. Her glasses flew off, I don’t know where. She was below me and scabbled at my face. I think she

was going for my eyes. Hard panic rushed my chest. The wind had been knocked out of my lungs and it came tearing back in; I tasted blood in the back of my throat, though I don't think I was bleeding. We struggled, rolling in the snow, then Jackie flipped us so she was above me, her knee raised. I felt a rush of terror and a rush of strength—at any moment she could plunge her knee into my stomach, digging deep behind my ribs—and I flung my hand out and fisted it in her hair. She gasped. I flexed my knuckles, digging against her scalp. I could rip her hair out. Our eyes locked. There was only our breathing, our chests rising and falling against each other.

If our parents had been there, what would they have done, do you think? Pulled us apart. Drawn us to separate edges of the clearing, scolded us. Now, Sam—that's no way to treat another person. Now, Jackie, please. That is no way to treat another person. They would have made us sit together, tight with rage until the feeling fell in on itself. That would have been their decision, and had they been there in the clearing with us on that day, it would have also had to be ours. But they weren't, and it didn't, and rage can be all things and all opposites. It leaps and burns; it uses tallow and boils water. When it is alive it is difficult to direct as forest fire and when it is dead it is safe and cold as obsidian stone, glass too black to reflect. Surrounded by ice on all sides, Jacqueline and I stared at each other. Our parents were not there. That was no way to treat another person. Rage is a relationship, too. Rage, when shared, when directed smooth and clear as river-water, connects and permits, sustains. Tissue between bones; the heart beating, and blood in the veins. No way to treat another person.

Jackie and I stared at each other, and we knew that this decision was ours to make. It is difficult for human beings to understand this as grace because it hurts so much, but it is.

We were suspended there for so long that the snow began to melt into our backs. I felt cold water soaking my collar, my neck. Jackie's breath on my face was warm; her skin was

warm. The winter would go on, that much we knew. Our parents and teachers would continue to build the houses, and next year, when we turned thirteen, so would we. We would for years and years, years and years and years, for as long as the world demanded it of us, for our whole lives if it must be so. Long ago we had made our vow not to lie to one another, and I saw no reason to break it now: this was an unbearable fate. And yet as long as we were alive and choosing not to lie we could likewise make no claim that there was any losing this quality of human skin—any losing the fact that Jackie, close to me now as she was, her composure beginning to slip, her bones and muscles quivering with rage and the liquid in her eyes beginning to shake and tremble like the surface of a lake, was warm as a hearth, and so was I. This fact was our house, miracle itself, as simple and daily as a page of light falling open across the hallway, as opening a door. It was how I knew that, faced with this decision, Jacqueline and I wanted the exact same thing.

I let go of her hair and she dropped her knee. We held each other close. Our bodies were warm as the sun in August, shimmering over fields of golden wheat.