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Following the Androscoggin

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TRINITY COLLEGE
Hartford, Connecticut

Thesis

Following the Androscoggin

submitted by

Molly Parent

Class of 2015

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for
the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in English

2015

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Preface

One morning last summer, I was sitting at my kitchen table back home in Maine, catching up with one of my sisters. We rarely see each other—she lives in North Carolina with her husband and my nieces—so it almost goes without saying that we take advantage of time that we get together. We were raised separately from each other, she being nearly twenty years older than I and—due to the peculiar composition of my family—having a different mother. While my mom was born and bred in Minnesota, hers grew up in the mill town of Lewiston, Maine.

Now, I confess, I've never been to Lewiston. Growing up, I'd only known it to be the home of Bates College, and just another Maine city that has a huge Franco-American population and died with the mills. However, as I got older and heard the city mentioned in conversations, it would often be accompanied with an overdone French accent and some remark about its dirtiness or poverty: *Oh, you mean Lew-ee-ston? What a shit heap.* Still, I maintain that the city was never really on my radar. I didn't even know that my sister's mother was raised there until our chat that morning.

As we moved through topics of conversation and got to talking about my studies, she asked how my French was doing since I had returned from being abroad in Bordeaux that past fall. I replied that it was better than it had been before, but worsening since I had left France. It was then that she casually told me that not only is her mother fluent in French, but also that you'll never hear her speak it. You'll never hear her talk about her childhood in Lewiston. With that, my imagination was sparked, and the foundation for *Following the Androscoggin* was laid.

I originally intended for the story to be based around what my sister then told me about her mother's upbringing in the '50s and '60s. It was a childhood of hiding her French heritage and

language, of living in poverty, and of being bullied by the Catholic church. However, I shortly realized that this was not my story to tell, or at least I could not tell it as I had originally planned. I am an outsider to the more-recent Franco-American struggle; my French-Canadian ancestors did not belong to a specific community such as Lewiston when they immigrated to Maine, and thus assimilated more quickly into American culture. I knew then that my story would have to also be told from the perspective of an outsider, from someone who would learn about the Franco-American struggle, just as I had.

In order to grasp a fuller sense of the facts behind the fiction I wanted to create, I did my research. I read multiple articles on Franco-American identity, on the history of their Lewiston community, and on the mill culture that existed in America. Before I had even figured out who the narrator of my story would be, and what direction my story would take, I was becoming attached to Maine's Franco-Americans. Their struggle, the discrimination they faced and continued to face, is never talked about. I've lived in Maine my entire life, and I'd never been taught a thing about the state's most prevalent ethnicity. I knew that I couldn't tell the whole story of Lewiston; it was not my story to tell. But I also knew that I *needed* to at least try to tell part of it.

The next decision that I made for my story—that is, the time period—came very easily to me. Many articles that I had read pointed to the mid-20th century as the definite rupture in Lewiston's Franco-American community. The mills had almost all closed, and the preservation of the language and the culture was at an all-time low. Franco youth were both tormented in school for their French, as well as buffeted by an exploding American rock-and-roll culture that urged them to assimilate. It was therefore at this time that the ethnic tensions in the city were at a high, and this time when my story would be set.

Then Tommy, my soon-to-be protagonist, walked into my head and would not leave. I saw a kid on the brink of being an adult, but still very tied to his family. I saw a kid whose own life had been molded by a sort of oppression which, though different from that of the Franco-Americans, was still valid and common in the time period that I had chosen. The '50s were the years in which my parents were raised, and I have heard from them what happened when opinions and desires were silenced and internalized. I do not believe that these issues are particular to the '50s, simply that there was a societal structure in place back then that only served to cultivate this sort of oppression. So, I did more research in order to get a sense of that time, as well as consulted my parents when I needed details that could just not be read in an article. My mother became my American culture specialist, and my father took on the role of Maine historian. Their experiences and knowledge proved invaluable to me as I created 1950s Lewiston.

Soon, the first page began to write itself: Tommy and his family arrive in Lewiston from Massachusetts, his mother shakes from the stress of it all, Tommy knows he shouldn't watch, there's some sort of tension involved in his relationship with his father. That was really all I needed to start exploring the relationship between Tommy and Lewiston, but also, more importantly, between Tommy and his parents. While my story is about the Franco-American struggle,—and that is where I had originally intended for the focus to lie—I found that the heart of the story was really in the interactions within Tommy's family. I've always found it easier to explore and write about the human side of a story, rather than to solely focus on the twists and turns of the plot.

The final big decision that I had to make concerning the composition of my story was the point of view and temporal perspective. It's always been slightly more difficult for me to tell a

story in first person, as I feel that it sometimes causes me to lose my style in order to capture a specific voice. However, I knew as soon as Tommy entered my head that I had to write with his voice, that this would be necessary in order to create the sort of story that I wanted to create. Yet, I also knew that a kid who's fifteen probably wouldn't have an inner voice that corresponds to my style. So, the story would have to be told from the perspective of a much-older Tommy. This choice allowed me to write in a very reflective, sense-oriented sort of voice driven by memories. I feel that I ultimately made a good compromise between first-person narration and my own style. So, the story evolved and grew, developing more layers than I had originally intended. Yet, I tried to keep my eye on the stories I wanted to tell: the Franco-Americans' and Tommy's.

Due to the fact that *Following the Androscoggin* is inspired by what my sister told me that one morning, I cannot claim that any particular book or author made me want to write this story. However, as I became heavily involved in the writing process, there are definitely sources from which I drew. E.B. White's calm and witty essays have always been a staple in my home library, and I referred to him whenever I needed grounding. For when I needed a reminder of the elegance of secret longings amid social strife, I turned to Gustave Flaubert, particularly his masterpiece, *Sentimental Education*. And always in my mind was my ultimate muse, Edith Wharton, a writer whose understandings of the human psyche and emotional capacity, and simplistic expression of these understandings, changed the way in which I view literature. *House of Mirth* has been my American lit. bible since junior year of high school and continues to influence my writing.

There is one writer, however, who most greatly affected this particular story in terms of tone and setting, and that is Elizabeth Strout. I read her for the first time last semester, at Professor Rutherford's suggestion, and found a writer who takes everything that I love about my classic

literary inspirations, and transports them into a modern landscape. Her novels on my home state, particularly *Olive Kitteridge* and *The Burgess Boys*, perfectly capture the Maine that I know and the Maine that I try to show in the majority of my writing. Though I hope that I can continue the literary traditions of all the other writers who inspire me, I would especially love to be considered in good company with the likes of Strout, who makes Maine accessible to a lover of good writing.

So, at this point I have hopefully given you a thorough look at my inspirations and decisions when it comes to this piece. Now, I will also give you leave to read what I have written. Enjoy.

*To Maine's Franco-Americans, to my ancestors, whose voices were silenced for far too long.
To those throughout history whose stories could not be told.
And, of course, to my parents, who encouraged my own voice to bloom.*

I.

I have not forgotten the way Mother's hand shook on that first day in Lewiston. At first, I didn't notice it as she clutched the handle of her purse and we walked up the steps of the old house, our new house. Father had to set down his suitcases at the door so he could search his pockets for the key. As he muttered under his breath, Mother turned and asked me to hold her purse, saying that she simply could not breathe in the heat. It was definitely hot—I could see sweat beading above Father's collar, underneath the cleanly cut line of his hair. My own neck was damp, along with my back and armpits. But Mother seemed wonderfully cool—there were no signs of sweat seeping through the back of her sleeveless dress, and her neck didn't show any sort of sheen. Still, I took her purse and returned the nervous smile she gave. Her hand went up to the scarf knotted under her chin in a slow and careful motion, and it was then that I saw the shake. Fingers tried to work their way through the silken fabric, slipping and falling with each advance on the tight folds of the knot. The shake continued through her arm and I dropped my eyes—this was not for me to see.

I looked, instead, at Father. He had finally found the key and now jiggled it around in the lock. He made his body a shield, the bulk of his back hiding his struggle with the door. I couldn't tell whether or not he did this purposefully. It wasn't as though I couldn't hear the rattle of the key as it moved around inside the lock. The sound filled the heavy air. That, and Father's breaths, quick and agitated. And my breaths, and Mother's breaths, and the breaths of katydids.

When he finally got the key to turn, Father lightly pushed the door open, and said, "There we go." Picking up his suitcases, he walked into the house and stood against the door, holding it

open for Mother. She had finished untying the knot, and now stuffed the scarf quickly in her purse. Her heels clicked on the stone steps as she walked up to the door, then created a hollow thud on the wooden floor once she went inside. Father looked at her as she turned into a room and disappeared from my sight. His eyes continued to follow her for a moment, then he looked down to me.

“Tommy, you going to come in or make me keep holding the door?” he asked.

I apologized and started walking up the steps when Father stopped me.

“Empty-handed?”

“No, sorry,” I said. I walked to our Buick, parked perpendicular to the house, and opened the door to grab a box. My arms seemed longer than any other part of me, and I wrapped them around the biggest, heaviest box I could see. As I made my way back to the house, I asked Father when the rest of our stuff was going to be brought up. We were keeping everything with my Uncle Dave, who was staying at our old house in Massachusetts. Father replied that my uncle would probably drive it up the next weekend. I got to the top of the steps and glanced down at the writing on the box that I was carrying. *Kitchen: Mixing bowls, Pans, Flour jar, Rolling pin.* I didn’t even know where the kitchen was.

I wanted to ask Father if he thought it had been a good idea to leave everything—our paintings, grandpa’s rifles—with Uncle Dave. I’m sure now that he would have said something about needing to trust his brother-in-law, needing to trust his recovery. Here’s the truth that we hardly mentioned: my uncle had been an alcoholic. But Father would never have spoken about it so casually, and there’s no chance that he would have grinned while speaking of the progress that Uncle Dave was making. I can imagine how his jaw would have clenched, how he would have

looked past me while replying to my question. I would have been pushing my luck, voicing my doubt in not only my uncle's ability to readapt to normality, but also Father's ability to judge the situation. So, as usual, I said nothing, and Father took no notice of my silence. Glancing at the Buick, he told me that he wanted it emptied by dinner, but that I would have to do most of the work alone; he had some business at city hall.

"Will you be able to handle everything alright?" he asked.

"Yep, sure." Feeling the need to be away from him, to be alone with my silence—or at least in the company of Mother—I began to walk into the house. But Father held me back, putting one of his suitcase-laden hands in front of me.

"Alright, Tommy?" I turned my head and looked at him. He was still sweating.

"Of course."

The house was big, or at least bigger than our one-story cape back in Massachusetts. This house was in the Federal style and had two stories, as well as an attic and a cellar. My room had a fireplace, which made me worry about how cold the winters would be. I realized that I had never lit a fire before, and that made me nervous. Back home, I had always wanted to do Boy Scouts, but had never dared ask Father. My good friend, Roger, was a Boy Scout. Roger had gone on a trip to the Berkshires the summer before, and he'd had to cook on a fire. I didn't even know how to cook on a stove.

I had to catch myself when I started thinking too much about home. Not because it wasn't right of me to think about what I had left behind, but because I had to stop thinking of it as *home*. Lewiston was home now, as Father had made clear at dinner. His trip to city hall—where one of

the clerks who helped him had also voted for Eisenhower the previous November—had convinced him that he had made the right choice in accepting the promotion from P&G; they had recently opened their offices in Lewiston and wanted his experience as they started out.

Later that night, I helped set up the television. Father considered it the most important thing we had jammed into the Buick. He thought of himself as modern because he watched the evening news on a *television*, and therefore supported progress. I had once heard him tell the butcher back in Massachusetts that he didn't see much wrong with the nuclear bomb. It was terrible, what had happened in Japan during the war. But it was *progress*, just like the television.

I figured Father would have the setup well under control, but he liked to have me at least watch when he did things that I, too, would have to do when I became a man. I didn't think that setting up a television was especially manly. It definitely wasn't starting a fire with flint, and cooking beans over that fire, then eating them out of the can. Roger had told me that he had once burned the beans on the bottom of his can, but eaten them anyways because he was hungry. I remember thinking that I had never heard of anything so wonderful as scraping beans off of a can and eating them, knowing that *you* had burned them.

“We're lucky we didn't move in a year ago,” Father said. “We wouldn't have had electricity.”

“I can't believe that,” I said. He crouched down in front of the television and I watched him lightly push and pull at the antennae, trying to make the black and white images on the screen become less fuzzy.

“Oh, it's true. The old woman who lived here never had it installed, thought she lived fine without it.” He was finally satisfied with his fiddling and sat back on his heels. “I said I wouldn't buy the house if there was no electricity.”

“That must have been expensive.”

The second it was out of my mouth, I regretted it. I still don't know why I chose to speak then, why *that* thought had to be the one to escape my head. Father gave a short little laugh, a surprised *hah*, and fixed his eyes on me. I looked at his feet, then at the television. He turned it off, which forced me to look at him. I focused on his chin.

“Thomas, what makes you say that?”

“I don't know.”

“You don't know.” He paused. “It's fine, you don't have to tell me.”

“I just—I guess I'm just beginning to think more about money.” It wasn't the truth, but I was good at lying. Father's face softened a little, though his eyes had a wild look to them.

“Money's a fine thing to think about. A necessary thing.” He stood up and walked to me, then put his hands on my shoulders. I felt as though my knees were going to buckle from the weight, and I had to put effort into looking up at Father's face, even though I didn't have to tilt my head back that far anymore. “Just be sure it's not all that's on your mind. There's more to worry about than money.”

He lifted one of his hands and rested it gently on top of my head, barely making a depression in my hair. It reminded me of the way I had seen babies be baptized at Mass. The priest would always cup his holy water-wet hand around the top of the fuzzy heads, as gently as he would hold a ripe peach. Father was touching my head as if it were a glass ball, almost too fragile to be handled.

“Do you understand?”

Simple question, I thought, give a simple answer.

“Of course.”

He let his hand fall a little deeper into my hair, the tip of one of his fingers coming into contact with my scalp for just a second. He then took both of his hands off of me and walked over to the television, turning it back on.

Truth be told, it wasn't a complete lie that I was starting to think more about money—though I wasn't thinking about it out of the blue. I had only asked about the cost of putting in electricity because I had been worrying for a while about how much Father had spent on Uncle Dave and his alcoholism. Between hospital visits and the residential program he had been put into, all of which Father had covered, Uncle Dave had cost us. I didn't think Father knew that I had such a full idea of what had happened, but I had listened and remembered. I had listened to phone calls when I appeared to be doing work; I had listened to distant conversations in the living room when I was supposed to be asleep in my bed. I had found that by talking less about something, Father would assume that I knew less. That morning, I had taken a chance by asking Father when Uncle Dave would drive up; I had almost said more than I wanted to, let on more than I should have. But I needed to know—more than just our paintings and grandpa's rifles, Uncle Dave had my bike. My books. My boxing gloves, which Father had hoped would help toughen me up. Unsurprisingly, I hadn't developed a passion for punching, but I still counted the gloves among my prized possessions.

After I left Father staring at the television, I went up to my room and sat in front of the empty fireplace. I could have sat on my bed; it was fully made. Mother had worked fast once we arrived, unpacking the boxes we had managed to fit in the Buick. She had gotten to my room

before I had even been in it for the first time. After she was done, I had walked in, my eyes falling on the bed. There was the familiar sight of the quilt my grandmother had finished just before she died, the blue and green log cabin design spread out over cool linen sheets. All of me had wanted to immediately rush to that quilt and run my fingers over the pinpricked fabric. I had wanted to just lower my face into its comforting softness, close my eyes, and let myself be carried away by its scent. There was the lavender balm that Grandma would rub on her hands while she sewed, protecting her fingers from getting calloused by the needle. There was also the rosewater that Mother used to wear when I was younger, when she would lie on the quilt and let me listen to her breathing until I fell asleep. I knew that these smells would be waiting for me, but then I had seen the fireplace, and a cold feeling had entered the back of my throat.

Earlier, when I presented Mother with the kitchen box, she had faltered for a moment and I was afraid she would start shaking again and I would have to pretend I didn't notice. But the moment passed and she had said that she was sure the two of us could find a kitchen. Looking around the first floor made me realize that the outside of the house made it look more expansive than it actually was. The rooms were big, but there were only five of them: the foyer, which had doors to other rooms on either side and a staircase in the middle; a great room, which was made up of the dining room and the living room; a small library; a kitchen; and a bathroom—Father had also made clear that he wouldn't buy the house unless it had indoor plumbing.

I thought Mother was going to cry when we had first walked into the kitchen. A few years before, Father had gotten her a General Electric oven, the real thing, with push buttons and a shiny white finish. It had not made the trip from Massachusetts, nor was it going to. Instead, the kitchen greeted Mother with the sort of oven I'd only seen in Gene Autry films. It was made

from some sort of rough iron and pockmarked with dark rust. It was horrible. I had dared to look over at Mother and saw her biting her bottom lip repeatedly. But then she had walked to the small wooden table in the middle of the room and gently set down her purse. She had started looking around the kitchen, surveying it in its entirety. She had stopped when she got to where I was standing, though she was not looking at me. I had turned, following her eyes, and saw a small wooden crucifix hanging above the doorframe behind me. I had turned back to her, and keeping her eyes on the crucifix, she had said, “Well, that’s a relief, anyways.”

At the end of that hot day, I was sitting in front of the fireplace, instead of on my bed. While I had been itching earlier in the day to surrender myself to lavender and rosewater, I now felt that one whiff would make me sick. Suddenly, I couldn’t imagine filling myself with those memories in a place like this. In a place where rusting ovens cooked meals, where electricity and plumbing weren’t considered necessary, where fireplaces still had a place in bedrooms, where fifteen-year-old boys had to light fires to survive the winters.

Was I being too sensitive? Most likely. Father was always telling me that I had to toughen up or no girls would ever want to go steady with me. He would say that I should go to the YMCA with my boxing gloves for a few hours. I would wonder whether he had gotten Mother to marry him by being tough with her, and something would tell me that he hadn’t. I would wonder how, then, he *had* gotten Mother. But then he would ask me if I had heard him mention the YMCA and I would say, “Of course.”

The fireplace was simple, or at least I thought that it was simple. It was made of red bricks that were coarse and porous when I pressed my fingers against them. The mortar that ran around

the edges of each brick was smooth in comparison, and I was surprised that it was not cracked. Surely, I thought, it should have been cracking from the heat of all the fires that had filled the fireplace. I wondered whether it was part of the construction of fireplaces that heat from the interior did not affect the exterior—that the outside would not reveal what happened inside.

I discovered that the inside was also made of bricks. I had not been able to tell at first, as they were not the same red of the outside. Rather, they were a rich, velvety black that made me think that they could not possibly be the same kind of brick as the outer ones. I leaned forward from where I was sitting to touch the black brick, but could not reach, despite the length of my arm. So I got on my knees and extended my arm to the very back of the fireplace. My fingers brushed against a smooth solid surface. It felt like the stones I would find at the beach, except with a residue I could feel on my skin after I had pulled my hand away. Leaning back, I looked at my fingers and saw that they were streaked with blackness.

My first instinct was to quickly wipe my hand on something and get rid of the grime. I'd been raised to strive for cleanliness. Father thought that bodily cleanliness was on the same level as cleanliness of mind and spirit. This made his daily shave into a confession, the bathroom vaulting its ceiling and transforming into a cathedral. Father's rough stubble would become his sins, while his razor would bear the strength of God's grace. My beard was still refusing to come in, so I had to repent of my sins the normal way. I knew that Mother also went to confession, so I had never asked her whether she did double duty and let her nightly cold cream pull sins from her skin. Then again, I didn't think that Mother contained enough filth, physical or spiritual, to warrant two confessions, let alone one.

As I looked at the dark filth on my hand, something fought against my initial instinct and convinced me to let the blackness taint my clean skin. I rubbed my hands together and was surprised by how smoothly the ash spread itself over my palms. While it wasn't an even coverage, there was no doubt that it touched every inch. It settled into the three distinct lines that ran the width of my palm, as well as the wrinkles behind my joints. In the smoothness of that ash, I could sense the heat of all the fires that had filled the fireplace. As I felt the heat soak into my skin, a part of me suddenly wanted to wipe the blackness off on my shirt, on the floor, on the fireplace, on any surface that was not my body. I didn't want anything in this house to fill me with a false sense of warmth and security. I had left that feeling behind in Massachusetts, and I wasn't sure whether even my quilt could bring it back.

I closed my eyes, and could feel another part of me reaching for the fire and absorbing the blackness. I wanted to be like my parents, like my Father, and find the strength to belong in Lewiston. If giving in to the grime and the heat and the dark was my only way to belong, I would take it. I quickly opened my eyes, checking if the ash was still on my skin, and I felt ridiculous. There were no fires from the past burning in my body. The blackness was just remnants of old burning wood, nothing else. The heat of the day had definitely gone to my head. Deciding I needed water, I left the fireplace and went in search of a glass.

Crawling into bed that night, I kicked the quilt away. As it slid to the floor, its scent rose in the still air and weakly rushed to me. I covered my face with my hands, not wanting even one whiff of lavender to enter my nose. Instead, my nostrils filled with the acrid aroma of something burning. I still hadn't cleaned my hands. Yet I didn't take them off of my face, and I began to breathe the same air in and out. I concentrated on keeping my breaths even, but my face grew

hot and moist and I wanted nothing more than to feel air in my lungs that was not tainted with ash. The only other air I could breathe that night, though, would be tainted with lavender and rosewater. And that would hardly be better.

II.

My parents and I left the house at 9:30 the next morning because Father wanted to walk to Mass instead of drive. He insisted that it was important to know the city through the soles of our feet and not only through the tires of our Buick. I think he failed to remember that Mother did not wear soft leather loafers when she went to Mass, but hard heels. I walked behind her as we made our way to the nearest church, watching how she walked on the balls of her feet with a practiced stride. The seam up the back of her nylons hid the stress beneath her skin, but I saw how her gloved hand curled into a fist as she walked.

Our house was several blocks away from the Androscoggin, the river that ran through Lewiston, but the walk to the basilica brought us right next to it. It flowed towards us, carrying sticks and other debris in the current. Across from us, on the other bank, was more city, and I wondered how big Lewiston actually was. When I asked Father, he scoffed and corrected me.

“That’s not Lewiston over there, that’s Auburn. It’s another mill town, but not as rich as Lewiston.”

I kept looking across the river, trying to see some sign of Auburn’s poverty. Looking up at Father, who continued to walk briskly ahead of me, I asked, “Why’s Lewiston richer? Aren’t the mills dead here, like back home?”

“I don’t know *why* it’s richer, Tommy. It just is. If I had to guess, I’d bet they saved instead of spent when the mills went down—something Lowell and Manchester didn’t do.”

I knew that the mills were a sore subject for Father. When his grandparents had come over from Galway, they had found work in Manchester’s woolen mills. They had endured the sneers

of the townies, the long hours, the bad lungs, and the low pay, all in the hope that their children would work elsewhere. Father never met his grandparents, but his father, my grandfather, would tell him stories of going to the mills after school was done for the day. He would go with the other children who would help their first-generation parents pay for that night's dinner. The other children who, as they carded the rough fleece, swore they wouldn't be in the mills past eighteen.

My grandfather had gotten out, went on to work in a grocery store in the North End, the only Irish kid in a sea of Italians. But he had saved up and worked up, eventually taking the store over. Then his parents both died, right when he had finally reached a life of what he considered security and comfort. They never got to see my grandfather's store, never got to see the jars of pickled eggplant and links of sausages hanging from the ceiling, all of which somehow screamed *success*. But it was a success that was tainted, made bitter by the suffering that had brought it to him. He had hated the mills more than he had as a child when he worked in them. And Father, being a loyal son, carried his father's bitterness with him.

I think now that he was secretly pleased when the mills started really going down after the war, even though he couldn't say it out loud. Back then, saying anything against American economic prosperity was treasonous. Even more than it is now. Everyone seemed to forget, though, that the mills hadn't contributed to American economic prosperity in decades. It was easy to forget, when workers kept working and rioting was only discussed in hushed tones. But Father didn't forget, not when he remembered how much his father wished he could have forgotten.

We continued on our way to church, the spired towers becoming more and more visible. The

closer we got, I began to see a change occur around us. The beautiful elms that lined Lewiston's streets remained, but the stones on the street seemed more cracked than those that were near my house, the bricks of the houses more crumbling. The faint wail of a baby could be heard from a few streets over.

“Dick!”

Father turned at his name being called, and I followed his eyes. A smartly dressed man was walking quickly towards us, his hand raised in greeting. Father smiled with a closed mouth and raised his hand in reply, then called out, “Bill.”

“This is the man I was talking about, the one at city hall who's got his head on straight,” Father said once Bill reached us.

Mother and Bill greeted each other, then Father introduced me and I shook the man's hand. He had a rough, tight grip, a little too intimate for a first introduction. He looked at me with crinkled eyes, but instead of meeting them, I looked at the minimal blond stubble on his face glinting in the early-morning sun.

“So, Dick, what brings you to this part of town?” His tone was friendly, but the question didn't seem to be.

“Taking the family to Mass. Thought we'd walk and get to know your city.”

“Great morning for it,” Bill said, squinting at the sky. “But you and your family shouldn't be here.”

Father faltered, struggling to understand how he was in the wrong. It was a position of weakness that he was unaccustomed to, and being new in town was an excuse that only confirmed that weakness.

“I’m afraid I don’t understand, Bill. This is the way to the basilica, isn’t it? There was a big deal made about its dedication when we were in Massachusetts, so we figured we’d see it.”

“No, you’re right. You’d get to the basilica in about ten minutes if you kept going. But I’m telling you that you can’t go there, not if you want to avoid the frogs.”

“Excuse me?”

“The frogs, the Francos. They’ll be swamping the basilica for Mass.”

“I’m sorry, I still don’t understand.”

“Oh, you don’t have the Francos down in Massachusetts? I guess the right term is Franco-Americans, but it doesn’t change what they are. They speak French and they go to Mass, that’s enough for me—not that I’m saying there’s something wrong with Catholics, Dick.”

“No, I know you didn’t mean anything by it.” I could tell that Father was thinking fast, trying to figure out how he could come out of the conversation on equal ground—it was too late to come out on top. “I, uh—I just didn’t have any idea about there being this sort of problem here.”

“You couldn’t know, Dick. But now I’m telling you.”

“Why can’t we be here, though?” I asked. Even now, I’m still surprised that I spoke up, or that I didn’t at least immediately apologize: *I’m sorry, I—never mind.*

“It’s their quarter, they live here,” Bill replied, giving me a hard look. “Used to be their ghetto, before the mills shut down and the mayor said it couldn’t be called a ghetto anymore. Still is one, as far as I’m concerned.”

“But why can’t *we* be here?”

“Tommy—” Father’s voice came out low and quick.

“It’s okay, Dick. He should know, if he’s going to live here.” Bill fixed his eyes once again on me. I could see the beads of sweat that were beginning to collect on his brow as the day warmed up. As if to confirm the heat, a cool drip of sweat rolled down my spine, stopping above my belt. The corners of Bill’s mouth turned up slightly as he spoke. I should have known right then—I should have seen—that he had a potential for conflict.

“Son, it would just be better if you stay in the good part of town. There’s no reason to come here,” Bill said. I looked at the glint of his stubble and how it darkened above his lip as sweat gathered there. The small drops quivered as he continued to speak, glancing between me and Father.

“It didn’t used to be so hard, before the war. They just stayed put most of the time. I remember when the only chance you had of seeing one was if they didn’t get to the mills early enough. You’d catch a frog in the morning, running to the mill to beat the seven o’clock bell. And now, you can hardly walk down the street without having at least one Franco bastard *pardonez* past you.”

“Bill, I don’t like my family to hear that kind of language, especially on a Sunday,” said Father.

“Well, if I had my way, you wouldn’t hear it at all, never mind Sundays,” Bill began. “Oh, you meant bast—my rude language.” He smiled toothily. “Apologies, Mrs. Blake. I sometimes let my mouth get away from me. But every man has to have a fault.”

Mother said that every man certainly did, then used Father’s addiction to her strawberry pie as an example. She always knew how to smooth out a situation, no matter how uncomfortable she might have been. I looked over to see her holding onto Father’s arm and smiling graciously at

Bill, and wished that I could know what words she held behind that smile. Perhaps words explaining that thoughts had passed through her mind before, thoughts with implications far worse than those of “bastard.” Perhaps words that would cast the men around her in shame, shame for believing that one word could bring her down. Oh, to know the words she did not say. But then, maybe she didn’t even know what she would say if she had the chance. Maybe she wouldn’t say a thing. Maybe she would continue smiling.

I still wasn’t happy with the reasons Bill had given me for why we couldn’t be in that neighborhood, why we couldn’t go to the basilica. The only times I had been told that I couldn’t go someplace was when I hadn’t been old enough, or when I could have been in danger. People had never been the problem, or at least not people whose only shortcoming was the language they spoke.

Bill told us that if we still wanted to go to Mass, we would have to go to the church across the river in Auburn. There apparently wasn’t much of a non-Franco Catholic population in Lewiston, and the church mostly catered to the needs of those who frequented the basilica. Father looked at his watch and started, saying we would have to hurry back to the house and get in the car if we wanted to make Mass. Taking his hat off of his head with one hand and running the other jerkily through his hair, Father said he was happy that Bill had arrived in time to stop us.

“The family and I will need a guiding hand for these next few weeks,” said Father.

“I’ll be pleased to guide you, though I’m sure you’ll get a clear picture of the city’s rights and wrongs soon enough. It’s just a matter of time,” Bill said, looking at Father until he finished speaking, when he glanced quickly at me. I returned the glance for only a second, then turned

around to look at the river behind me. As I heard Bill and Father say their goodbyes, I watched the debris continue to move along with the current. The brown water shimmered dingily. I wished I could run to the riverbank, jump in, and let the current carry me away as well.

As we quickly walked back to the house after leaving Bill, I realized that, rather than going with us and leaving the Franco quarter, Bill had continued to walk further into it. I wondered if either Father or Mother had noticed. It had seemed odd to me for him to have been there in the first place, if he really had such an aversion to those who lived there. And yet, he had been there, and had kept going. The thought stayed with me during Mass, even after I received the Eucharist. Jesus' body and blood were meant to cleanse me of troublesome thoughts, but all I could see for the rest of the day was Bill's glinting stubble and his quick escape along the dark street.

III.

That first week in Lewiston passed quickly, and I remember how surprised I was. I guess I thought that the process of adjustment would drag on, that every day would seem as long as the first one—that hot day that had ended with my hands spread over my face, ash cycling through my lungs. Funnily enough, though, adjustment—or at least the appearance of adjustment—comes fast when all your time is spent trying to not think about how much you really just need to adjust.

It was exhausting, how much effort I put into distracting myself from the obvious: I wasn't going anywhere. I would be in Lewiston for as long as Father's work kept him there, which could be until I graduated from high school. My position was one of heavy acceptance; it weighed me down during the week and trapped me in the house. It wasn't the only thing, though, that kept me from the city.

On Monday morning, when we were all eating breakfast around the kitchen table, Father told me and Mother that we shouldn't walk around Lewiston by ourselves. It was too hot, he reasoned. *Baloney*, I thought. It was hotter in Massachusetts, and there I would spend entire days outside without reprimand. I excused myself quickly from the table, leaving my grapefruit half partially eaten and only a few bites taken out of my toast. I left as though I was going to the great room, but instead stood just outside the door of the kitchen. With my back against the wall, I heard Father telling Mother that he had to figure out what the situation was with the Francos before we started working our way into the community. He didn't want us to make mistakes, not after our run-in with Bill the day before. We were too new, too vulnerable to take risks that

could set us back before we'd even begun. Mother didn't respond, but I pictured her nodding her head in agreement, then bringing the jagged edge of her grapefruit spoon above the pink flesh. Perhaps there would be a moment's hesitation, a doubt in her mind, keeping her from cutting through the fruit. Should she have protested, said *To hell with it* and admitted that she didn't want to be a prisoner in this new house, waiting for her husband to figure out how they should adapt? Should she have watched Father's smoothly shaven face turn red as she raised her voice? These thoughts would be suspended above her grapefruit, waiting for her to set down her spoon and give them sound. But then she would exhale softly and push the spoon all the way down to the rind, fragrant juice gushing to the surface. *Oh, Mother.* I left the wall and continued to the great room, heaviness beginning to set in.

And oh, Father. In Massachusetts, he had *been* the community, not just a part of it. A selectman, member of the county board, head of the altar committee at our church, Father had taken a bite out of our community. I knew that it had been just as difficult for him to leave as it had been for Mother. However, while Mother's body betrayed her and revealed her sadness through small smiles, Father somehow had the strength to will his body into a kind of tolerance. From the perspective of boy who was on his way to becoming a man, I may have admired this control that he had over himself. As a son, though, I couldn't help but be angry. All the times in my childhood, and even then, when he should have been willing to reach to me. If I'm being honest with myself, I can still feel a certain emptiness from those early years, all due to the absence of Father's touch in my life.

So passed every morning that first week. The three of us sitting around the table, Father telling us that the city was still too hot and that we had to stay in the house, me leaving and

Father filling Mother in on what he had learned about the “situation.” Not everyone in the city was as open to discussing Lewiston’s Franco residents as Bill had been, Father was discovering. I would overhear him say that the general attitude was negative, but that non-Franco citizens were tight-lipped when it came to discussing specifics. I found it unfair that the only person who I had met in the city was a man who felt so strongly about something that no one else would talk about. I had become interested, but now there was no one who could satisfy my desire to know more. Father talked to me about the weather when I was in front of him, then about his inability to learn anything new when he thought that I couldn’t hear. It was frustrating, all of it.

Mother and I spent the week continuing to put the house in order, both of us trying to ignore our overwhelming need to feel at ease in these surroundings. We organized and reorganized, kept ourselves busy, but soon arrived at the inevitable conclusion: Uncle Dave needed to bring the rest of our belongings. There was only so much we could do with the boxes from our Buick. At the end of that surprisingly quick week, an hour after we had Saturday night dinner, Uncle Dave pulled into our driveway in his Chevy truck.

The last time I had seen him was when we had picked him up from his program and driven him to Mother’s parents’, where he had lived for those first few months after getting out. He had been quiet and good-natured, but I had read something in him that I didn’t trust. He hadn’t met my eyes when he talked to me, and maybe it was hypocritical of me to mistrust him for that. It was difficult for me to look at people full-on when I was young. I didn’t mind seeing people at times when they didn’t see me, but there was something about doing the expected thing that I found hard.

The man who shook Father's hand at the door and wrapped Mother in a hug was not the same man who hadn't met my eyes. Though Uncle Dave was still seemingly good-natured, he wasn't quiet. Without being asked, he started talking about the drive.

"Easy all the way up until Portland. Then it was an absolute mess, backed up for miles. Sorry I'm late," he said, placing his suitcase on the floor and looking around the foyer. "Swell place you got, Dick. Beautiful." Father thanked him and started talking about the old woman who used to own the house, while Uncle Dave smiled with his hands in his pockets, listening and nodding.

There was still something nervous about him, but I didn't get the same mistrustful feeling. When he shook my hand, I knew that I should have looked at his face to see if he looked at mine, but I just couldn't do it. I looked down, and I guess he interpreted it as embarrassment of some sort. Releasing my hand, he pulled me towards him in a tight embrace. I stood stock-still. I couldn't remember the last time I'd been held by someone other than Mother—my mind raced back to when I'd had the chicken pox in third grade and she had rubbed calamine all over me, then wrapped me tightly in a blanket and held me while I slept. I didn't know what to do as Uncle Dave clapped me on the back, except reciprocate. Was this how men gave hugs—did men hug? I'd never seen Father hug another man, not even his own father. I didn't remember that he had ever hugged me.

Uncle Dave released me after a moment, then held me at arm's length.

"Jiminy, you've grown, Tommy. What're you feeding him, Joyce? Steak and eggs everyday?" He looked back towards Mother, who crossed her thin arms and scoffed. I always liked seeing her around my uncle; the familial bond seemed to release a part of her that didn't come out around Father. I think that Father noticed this change in her as well, though I never

heard him say a word against Uncle Dave in conversations with Mother. But I can imagine now the discomfort he felt inside when he saw his wife being more comfortable around another man —no matter that it was her brother.

I think we were all surprised by how well Uncle Dave seemed to be getting along. While he ate cold sandwiches that Mother hastily prepared, and drank from a tall glass of milk poured for him by Mother, he told us about life in Massachusetts. I kept expecting Father to tell me that the conversation was not for my ears; however, I think that the balance in the house had been so thrown off by my uncle's arrival that Father forgot that I wasn't supposed to know as much as I did.

In the week since we had left, Uncle Dave had gotten a job at the gas station in town while he looked for other work. He had been a science teacher before things fell apart, but he wasn't sure if any school would hire a man in recovery. Even though he was doing everything just as he was supposed to—continuing to attend meetings at the hospital, staying clean—his sin had already been committed. While God's forgiveness could be bought with tithes and Hail Marys, society's forgiveness didn't have a price.

He was still technically married to Aunt Martha, though she and their two daughters didn't live with my uncle—she didn't want him back until he was completely healed. It was only when he talked about my cousins that I saw the Uncle Dave who we had picked up and driven to my grandparents'—the quiet Uncle Dave with the distant eyes.

“Lily's birthday was this week, but Martha told me I couldn't go to the party. The one with Lily's schoolmates and everything.” He looked down at his empty plate as he talked, flicking his glance upwards to Mother's face every so often. “I hadn't even been planning on going. I've

only ever gone to the family party, never the kiddie one. That was Martha's affair. Maybe that makes me a rotten father, but I can't think that you ever went to one of Tommy's parties, right, Dick?"

Father glanced quickly at Mother, then cleared his throat and said, "Tommy didn't have birthday parties with friends when he was growing up. I guess that means I'm off the hook."

Uncle Dave looked up at me with a glassy stare and I held his gaze for as long as I could before I felt that it had gone on for too long. After I shifted my glance, he said, "Lucky you, Dick. But can you imagine that? Being told you can't see your daughter, being told that other parents wouldn't want you around their children. Parents used to call up the principal and practically demand that I teach their kids. Now it's as if I have some disease and I'll infect anyone I touch."

Father cleared his throat again, and said, "Dave, I don't want you to feel worse about things, but you have to know why people feel the way they do. Alcoholism is a disease. You were an alcoholic. You're recovering and doing a grand job of it, but it will take a while before people's faith in you is restored."

Mother reached to her brother and took his hand in hers, running her thumb over his knuckles. I imagined that they were both shaking a little—Uncle Dave with his emotion and Mother with her daringness to reach to him. However, neither of them showed any sort of tremor, but were somehow on the same frequency, canceling each other out. Father continued talking without noticing Mother's steady motion, only seeing his wife soothing another man.

"You have to know, though, that you've always had our complete faith. Never lost it." *Oh, Father, you liar*, I thought. I knew even then that he had hated being connected to someone with

such an unexplainable problem. Uncle Dave had drunk himself into a disease; he was responsible for what afflicted him. It would have been easier if he had served in the Pacific and come back thinking that the Japanese were still shooting at him. That would have been understandable, even commendable. The reality was, in Father's eyes, pathetic and reckless.

Uncle Dave believed Father, though. Believed him because he wanted to, because he needed to—because Mother's hand was still on his hand, letting him know that *she* had never lost faith. As he nodded, my uncle looked once more at me. He didn't meet my eyes, but he was still undeniably looking *at* me. As the four of us sat around the table—Father leaning back in his chair, Mother comforting her brother, Uncle Dave glancing in my direction, and me trying to soak in the feeling of being included in my parents' conversation—I saw that it wasn't suspicion and mistrust hiding in my uncle's eyes. It was shame, pure and simple.

Mother wanted Uncle Dave to stay longer, but he insisted on leaving the next morning. I could tell that Father was relieved; he got up early to help unpack the truck. He didn't ask me to help this time, but left me inside to get ready for Mass. As I stood at the bay window in the great room and watched Father and Uncle Dave lifting my bike out of the truck bed, I wondered if they worked in silence or continued the conversation from the previous night. I wondered if Father was lying and Uncle Dave was shaking, both wishing that they could be anywhere else but there. I knew that was my wish.

Mother came up behind me and put her hands around my shoulders, unable to drop her chin on the top of my head like she used to do; I was half a head taller than her. Instead, she leaned her cheek into my neck, and I could feel the pleasant greasiness of her makeup against my skin.

I felt that my uncle's presence was to thank for this intimacy; though it was not an embrace, it was still delicious closeness.

"Why aren't you out helping them, sweetheart?" she asked.

"Father told me to get ready for Mass," I replied. I was still in my pajamas. "I haven't made much progress."

"I'd say not. Do you want me to make you some toast? I was just about to get some for myself."

"No, I'm not really hungry," I said, shaking my head softly, making sure not to disrupt her own. "I guess I should go get dressed. I want to say goodbye to Uncle Dave before he leaves."

I started to move, but Mother held my shoulders fast.

"Oh, Tommy, not yet. Just wait a bit longer." I relaxed back into her hands, and she loosened her grasp, nestling further into my neck. "I like watching my men work together while I have my boy in my arms. It makes me feel at home. Alright?"

I turned my head slightly and kissed her hair, then fixed my eyes once again on the two men gathered around the truck.

"Of course, Mother."

IV.

Uncle Dave took his empty truck back home to Massachusetts, and Father, Mother, and I went to Mass in Auburn. I hardly paid attention to the service. My body performed the actions it had been trained to do—I let the priest put the wafer that tasted like mold on my tongue, drank from the communal wine cup, and crossed myself on command. It was a performance devoid of any sort of passion or conviction.

The priest, who sticks in my mind as being so thin that his vestments hung on his frame as if his shoulders were a hanger and his body was air, gave a homily that seemed to please Father. I saw him nodding his head every few minutes out of the corner of my eye. His gaze never left the pulpit. I wish I could remember what the skinny priest had said in those fifteen minutes, what in his words had given Father more apparent satisfaction than anything that ever came out of my mouth.

There's a lot that I wish I could remember. Isn't that something people say? I think it escaped my lips even when I was young. But how much have you really forgotten when you're fifteen? You want to remember what it felt like to be born, to say words for the first time. That's one of the graces of being young, I suppose—wanting to remember those sensations that are only meant to be felt once. You want to remember because, underneath this sort of sweetly nostalgic desire, you know that you'll never experience those feelings again. You live in a moment when everything's just there, at your fingertips, waiting to be felt—and you search for what's not there. Like I said, there's a certain grace to this sort of memory.

But then that grace passes. You forget things you never needed, never tried to remember. Did

Father have a silver or a gold watch? What songs did Mother hum while she did laundry? These details, ultimately unimportant, have slipped away now. Do I go on without them? Of course. And yet, I can't shake the feeling that I've been robbed and I can't find who's to blame. Still, there are ways in which I consider myself lucky—many moments of that summer in Lewiston continue to stick in my mind. I close my eyes and I'm looking at my brown-shingled house, dark and old, forsythia bushes under the bay windows...Mother prunes them in her blue canvas gloves...or are they red? No, definitely blue...I could not forget this. I see myself biking down elm-lined roads...I was such a beanpole, with that tight hardness to my body that I always admired in other boys and never thought I had. I should have known myself, even then...but now the Androscoggin is on my left...I'm getting close. And then I hear a woman scream.

It wasn't until a couple weeks after Uncle Dave left that I expressed my desire to go out for a bike ride. The need to be alone and out of the house had become unbearable. By then, Mother had been receiving invitations from ladies at church to play dominoes and bridge at their homes, and Father had let up on his strict quarantine. I went with Mother to the ladies' homes in the city, walking on main streets as Father wanted. We had those afternoons together, Mother and I, those few afternoons when we still felt new. There were the familiar advertisements in shop windows for ten-cent milk bottles and Philco television sets, advertisements we had walked by thousands of times in Massachusetts. But here, they were old friends waving to us, offering us comfort in this strange land.

I saw boys my own age sitting in drug stores, playing baseball in side streets. Did I want to join them, even though I was never a first choice for pick-up games back home? Yes—I missed being around people my own age, people who weren't Mother or Father. I missed Roger. I missed racing on our bikes to the lake outside of town, then stripping to our skivvies and rushing

to the shore. We would push each other as we galloped with high plunging steps into the water, laughing as we fell in together. I didn't want to replace him, but I needed to feel the releasing happiness of an easy friendship.

Mother would see me watch the boys, but she would never insist that I join them. I think she was afraid to even suggest that I leave her; she needed me to be at her side as much as I soon found that I needed to be alone. But she should've known that, even given the opportunity, I wouldn't have left her on those walks through the city. Weren't my smiles enough to convince her? She returned them without a word, and I wanted to believe that meant she understood.

But after three weeks of house arrest, mixed with with afternoons of a freedom that I shared with Mother, I found that I had to be with myself for a moment; I needed to go on a bike ride alone. Even half an hour would give me some release from Father's scrutiny and Mother's silence. I thought it was an acceptable need, one that even Father could understand. Surely he relished his weekdays at work, those daily eight hours when he wasn't confined to the varnished walnut paneling of the house. My bike had been sitting in the garage since Uncle Dave left it behind; why had he even brought it if I couldn't use it?

One Sunday night at dinner, I asked Father as he ate his salad. Swallowing a large bite of iceberg lettuce, he said, "Does it have to be this minute?"

"No, it doesn't. Just sometime before it gets dark," I replied, looking down at my own salad.

"The walks with Mother aren't cutting it, then?" he asked. Without letting me respond, he continued, "Why don't you wait until you start up at school and make some friends. I'd rather you were with kids who know their way around."

“Wouldn’t it be better if I didn’t wait so long? There are always kids playing in the streets when Mother and I are out. They look like they’re my age. Maybe if I introduced myself—”

“You don’t know where they’re from, Tommy, who their parents are.”

“But if I met them then I could find out.”

“I don’t know—maybe.” He shook his head and brought another chunk of lettuce to his mouth. “We can discuss it later.”

Father chewed as though the crunch enforced his words. Father always ate with gusto. He did this even when what he put into his mouth, such as that night’s meal, didn’t warrant such enthusiasm. Maybe it was his way of making Mother feel that she had done well, something that she rarely otherwise heard.

“What about tonight, then?” I asked.

“I thought I already said no? Anyways, Ed Sullivan’s on tonight.”

That was the deciding factor—a television show. Father’s “progressive” nature was going to prevent me from being out on my own. So, I turned to Mother and asked her to pass me the salad. As she placed the bowl in my hands, I caught her eye and, with a meaning glance, begged her to speak. She blinked quickly, then lay her hands on the napkin in her lap and turned to Father.

“Richard,” she began quietly. Still chewing, he looked at her and nodded in acknowledgement. “You know, I think it would be a wonderful idea for Tommy to go out for a bit. The air and exercise would do him good.”

Father chewed once more then swallowed. Continuing to look at Mother, he said, “You think

so?” She nodded. He wiped his mouth with his napkin and said lightly, “Well, if *you* want him to take a bike ride, let him take a bike ride.”

Mother smiled at me as Father got up from the table and I promised him that I would be back in time for Ed Sullivan. It seemed that her smile was as much for herself as it was for me. A solid clang then came from the kitchen as Father set his plate on the counter, and her smile cracked.

“But if he’s attacked by frogs when he’s biking,” he bellowed into the dining room, “it won’t be on me.”

The sun dipped low over the Androscoggin as I made my way down the shoulder of the elm-lined street, passing the occasional car and people whose faces I didn’t notice. The trees cast long shadows over my path, causing me to break in and out of heavy golden light. The beauty of the trees and the light contrasted so greatly with the persisting discomfort that filled me that I began to feel sick. Mother would have told me that I hadn’t had enough to drink, or that the day was still too hot for such physical exertion. But she had fought in her small way to let me have that moment, had even said that I needed the exercise. I know now that she told these little lies to allow me some happiness, lies that went against the pulling sense in her that I needed to be protected. But even then, thinking of her lies made me distinctly uneasy. Squeezing the breaks, I pulled my bike to the curb of the emptying street.

I sat down on the curb and used the front of my shirt to wipe sweat off my face, watching the river flow across from me. Once again, I felt the desire to fling myself into the murky water. I wondered whether it would be immediately cool, or if I would have to plunge to the very bottom

to find relief from the heat of the city. And if I made it to the bottom, would I be able to kick my way back to the surface? It's not that I was considering ending my life; I didn't want to die. I only wanted to know whether I would have the strength to push myself back to my sweltering life.

Frogs. I knew, even then, that the word wasn't good. Growing up, I had been taught to see everything as black and white, good and bad. There were no compromises, no good mixed with the bad. It was a fairly standard way to be raised, I think, but it always made me wonder what would happen if good revealed bad, or vice versa. Frogs, though—what good came out of that? And why did Father have to use it? For I had also grown up knowing how much other words had followed him—*Mick! Paddy!*—and caused his skin to burn and his stomach to drop. Father had always built himself to be a model man who I could idolize, but, at that time, he was becoming the kind who could turn rotten in my eyes by speaking just one word. Sometimes I've wondered whether I was overreacting, whether I judged Father too harshly for saying that one word. I like to think now that I wasn't *judging* Father, not really. It was more that I was disappointed in him. I was beginning to grasp what he would do in order to be accepted by others, which included being something that was so unlike who I thought he was. And that, I think, scared me.

As I sat on the curb, contemplating the Androscoggin, I began to fully take notice of where I was. The shabby houses, the muffled conversations coming from open windows in a language that I could not understand. Once more, I had unintentionally found myself in the Franco quarter of Lewiston. Suddenly, from behind where I sat on the curb, there came the piercing cry of a woman, followed by the solid sound of skin hitting skin. And then came a voice that yelled

incoherent, but distinctly English words.

It was Bill's voice.

When I heard the cry, I had been looking straight ahead at the golden light that broke through the elms. Suddenly, it was as though the light passed straight through my eyes, through my entire body; I had become a block of ice. As the light touched me, it was refracted—but still I felt no warmth. At first, it was the woman's cry that froze me, causing my heart to jump abruptly to my throat, then fall back down and seem to stop altogether. Bill's voice hit my ears before I had a chance to take a breath—I wish that I had been able to make out what exactly he yelled, but I couldn't.

Then I heard another voice, a younger male voice, yell back in English. The woman's sob came out pleadingly and Bill shouted once more, then a door slammed. My icy body shattered and I quickly turned my torso around to look down the alley. The light that had gone through me now flooded the narrow passage, illuminating the ground and buildings. Bill's shadow stretched far behind him as he walked briskly from one of the run-down houses and down the road toward me. As light hit his body, I could see the sweat that beaded at his hairline and in the hollow at the base of his throat; both his collar and tie were loose, exposing skin and an undershirt.

I remember very clearly seeing those two things—the shiny triangle of skin and the white cotton shirt that had turned gray with sweat—and feeling a strange churning in my stomach that had nothing to do with my earlier sickness. I had never seen a man so undone in public, revealing those parts of himself that were usually kept hidden. I was, without exactly realizing it, exhilarated.

As Bill came toward me with his head down, I just stared. I didn't say anything, couldn't say anything; my breathing still hadn't returned to normal. *Please, please don't see me*, I thought. But then, also, *Look up, look at me*.

Meanwhile, the two voices continued to come out of the house. The young male no longer spoke English, but had switched to vowel-heavy French mutterings that were so soft I could hardly hear them. The woman's voice came through as a mixture of shaking cries and thick French mumbling. As the voices carried in the alley, Bill didn't look back—until the door of the house opened and a young man, not much older than I was, appeared. Bill turned around to face the young man, who began to advance on him. Both of their hands curled into fists as they closed the space between them.

The young man's resolute gaze stayed fixed on Bill as he walked, but his youthful face betrayed him. The corners of his mouth, which he tried to keep in a hard line, twitched with the emotion that had come out in his earlier shouting at Bill. He wiped at his eyes a few times with the back of his fist, squinting slightly after each wipe. After one these wipes, his gaze flashed quickly to me. He didn't seem to register at first that he had seen me, and he looked back at Bill. Then it clicked, he stopped walking, and his stare came back to me.

Bill turned around and followed the young man's gaze. His eyes squinted in the sunlight, then widened in recognition. Rapidly he swung his head back to the young man, then returned his eyes to me. As he furrowed his brows and his tongue darted at the corners of his mouth, I saw that his agitation had taken on a new sense, one that I couldn't make out. I think now that it was the recognition of exactly who I was, that I was not just a random kid, but someone who knew his name. Someone who could let slip that he had been with the Francos. Not just in the

quarter, but with the people whose presence alone Bill thought was an infection. It was this recognition that had him contorting his face and licking his mouth.

Suddenly I, who had before been just an invisible observer, held the attention of two men who, in that moment, possessed such violent energy; they stood in the still-golden alleyway, chests heaving slightly with agitated breaths. And yet, I still could not seem to make my heart and lungs work well enough to give me just one breath of heavy air. I needed that air, needed my brain to get the oxygen that would then force my legs to take me to my bike and leave. I was curious, but only to a certain extent. At a point, the instinct that wanted to keep me alive had to kick in because the next thing I knew, I was scrambling up from the curb.

“Hey! Stop!” Bill yelled. The stillness was broken, and my heart started beating. It pounded against my rib cage as I got on my bike and pushed up the kickstand with the toe of my sneaker. I started to turn the pedals too quickly and they spun out of control, causing the chain to rattle and the bike to wobble. My breath was coming out erratically now as I steadied myself and propelled myself forward with more control. I heard the sound of fast feet on pavement and looked back to see Bill running down the alley toward me. The young man stayed where he was.

Looking forward once more, I gave the pedals a couple of good revolutions, then put my weight on them and stood straight, coasting past the darkening elms. As I left the Franco quarter, I could still hear the sound of Bill’s feet pounding after me. But he didn’t shout again, didn’t threaten me with promises of what would happen if I talked about what I had heard and seen. He didn’t need to. Who would listen if I told them?

When I pulled into the driveway of my house, the sun had nearly completely set, with only a thin golden line remaining on the horizon. There was a lamp on in the great room whose light shone through the bay windows and onto the front lawn, causing the grass blades to cast jagged shadows. I could also see the glow of the television, with Ed Sullivan's face appearing in the glow.

I considered sneaking in quietly and praying that Father wouldn't hear me. If Mother heard, she wouldn't say a word. She would later leave the room silently and join me in my bedroom to talk. But I knew that Father would hear no matter how lightly I tiptoed, so I walked into the house as if there was nothing wrong with staying out past eight. The door had hardly closed before I heard the sound of Father getting up from his leather easy chair.

"Do you see what's on the television?" he asked, storming into the foyer.

"Yeah," I said, looking past him and at Mother. She stared straight ahead at Ed Sullivan.

"Excuse me?"

"Yes, I see. I got lost, sorry."

Father stared me down, his arms crossed in front of him. I put my hands in my pockets and looked over at the stairs, wanting nothing more than to climb up to the bathroom and dunk my head in a sink full of cold water.

"Lost?" he asked. I nodded, holding my breath and hoping he would buy my lie. "Alright."

I breathed an internal sigh of relief, then said, "Father, I'm really tired. Is it okay if I go upstairs and wash up?"

"Worn out from a bike ride? What were you doing, going uphill both ways?"

“No,” I said. I thought about telling him what I had seen, but I decided it was best to channel Mother and stay silent. “It’s just the heat, it always makes me tired. May I go?”

“Alright, fine. Go ahead.” I turned toward the stairs. “But Tommy?”

“Mhm?” I turned back around, all but itching to leave.

“I don’t think there’ll be anymore bike rides for now. At least not until you start school and make some friends. I don’t want to think of you being alone in this city.”

I nodded and walked with heavy steps to the stairs. *Of course.*

V.

Sliding in-between the cool linen sheets of my bed that night, I felt that I wouldn't be able to sleep. It's not that I had lied to Father; I was exhausted. But it was the sort of tiredness that breaks your body and electrifies your head. My eyes closed against the darkness of my room, only to reverberate with the sharp sound of the Franco woman's cry. The images of Bill's sweaty skin and the young man's squinting eyes appeared to me as if they were on a film roll that coiled its way through my mind.

As my body began to sink into the mattress and disassociate itself from my brain, the film played faster and faster, and the two images seemed to bleed into each other. Keen eyes squinted at me above the triangular hollow, which quivered agitatedly. The eyes then blinked, causing fat tears of sweat to squeeze out from their corners and run down to the base of the hollow. The skin there absorbed the sweat greedily and then seemed to quiver for more tears.

I wanted to open my eyes, but suddenly didn't seem to have them anymore. I tried to yell, tried to make someone turn off the film, except there was no part of me that could make sound. The film continued playing and the eyes continued crying until, suddenly, the triangle of skin opened at the place where it had consumed the tears. With no warning, waves of hot sweat began to pour from the opening, crashing over me. I was burned as the sweat hit whatever part of me could still feel pain, then stung as the liquified salt found its way into the burns. Each wave released the woman's anguished cry, causing a chorus of cries to hit me with roaring acuteness. Another voice began to yell with the woman, the voice of a young man. Except, the squinting eyes that belonged to the young man from the Franco quarter hadn't opened, hadn't

ceased their crying, since the other voice joined in the woman's chorus. The yelling became louder, almost drowning out the woman's cry, and still the eyes did not reflect it. Then came my sudden realization that the yelling did not come from the film, but outside of it.

I wrenched myself awake with the sound of my own scream still in my ears. I was laying stock-still on my bed, but my heart beat violently, its pulse crawling all the way up into my throat. Casting my eyes around the dark room, I couldn't see anything; the absence of something to look at was a welcome change from the dream. My gaze settled straight ahead of me, on what I knew was the fireplace. As I felt my heart began to beat normally, I continued to stare with heavy eyes at the fireplace. I thought about the black ashy interior and how surprisingly velvety it had been that first day when I had brushed my fingers against it. Before I knew what I was doing, I flung back my covers and got out of bed. The wooden floor was so cool and smooth against my bare feet, almost like frozen butter—suddenly I was on my hands and knees making my way to the fireplace. I wanted to melt into the floor, so much so that I could almost feel myself sinking into it. Yet I somehow reached the fireplace, and pulled myself from the floor and into the brick cavern. Everything was cool and smooth—like the floor—and blacker than the darkness of my room. I wanted to feel the black on my body, and so ran my hands over the bricks and rubbed them on my face, my shirt, my bare legs.

When I looked out of the fireplace and back toward my bed, my heart stopped as I saw something resting there. Then I realized that I had pushed my covers up when I got out of bed, and they were simply illuminated by the slight moonlight in an alarming way. Suddenly, though, the covers shifted and fell flat onto the bed. Something then thudded onto the floor. Before I could react, before I could catch my breath, my ears were filled with the crying of the Franco

woman. I crammed my eyes shut as the piercing cry rang through my head, and I felt my face contort from the pain. Forcing my eyes open against the deafening noise, I saw, sliding toward me, the grotesque form of the triangular hollow of skin, eyes squinting above it. It reached the fireplace and began shooting burning bullets of sweat, which hit the parts of my body that I had rubbed with ash. Screaming, I tried to stop the bullets with my hands, but they were stuck to my ears from my attempts to muffle the cry. My head seemed to turn inwards on itself and I sunk into the fireplace, with only one thought running through my mind: *Why hadn't Father and Mother come to help me; hadn't they heard my screams?*

I awoke once more, immediately aware of the cool dampness that surrounded my body. My eyes fluttered open, and I saw that sunlight filled the room. I then became aware that I was curled into a ball, completely enveloped by my sheets and quilt. The sheets were soaked through with sweat, and I hoped that the quilt had at least stayed dry. Finally, I moved my eyes around the room and realized that I was not on my bed, but on the floor in front of the fireplace. I jerked fully awake and struggled to sit up, fighting to disentangle myself from the damp sheets.

I saw that my bed had also been stripped of the fitted sheet, which lay in a twisted heap next to my bed. At this point, I started to feel uneasy. I was curious about what had happened while I had slept, but the images and sounds of the night before were still fresh in my mind. They weren't beginning to fade like dreams usually did a few seconds after they were interrupted by consciousness. I could feel everything as if I were still asleep, and that made me more uncomfortable than I can even say now.

I got up, shivering as air passed through my damp shirt, and walked stiffly to the fitted sheet.

Bending down to pick it, I found that I was unable to grab ahold of it with one hand; something inside of it made it too wide to grasp. I felt distinctly chilled-through as I brought my other hand to the sheet and unwrapped the object inside. It was one of the boxing gloves that Father had given me. I stood and held it for a few seconds, feeling similar to how I had felt when I had first heard the woman's cry the day before. I couldn't move, couldn't breathe, could only look at the glove and feel a thousand questions fill my mind. After a moment, I found that I couldn't bear to hold it anymore, and let it fall from my fingers. The glove dropped to the floor, on top of my sheet, where it landed with a resounding thud.

In the mornings, I would usually wake up, go to the bathroom, grab my bathrobe, and head downstairs for breakfast. That morning, though, I immediately stripped out of my damp pajamas and took a shower. Before stepping out and grabbing my towel, I turned the faucet all the way to cold, as if the blast of icy water could snap me out of the dream.

By the time I was dressed and in the kitchen, Father had left for the office. Mother was sitting at the kitchen table in her silk dressing gown when I walked in. She was pouring over her cookbooks—the thin fingers of one hand pressed to her forehead, the other hand flipping through pages—and didn't notice me. When I popped two slices of bread into the toaster, she finally looked up and, giving me a small smile, asked me how I slept.

“Pretty well,” I lied. “I couldn't fall asleep right away, though. I kept thinking about what Father said yesterday.”

“What do you mean?” Mother looked back down at her cookbooks as she spoke. “What did your Father say yesterday?”

“Didn’t you hear what he called the Francos? Before I left for my bike ride?”

“Oh, for goodness’ sake,” said Mother lightly. “If I don’t hear about them from Dick, I hear about them from you.”

“From me? I barely talk about them. And Father hasn’t said much more than I have.” My mind then pictured all the private conversations my parents had that I couldn’t overhear. Did Father actually talk about the Francos when he was alone with his wife? I suddenly imagined them in bed together, reading before turning off the lights. Father would stop mid-sentence and say to Mother in a soft voice that he was sorry he had ever moved us to Lewiston. We would never have had to deal with *frogs* in Massachusetts.

“All the same, just hearing the word puts my teeth on edge,” Mother replied, then looked up from her cookbooks. “Isn’t it odd, though, that you never see one walking around? I really don’t believe I’ve seen one when we’ve walked through the city.” I wanted to point out that not only was there nothing in their appearance that made the Francos different from us, but also that we hadn’t gone through their quarter on our walks. However, I stayed silent and let Mother continue. “It’s as though they’re make-believe, like a ghost story my brother would tell me when I was little.”

Mother’s voice trailed off when she mentioned Uncle Dave and her gaze wandered to the window. The morning sun hit her directly in the eyes and she closed them, then tucked her bottom lip in-between her teeth. Even at fifteen, I knew that Mother was beautiful. As the sun hit her face in a way that made her black eyelashes gleam and the small hairs on her cheeks glisten, I could see why Father would sometimes stop what he was doing to look at her.

Suddenly, the toaster clanged behind me, making me jump. I took out my toast and spread on some jam, then sat down across from Mother.

“But it’s not a ghost story, that’s what I’m saying. They’re still here, even if we can’t see them,” I said. As Mother sat there, so poised in the sunlight, I contemplated telling her everything about the previous day. Everything that I had felt since arriving in Lewiston. Then I choked, and her silence became my muse once again. “Anyways, I just don’t get how Father can say such crummy things about people he’s never met.”

Mother turned away from the sunlight and toward me, then smiled.

“Oh, my sweet boy. You’ve always had such a chip on your shoulder about being good and kind.” She gave a little laugh, then said, “I’m starting to wonder where you got it from.”

“But you’re kind, and you’re good,” I reassured her.

Mother considered what I had said, then looked back at the sun. Without closing her eyes, she said in a steady voice, “You really think I’m good?”

It wasn’t a question so much as a statement, and she didn’t seem to expect any sort of answer. Still staring out the window, she continued, “Tommy, you know your father’s just saying what needs to be said, doing what he has to, so that we have a place here. He doesn’t like that it involves so much meanness anymore than you do. It’s just what has to happen.”

She gave a quick exhale, then looked back down at her cookbooks.

“Eat your toast before it gets cold, dear. And pour yourself some orange juice. It’s too hot to not drink something cold in the morning.”

I had decided in the shower, in-between thoughts of my dream, that I had to return to the Franco quarter. I had to see the young man whose tears had been shot at me the night before. I had to know if the woman who had cried was alright. Most importantly, I wanted to understand Bill's involvement in all of this, and do what I could to never have that dream again.

Mother had conveniently invited women from church over to play bridge that afternoon. That morning, she had been searching her cookbooks so intently in order to find the right combination of sandwiches and salads to prepare for her guests. When she asked for help with the preparation, I gave her the excuse, rather guiltily, that I didn't think Father would want me cooking. He had never helped with a single meal, and he had made it all but clear that he didn't think I should, either.

Mother smiled as if she had known that's how I would reply, but I still felt terrible about it. I asked her if I could go to the library instead; Father had told me that the reading lists for school were there. I had done well at my high school in Massachusetts, but he seemed to think that I would have to work even harder now that I was from Maine. I had to impress the Ivies. Princeton or Yale for my undergrad, then Harvard Law—that was his plan.

It took a bit of convincing for Mother to let me go, especially after what Father had said the previous night. I reasoned that Father wouldn't have told me about the reading lists if he didn't want me to get one. Promising Mother that I would be two hours at the most, I rushed out the door, almost positive that she wouldn't run after me. It was clear that she was excited to finally return to the social position that she had enjoyed in Massachusetts, and she wasn't going to let anything ruin her moment. Not even her worries for her son or her husband's rules.

It had been an honest mistake the day before when I had found myself in the Franco quarter. Now that I was trying to get there on purpose, though, I was worried that I wouldn't be able to find it. As I pedaled down my street, I thought back to the hilly terrain of my town in Massachusetts. It would have at least given me the occasional chance to catch my breath. Lewiston was so flat, and the air so oppressively heavy, that after five minutes my t-shirt was soaked through. At the slightest decline, I would stop pedaling and coast, breathing deeply as the feeble breeze passed through my sweaty clothes.

I soon realized that all I had to do to reach the Franco quarter was follow the Androscoggin. Its elm-lined banks gradually led me from mowed lawns surrounded by wrought-iron fences to the crumbling brick houses of the quarter. Passing by each horizontal street, I saw clotheslines strung in the open air from house to house, and heard the laughter and chatter of children. There was a steady mixture of French and English that came from the streets; the children seemed to switch between the two languages halfway through sentences and conversations. I assumed that they spoke English when at school, but to hear it there in the quarter surprised me.

As I pedaled past each street, I realized that finding the house I had seen Bill leave the day before wouldn't be as easy as finding the quarter. All the houses were nearly identical to one another, packed so close together from street to street. My chest began to hurt from how hard my heart was beating, not just because of the heat and the biking. If I couldn't find the house, I would have to somehow find the library to get the book list so that I wouldn't be home so soon. As the feeling of panic began to fill me, I pulled over and dismounted. Grabbing ahold of the handlebars, I walked my bike to the entrance of one of the streets, and started down it.

Children stopped playing and stared as I walked by them. *Do they know I'm not Franco?* I wondered. Could they tell before I even opened my mouth? I considered smiling, but it would have been more to comfort myself than them. I then considered asking them if they knew where I could find the young man. But how would I describe him? I didn't know his name, and I had barely seen him. And then they would definitely know that I wasn't Franco.

Ahead of me, a door opened, and a young man walked out. He didn't look back, but walked down the street away from me. I stopped walking and almost called to him, but then saw his brown hair. *Was his hair brown?* I asked myself. No, it wasn't; it had been blond, remarkably blond when the late-day sun had shone on it. The sudden excitement of thinking that I had found him quickly became a reminder that I didn't really know what I was doing, and I silently swore at myself. Resigning myself to spending the rest of my time out in search of the library, I roughly turned my bike around and made my way back to the main road.

Once at the end of the street, I got on my bike and put my feet on the pedals, then took another look back. I still had the dumb hope that he would suddenly appear, which of course he didn't. I hung my head and swore at myself some more, then started pedaling forward. As my lungs began to protest, I looked up and saw a blond young man walking toward me. He was in grimy work pants and an undershirt, and carried a lunch pail. As he got closer, it became clear that he was *my* young man; I pushed the breaks and leaned my bike to one side, putting my foot flat on the ground. When he saw me, his pace slowed momentarily in recognition, then he wiped his face with the back of his hand and continued walking. As he came closer, I saw that the skin around his eye was bruised.

“You were here yesterday,” he said when he was close enough that I could hear him. I nodded, and, scratching his head, he continued, “Why’d you come back?”

As he spoke, he stared me down with the same intensity as the day before. I looked back blankly and found that I couldn’t get a word out. On the way over, I had gone over what I would say a hundred times in my head. Like usual, though, none of it was coming to me now that I actually had to talk.

“I just wanted to check that things were okay,” I said in a rush. “When I left, Bill was still here, and I was afraid something would happen.”

I looked at his black eye as I finished speaking. He noticed and wiped his face again with his hand.

“You know Bill?” he asked.

“Yeah, well, my father knows him. He met him when we got here.” I paused, then added lamely, “We just moved here from Massachusetts.”

“I see, and does your father like Bill?”

“I guess.”

“And what do you think about him?”

“Did he do that to your eye?”

“Yes, after you went,” he said, then chuckled. “But he has its twin.”

“Then no, I don’t like him.” The young man looked at me for a moment longer, then smiled. With that one affirmation of our mutual dislike of Bill, combined with the smile he gave—one that made his eyes crinkle and my stomach lurch—I felt a bond cement between us. It was the first time since I had arrived in Lewiston that someone seemed interested in my opinion about

anything. Though I was terrified of what would happen if I said the wrong thing, the feeling of being able to just talk with someone was intoxicating.

“I’m going to my house,” he said finally. “Do you want to come and have a glass of water?”

“Uh, yeah.” I clumsily got off of my bike and started walking alongside him. “That would be great, I’m parched. Are you—do you work?”

“At Bates Mill, I’m in my lunch hour.”

“Oh, but I thought the mills were closed.”

“No, not all of them. But it won’t take long, Bates is almost finished,” he said, looking ahead as he walked. We were about the same height, but while I still felt as though my feet didn’t correspond with the rest of my body, he walked with ease. I was surprised and pleased by how candid he was with me. The words that came out of his mouth were exactly the words he wanted to say, and I could feel myself being able to speak in the same way.

“Why don’t you stay at the mill for lunch?” I asked, looking at the lunch pail that he swung beside him. “You already have it with you.”

“Because I don’t like to be at the mill when I’m not working, it’s a rotten place,” he replied, turning his head as he talked—it was easy for me to meet his eyes. “And I want to see my mother.”

So that’s who Bill yelled at, I realized, his mother. I wasn’t sure who else I had expected it to be, a wife or sister maybe. But, somehow, a mother made it worse.

“Does she live with you?” I asked.

“Yes, and my younger brother and sisters.” He paused. “We’ve all lived in the same house since I was born. But I’m the man now, so I have to look out for them. And I work for them.”

“The only job I’ve ever had is mowing lawns in the summer,” I said as we turned down the street that I had seen flooded by sunlight the day before. “Father doesn’t think it’s right that I have a job during the school year. He wants me to do well in my studies.”

“Well, I worked at the mill even when I was in school, but it doesn’t bother my father.” He stopped talking for a moment to wipe his face again, then took a quick gulp of air and continued, “He left my mother when my youngest sister was born. He went to Québec for the logging and since then, we haven’t seen him. But, you know, it’s not so terrible. I didn’t know him well.”

I looked at the wheel spokes revolve as I pushed I my bike, not knowing how to reply. We had only just said our first words to each other a few minutes earlier. I finally managed an “I’m sorry,” and the young man shrugged. It was unnerving for me; just mentioning Father to a person I hardly knew had felt like some sort of betrayal. And here he was, seemingly with no reservations about what he said to a stranger.

But now I think that he had been waiting to tell someone these things about himself. I think that’s something that happens often: at a certain point in life, you find yourself surrounded only by what you know, by people who know you too well. And as odd as it sounds, this closeness almost makes it impossible to be frank, to reveal what you really think and feel. There’s just too much at stake. He had found himself at this point, and then I happened to come along. I had seen his world the day before, and then made my way back in again to find him. Whether it had been out of curiosity or compassion, he didn’t care. As for myself, I just needed someone, anyone to talk to me. I needed a return of that easy friendship that I had enjoyed with Roger.

Eventually, the young man turned towards one of the brick houses, and I followed. As we got closer, I could hear the excited French chatter of children and the clatter of plates exit the house

from two open windows. When we reached the door, the young man set down the lunch pail and stuck out his hand.

“I forgot to introduce myself. I’m Lucas Bouchard.”

I leaned my bike on the outside of the house and wiped my palm on the front of my t-shirt, then took his hand and shook it.

“My name’s Tommy,” I said, and Lucas continued to shake my hand.

“That’s it, just Tommy?”

“Oh, no, sorry. Tommy Blake.”

He smiled and let go, then bent down to pick up the pail. Knocking lightly beforehand, he opened the door to reveal a boy and three girls seated around a table, and a tall blonde woman stirring a pot on a stove. From where I stood behind Lucas, I saw the brief glimpse of a dark welt on the woman’s back, just where her dress sagged slightly at the neck. Lucas looked back at me as I took in the scene, then called to his family.

“Bon déjeuner, mes petits, maman. Ça va bien?...”

I biked home brimming with adrenaline. I couldn’t figure out exactly how I felt at the time, but all I knew was that something had happened. It wasn’t happiness that I felt; Lucas’ mother hadn’t warmed to me as quickly as her son. I had hoped that she would be able to sense that I came in peace, but at my first word of English, she cast a distrustful eye upon me. I also wasn’t necessarily unhappy; Lucas had patiently translated for me, then walked me out of the Franco quarter on his way back to the mill. The apparent promise of his friendship was enough to fill

me with a sense of elation. It almost made me feel like I was back in Massachusetts with Roger, when he would translate the things he did in Boy Scouts so that I could understand. Almost.

This sense dimmed slightly as I walked into my house to find it silent. I thought that Mother and her guests would certainly still be consumed by their bridge after only an hour, Mother being the perfect hostess and making sure their glasses were never empty. But I found no evidence of any lemonade-sipping church ladies in the house, and had to call out for Mother before she made her presence known.

“Where’s the book list?” Mother asked quietly as I walked into the great room. With a glass of lemonade in her hands, she sat on the couch, frowning. I could see that the glass shook as she held it, and I considered bolting from the room right then. Especially because I didn’t have the book list.

“It, uhm—”

“Where’s the book list, Tommy!” She sloppily set the glass on the end table next to her and rushed over to me. Sticking her hands in my front and back pockets, she rummaged around for the list. Almost instinctually, I forced her arms away from me, and ended up pushing her. It wasn’t a strong push, but it was enough to make her lose her balance and almost fall backwards. It was a moment that stretched like taffy, and one that still sticks in my mind. I don’t even need to close my eyes anymore to see it: Mother’s arms reaching as she fell away from me, her heels clanging on the hardwood floor. Once she regained stability, she looked at me with wide eyes.

I think now that she was as shocked by what *she* had done as she was by what I had done. Never had we been so forceful with each other; never had I been so forceful with anyone. Father

was always the one who disciplined, sometimes with his hand when I was younger. But that's what fathers did, and mothers didn't say a word. Except I had never raised a hand in response.

"Mother, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—" I began, walking towards her with my arms raised for an embrace. But she crossed her arms in front of her chest and a sob escaped her mouth.

"I looked so stupid in front of all the women who came today!" She put her hands on her face, speaking with a shaking voice, and I stayed where I was. "I told them that you had left for the library, that you were already studying for the fall. I said, 'My Tommy, he's a smart one!' But then Libby Brown turned to me and said that the library is closed on Mondays. They all looked at me with such nasty rough faces and I smiled like an idiot and suggested that maybe you had gone to a library in Auburn. Except then Libby said that Auburn's libraries are also closed on Mondays. And I didn't know what to say because I just could not imagine that you had lied to me!"

"I'm sorry, but it doesn't sound that bad—"

"No, you don't understand! You made me such a fool in their eyes, Tommy!" She shouted, leaving behind a heavy silence, her loud breathing and sniffing the only sounds in the room. I can still remember how absolutely distraught she looked and sounded. And how terrible I felt, even when I was still feeling the high of that afternoon. Except it wasn't just a high brought on by my time with Lucas that I was feeling; I was also intensely excited by Mother's expression of such absolute passion. I had never seen her reveal herself so unflinchingly, without apology. While I was sorry that it had all been inspired by my lie, I could not help but feel a heart-pressing pleasure.

She finally lowered her hands and wiped at her face before I could see it, then looked at me with glassy eyes. “I don’t know what to do. Now they probably think that you’re some sort of delinquent who sneaks out of the house right under the nose of his dopey mother.”

“I don’t think you’re dopey, and I didn’t sneak out. I just—I couldn’t tell you where I was going.”

“Well, I think that’s clear enough.”

“Mother—” I sucked in a quick breath. “I need to tell you something. I wanted to tell you this morning, but I—well, I couldn’t do it.”

She took a hard look at me and nodded, then withdrew back to the couch. I sat in a chair nearby, waiting for her to say something. She wiped her face again and took a sip of lemonade, then crossed her legs and smoothed her dress with shaking hands.

“Alright, Tommy, what do you need to tell me?”

VI.

I ended up telling Mother all of it. Well no, I guess not really all of it. I didn't tell her about how miserable I had been in Lewiston before meeting Lucas; I didn't know how it would help. Even then, I could feel a crack forming that separated those first few weeks in the city from the time that would follow—Lucas was the bridge over which I had walked in order to cross the crack. Without the possibility of his friendship, I don't know if I would've been able to tell Mother anything.

I started by telling her about when we had first met Bill on our way to the basilica and I had seen him slink off to the Franco quarter when we left, how this had been the first clue that something wasn't right. Then I told her about my experience from the previous day, about getting lost and finding the quarter, hearing the cry and the smack of skin on skin, seeing Bill and seeing Lucas. I went on to tell her about what I had discovered that day, that Bill had hit Lucas, that he had hit Lucas' mother, Constance. While we had walked out of the quarter that afternoon, Lucas had told me that Bill came around often to see Constance; they had an agreement. Bill brought extra money to supplement Lucas' earnings at the mill, and Constance gave him a break from his wife. That was how Lucas put it, attempting to protect both his and his mother's honor. He may have been the man in his family, but he still didn't make enough to support them. And though Constance's solution was not unusual in the quarter—I learned that many Franco women took outside lovers—Lucas said she couldn't see a way out of her painful dependence on Bill. This filled her with self-imposed shame.

Mother listened in crossed-arm anger at first, but gradually allowed her body to receive and

react to what I told her. She raised her hands to her mouth and bent forward to rest her elbows on her knees as I revealed to her the world that she hadn't seen on our walks together. She gave me the expected reactions—the gasps and the head shakes—and I could see the unapologetic passion of her cries slipping away. This upset me and I questioned whether I had been right to tell her about something that removed her so far from herself and the chance to so visibly feel her own emotions, but I ultimately knew that it had been necessary.

Once I finished my story and Mother promised that Father wouldn't know—another lie she told for me—I got up and walked to her. She stayed seated and quickly began to apologize for yelling at me, claiming that she hadn't meant what she said. How naturally this apologizing came to her, how well she confessed; there was no sense of awkwardness or hesitation that comes when some people admit their mistakes, as if it is the most difficult thing to rid oneself of guilt. I wish I could've told her that her apology was insulting, that I had been so proud when she opened her mouth and tore me down. But there were so many things I couldn't bring myself to say then, so many things I still cannot say.

Shaking my head to stop her words, I bent my knees and sat back on my heels. I wanted to take her face in my hands, to massage her temples like she had done for me when I was little and got headaches. I wanted to be able to touch people without being embarrassed, without feeling like I was doing something wrong; I wanted to understand them through their bodies—bodies couldn't lie like words.

As I reached forward to press my fingertips to Mother's cheeks, her gaze followed me. I thought at first that she may have been afraid of my advancing touch, as I had raised those same hands against her only an hour before. But no, I realized that she wanted this almost as much as

I did. She seemed to move her head closer to my hands, partially closing her eyes in anticipation of feeling my fingers on her skin. I hesitated, I stopped reaching, and she saw.

I couldn't explain why, but seeing this desire that I thought was mine alone so plain on her face just spoiled the experience. Now I can understand how selfish this was of me, but I hadn't yet grasped that it wasn't enough to consume and digest others' emotions and call it caring; I had to allow myself to be consumed as well—I had to allow Mother to want something that I wanted. But that afternoon, I bottled-up my desire and ignored Mother's; instead of cradling her face, I pulled her hands into my own and held them, gently caressing her knuckles with my thumbs. It was a safer touch for both of us, but it was unsatisfying, and I let go after a few seconds. I had grown weary of not doing what I wanted.

I have often heard that summer months go by quickly, that they somehow fly past us and, before we are fully aware of their departure, autumn arrives. Some summers have seemed this way to me, I admit. At times, I have welcomed the swiftness of their passing, wanting nothing more than the still darkness of the cold seasons. There have also been those summers when I have spent evenings outside and savored the quickening electricity of the atmosphere, wondering, *How do I keep this from leaving me?* And then there was the month after I met Lucas that felt as slow as a lifetime.

With Mother keeping my secret and Father spending more time at the office than at the house, it was relatively effortless to see Lucas at least once a day. I was worried when I went back to the Franco quarter the day after we had spoken our first words to each other, worried that he had only shown me a casual kindness and did not have the same sort of need that I did for

companionship. But my concerns were silenced when I found him standing at the entrance to his street, once again holding his lunch pail. He smiled and told me he had been afraid that I wouldn't come back, that he had dragged me into a mess I didn't want to be a part of. I soon made clear that being dragged into his mess was just what I wanted.

Everyday of that impossibly long month, I was with Lucas during his lunch break, sometimes even when he was supposed to be working. When this happened, he would shrug and say that the mill was going to die soon whether he was there or not. We would occasionally spend lunch with his family; his mother continued to cast a watchful eye over me, but gradually came to accept my presence and even offer me some of their lunch. She would speak to me in English when she did this, then switch back to French when talking with her family. I didn't especially mind, as I always had Lucas there as my translator. But to this day I still appreciate Constance's willingness to speak to me in the language that had only ever brought unhappiness for her.

Most days, though, it was just the two of us, Lucas and I. We would walk along the Androscoggin and talk, him eating his lunch while I carried the pail. Lucas talked openly, gesturing with both hands and chewing as he spoke. When he was done eating, he would take out a cigarette and a matchbox from his pail and smoke lazily as we walked. It seemed so easy for Lucas to let his guard down; I would sometimes forget that we hadn't always known each other, that we hadn't met this way everyday since we were kids.

Whenever it came my time to talk, however, I would remember that this wasn't so. My soul wasn't so effortlessly bared, so quickly conveyed. It's not that I thought myself so much more complicated than Lucas that I was impossible to put into words, it's just that I had never really had the opportunity. And now that it was before me, I found it difficult. So it oftentimes goes

when you get the chance to do something that you've been aching to do for so long; reality can disappoint.

Yet I wanted so badly for Lucas to like me, to know how much I cared for him and whatever it was that was forming between us, that I pushed myself to share. Day after day, I gave him pieces of myself, pieces that had long been collecting dust. And he always responded, reacted; he actually wanted me to tell him these things. Some days, he wouldn't talk at all, so that it would be up to me to fill the silence. I usually did.

And then there were the days when Father would work late and Mother would tell me to take another bike ride before he got home. I would burst out of the house's heavy air and into the cooling evening; for that was the month when it's summer in the day, but creeping into fall by nighttime. Lucas would be home from the mill when I got to his house, and his family always ate late. This would give us time to walk in and out of the elms' long shadows without the distractions of pails and hastily eaten lunches. I would return home before the sun had given its last gasp and, more importantly, before the Buick had pulled into the driveway. Then Father would come home and I would sit at the dinner table and eat; I would eat as if my mouth were not full of words that waited for the next day's noon so that they could freely flow.

I wasn't sure if I craved Lucas simply because I needed a friend and anyone would do, or because I knew that Father would be unforgivably furious if he found out. I hadn't ever really purposefully acted-out, but that summer pushed me into the sort of teenage rebellion that would soon make kids pin posters of James Dean on their wall and stare at his hard-eyed pout before going to sleep, thinking, *Why can't I be tough and cool like that.* I think now that what I had

with Lucas was founded out of both necessity and desire—desire to go behind Father’s back and desire to learn, to understand someone who, like me, had also been molded by oppression.

Lucas’ oppression was not like mine. He didn’t feel it alone, didn’t only see it when he looked at his parents at the dinner table. It had been inherited, passed from generation to generation, starting when his great grandfather had come, like so many others, down from Québec to work in the mills. His stay in Maine wasn’t meant to be permanent, he was going to make his money and return to his family. But he soon knew that it would take a lifetime to make enough money to return to his home and live comfortably there. His family then joined him to live and work in America, but not to call themselves Americans. As they took their jobs in the mills and moved their lives into the quarter, they were cut-off from the rest of the city by the Androscoggin and its canals—most of which had been filled in by the time I arrived in Lewiston. They continued to speak French with others who still called themselves Canadians, and their culture survived.

Yet, their arrival had been less than well-received by Lewiston’s citizens, whose jobs had been filled by cheap immigrant labor. And not just immigrants, but French-speaking Catholics who refused to call themselves Americans, even though they were taking American jobs and living on American soil. As much as the Francos had their safety net of church and community, they couldn’t hold out against Lewiston’s hostility for long. So began, as Lucas put it, the campaign to create clean slates. Beginning when his grandparents were young and started going to the city’s public schools, students were forced to learn English and would be punished if they spoke in French. However, schooling didn’t last long for the kids of mill workers, a blessing in disguise that allowed the oral culture to continue. Then came the child labor laws of the ‘30s,

which made Lucas' mother get more of an education than any member of her family had before. But less time at the mill meant more time getting the French beaten out of her. Lucas said that it was his mother's generation that began to reply to their parents in English, for their native language shamed them. He had been brought up with French, but told by his mother that he would never get anywhere if he spoke it. And yet, as he had done on that first day I went home with him, he spoke only French when he was with his family. For he felt that it was as important for his brother and sisters to hear and speak it as it was for his mother to no longer be racked by guilt when she used her language.

This is how Lucas explained the Franco situation to me throughout the summer. I've since added in more details, but he gave me enough to satisfy the appetite for knowledge that I had then. What I came to realize was that Bill, Father, and everyone else in Lewiston didn't really understand what was going on with the Francos. They were becoming Franco only in name, some dropping this part of the title altogether and calling themselves plain Americans. Most of them didn't even work in the mills anymore, but then again, neither did anyone else from Lewiston. They only continued to live in the quarter because there was nowhere else to go, not in the city at least. If a Franco did manage to leave, he would Anglicize his name and never let on that he spoke anything other English.

And while the church had previously supported the community, the building of the basilica had made it too powerful. It had grown greedy, demanding tithes from families and single mothers like Constance who hardly had enough to feed their children. The church had become something to avoid, many Francos using their Sundays instead to congregate at an Italian

restaurant just outside the quarter. There, the two immigrant Catholic communities would worship in their own way with pasta and cigarettes instead of body and blood.

Still, the Francos were different. They were not pure-blooded Americans, or at least not Americans like myself, who could trace their roots back just a few more generations. And this condemned them, this made them be spat at, this made them the scapegoat. The city was poor? *The Francos needed too much of its money. The mills were closing? Those damn Francos didn't work hard enough; we could've worked harder.* And yet, I could not find anything in Lucas and his mother and his brother and sisters that made me hate them, that could make anyone hate them. But I was still so young; what did I really know about hate and the reasons people can feel it?

VII.

Just as I have heard that summer months pass too quickly, I have also heard that even the slowest of months must come to an end. The month I had with Lucas, the one of our secret meetings and my flying bike rides, ended one late August evening, close to the beginning of fall term. Mother was doing the dishes from dinner, Father was settling down in front of the television, and I was walking my bike into the garage for the night. I heard the comforting light ping of the tire spokes as the wheels revolved, then another sound joined it: the whispering of my name. I looked quickly around, but could not find the whisper's source. Suddenly, Lucas stepped out from behind a maple on the edge of our yard, making me jump.

"I'm sorry, I didn't try to scare you," he whispered.

"I wasn't scared," I whispered back, my skin still crawling with surprise. "What're you doing here?"

"I need to talk to you." He walked towards me, but I quickly put up my hands.

"No, don't get out of the shadows, I'll come to you." He stopped and I walked my bike the rest of the way into the garage, then joined him in the dark. "Lucas, we just talked about an hour ago, and we'll talk again tomorrow."

"I know, and I know you said I shouldn't come here—"

"Yeah, my father will have your hide if he sees you."

"I know! But—"

"Shh!"

"I know. But I had to come." He crossed his arms and, looking past me, said, "Tommy, my

mother is pregnant.” His announcement hung heavy in the dewy air. I almost congratulated him, but then I remembered that Constance had no husband.

“Is it Bill’s?”

“It’s impossible that it could be someone else’s. Which I guess is good, but—“ He shook his head, then fixed his eyes on me. “Look, I didn’t come just to tell you. I need your help.”

“My help? What am I supposed to do?”

“Mother told Bill—“

“Oh.”

“Yeah, now he’s angry. He hit her yesterday when she told him, and I was at the mill.” He paused and ran his hand over his face, then continued. “She’s fine now, but he’s threatening to tell our priest. My mother, she’s still married to my father, even though he hasn’t been in Lewiston in almost six years. She would be accused of adultery.”

“Come on,” I said. “The church can’t take that seriously anymore.”

“Maybe not in Massachusetts, but it’s still an offense here. She won’t be able to go to Mass.” I began to protest, but Lucas spoke over me. “My mother is not like some of the others in the quarter; she still has her faith. It’s all she has. Don’t you see, she can’t lose this!”

“Bill would never talk to a Franco priest,” I said, thinking fast. “He would never step foot in the basilica.”

“Maybe not, but I don’t want to wait and find out, or see her get hurt again.”

“Lucas, I’m really sorry about your mother. But I still don’t know how you think I can help.”

“I thought you could talk with Bill, help him understand.” I began shaking my head. “He has to listen to you, you’re American!”

“So are you!”

“You know what I mean. I’m not the right kind of American. Anyways, you said he likes your father!”

“Yeah, that doesn’t mean he likes me, or that I’ll say anything that can change his mind!” Just thinking of talking to Bill was making my heart pound, and it was difficult to force out words. “I want to help your mother, but you can’t think that I want to do this.”

“I’m only asking you to try, Tommy. Why can’t you at least do that?”

“Because I’m scared!” I said the words louder than I intended, and they only rang in my ears for a moment before the front door opened.

“Tommy, what’s the racket about? Aren’t you done with your—”

The light from the house fell through the doorway and flooded the yard. Father’s eyes fixed on Lucas and I held my breath. He seemed taken-aback, standing there in the doorway, but I couldn’t see any trace of the anger that I had expected. No, there was something else, something I couldn’t make out.

“Lucas, what are you doing here?” Father asked, and I swear that my heart stopped for just a moment as soon as the question escaped his lips. My mind raced through all the moments I had been with Lucas, wondering if Father could possibly have been in any of them. *What had I missed?*

“We found out yesterday that Mother is pregnant. It’s Bill’s and he knows. He’s—well, he’s at the house and I’m worried about what he will do. He’s already made threats, you see.” I looked at Lucas as he spoke, and could see that he was just as shocked as I was. But still, he spoke to Father as if he knew him. *He knows him?* Suddenly, though, I registered what he had said.

“Bill is at your house? Right now?” I asked.

“Yes, that’s why I came here. That’s why I wanted you to come.”

“Are you kidding me? You left your mother alone with him? After what he’s already done?”

“But she’s not alone, my brother and sisters are there, and the neighbors are home for the night. They would hear if anything was happening.” Lucas looked between me and Father as he spoke, as if he were beginning to doubt himself and needed reassurance from both of us. I turned my attention away from Lucas, not wanting to give him any comfort. I looked instead at Father, and at the mystery that waited me there.

“You know him?” I asked, pointing to Lucas.

“Yes, I do,” Father replied in a tight, controlled voice.

“How do you know him?”

“Tommy—” Lucas began, as Father struggled to find words.

“No, Lucas.” I remember that exact moment so well. There are moments in my head that are so clear; I feel myself immersed in clarity as soon as I think of them. At that specific moment, I found that I was finished with lies and the words that conceal them. I was done with the words that Father wouldn’t say, that I couldn’t say. I decided that I wouldn’t lie dormant any longer; I would explode. “No, you tell me right now why you know my father! One of you tell me!”

“But I had no idea he was your father!”

“Yeah, that doesn’t explain why he knows your name.” I turned to Father and met his eyes. In them I saw something that I had never seen, and have seldom seen since: surprise. His control, his hold on the world had slipped and suddenly I had strength like never before. Mother became my model once more—except I now captured the passion of her tear-stained eruption from the

previous month, and not her silence. “You’re not supposed to know about him! He was supposed to just be mine! Why can’t you let me have one thing in my life that doesn’t have your hand squeezed around it?”

Father stared at me, the surprise leaking from his eyes, then finally said, “Lucas, I think you should leave.”

“Right, okay. But will you come soon?” Father nodded and Lucas turned to me. “Tommy, please, my mother needs—”

“Of course, Lucas.” I looked at him quickly before he turned and left.

I wasn’t angry with him, not really. I wasn’t even really angry with Father, but I had caught him in a lie. A large part of me ate it up, this reality of Father being the one who had been caught, who had made me a mistake. Another part was just relieved that it had been him and not me. But if I had learned anything from my catechism classes, from Father, it was that there is always someone to blame. There is always someone who is responsible for the way things are, for the way we are. And at that moment, I found Father at fault for the feeling I had that my attempts at achieving some sort of balanced normalcy that summer had suddenly capsized.

We told Mother that we were going out for a drive. I would tell her later what had happened, or maybe Father would. Either way, nothing would be hidden from her. She had her hands and arms covered in soapy water when we left, her face full of confusion. But then Father went back into the kitchen as I stood just outside, looking in. He leaned down to kiss her on the forehead, and she closed her eyes, dropping her hands, along with the plate she held. I could hear the dull clanging of dishes as they floated in the water and hit the sides of the sink. Other than that, the

moment was silent between my parents, and I looked away. After Father walked past me and toward the front door, I glanced back at Mother. She gave me a small smile and I returned it; I saw her happy.

As Father and I drove to the quarter, he quickly told me how he knew Lucas and Constance. It had started out being about money, with Bill telling him that there was a woman in the quarter with whom he had an arrangement. It was business for him, he said, a transaction, nothing more. Yet, Bill was always very insistent that no one else could know, that he only told Father because Father still hadn't figured out how Lewiston worked; Father couldn't make the same judgements as others in the city.

But still, it was only about money, it was about protecting Bill's investment. When he asked Father to check on Constance and the family soon after we arrived, it wasn't because he cared—this is what he claimed. So Father did his caring for him, seeing Constance and the family on his way to work, before Lucas would leave for the mill. I still wonder how Constance accepted his help so easily when it had taken her weeks to warm up to me. And how Lucas had never figured out who Father actually was, even after getting to know me for that month. It may seem strange, but I never found the answers. That night, I wanted nothing more than to know everything, to break through misunderstanding. But I quickly realized, and have since accepted, that you can't place expectations on your ability to grasp your own life. There will be holes, and not just holes caused by a faulty memory. Questions continue to slip through the holes, and we are left wondering.

One thing that I don't question is what I've come to understand Bill, who said that it had all been about money. But this didn't change the fact that what he asked of Father, he asked because

a part of him knew that he hurt Constance. After that night, I came to understand that Bill faced his own sort of oppression, and this kept him from calling things as they really were. I've realized that when he threatened Constance with revealing her adultery, it was not because he was angry about the possibility of a baby. Rather, it was too much for him that he would not be able to call it his own. I still couldn't forgive him for what he had done, but I could try to see what made people do the things they did.

While Father told me all of this on our ride to the quarter, I looked out the window and watched the dark city pass by. When he finished, I finally turned to face him.

"So, if I ask Lucas, he'll tell me exactly the same story?" I asked.

"Yes, he'd say more or less the same thing." Father looked at me, then back at the road. The surprise was beginning to diminish, but was still there in his eyes. "Do you think I'm lying?"

"I don't know. I mean, you just told me that you've been lying since we moved here."

"No, no, I was not lying." He took one hand off the steering wheel, using it to emphasize his words. "I was just choosing to not tell you something, there's a difference."

"But you made it seem like you hated the Francos when you didn't. You called them frogs, but then you help them. That's lying!" And then it came out, one question that could not go unanswered: "Why can't you show when you care?"

Father didn't say anything, didn't look at me. I remember that I didn't turn away from him for a minute or so after that. As he continued driving, his jaw clenching and unclenching, I just wanted to stay still and let the question cover both of us. But I also wanted Father to give me some reply, and he wouldn't. I felt like I was going to cry, except I still couldn't cry in front of

Father, no matter how many words I was finally saying to him. So I rolled down the window a crack and let the breeze force the tears back into my eyes.

We continued to spend the last minutes of the ride in silence, both of us focusing on the path that the car lights cut through the darkness ahead. The rumble of the tires and the whirring of the air conditioning was all we heard until Father pulled down Lucas' street and drove to his house. Through the windows, I saw the shadows of people moving around inside, and was momentarily pulled away from the car and from Father. I had to know what was happening with Lucas and Bill. I had to know what *had* happened. Father cut the engine and unbuckled his seatbelt.

“I think it would be best if you stay in the car,” he said.

I nodded and he pulled on the door handle, then turned back towards me before getting out.

“Tommy, I didn't mean to lie to you, or hurt you.” I looked at him, right into his eyes, and accepted his words. Then, another thing happened that I cannot forget. Father took his hand from the door handle and brought it to his eyes, applying pressure to each lid with his index finger and thumb. He didn't shake, didn't sob, but his voice was unmistakably thick as he continued. “You know, it's not always easy for me to—to say—”

I reached forward and lightly placed my hand on Father's forearm, trying to make him know that he had said enough. As I sat there, allowing myself to tighten my hold on his arm, I came to understand something else: it's sometimes better to imagine what could have been said, rather than to know what would have been said. Father eventually uncovered his eyes and I let go of his arm. His eyes were bright and glassy as we looked at each other and he reached forward, placing his hand on my head. This time, he didn't touch me as if I were glass, but intently

cupped the back of my head, then let his hand drop to my neck. He let it linger there for a moment, his hand hot and heavy, then gave me a quick squeeze and opened the door. I rolled the window down all the way as he walked to the house, and tuned into the conversation inside.

Constance didn't seem to speak at all, but rather I heard a mix of Lucas, Bill, and Father. I wondered if Constance was even there, or if Lucas had spirited her away somehow before we arrived. The men's voices began to escalate, then suddenly the door opened and yellow light fell on the street. Bill and Lucas tumbled out, their hands at each other's collars. Father had his own hands on their chests and tried to force them apart, all the while keeping his face out of the fray. The rest of Lucas' family was nowhere to be seen; none of his siblings peeked around the door and Constance wasn't there, crying out in French for them to stop. Lucas must have managed to hide them, after-all.

The men were silent as the three of them scuffled in the street; all that hung in the air was kicked-up dust. I watched, silent as well, from inside the car. Suddenly, I was brought back to the times when I was young and would sit inside the car while Father was outside, talking. We would've gone to the grocer's or someplace similar, and he would've found a friend or a colleague to listen to him. He would stand tall with his hands in his pockets, eyes fixed on whichever man he had found. I would just stare through the window while hearing their muffled conversation, wondering when, if ever, I would be like them. Then Father would catch me looking and I would quickly slump down in my seat.

As I watched and remembered, the silent fight seemed to go on forever. Finally, though, Lucas let go of Bill and tore himself away. Father held Bill back from going after Lucas, speaking words into his ear that I could not hear. Bill nodded and spoke in Father's ear, to which

Father clapped him on the back, then released him. As his chest rose and fell with quick breaths, Bill turned away from us and walked into the night without looking back. I wanted to open the door, to yell at Father that this wasn't right, that Bill couldn't just go. I didn't feel that there was any guarantee that Bill wouldn't return, not when all Father had were his words.

And yet, I didn't yell out—I stayed in the car and watched while Father shook Lucas' hand and told him he'd be around the next morning. As Father walked to the driver's side door, I allowed myself one more glance, one that spoke the words I just could not bring myself to say. Lucas returned my glance, even as I rolled up the window—the night air had grown too cool and I only had on my t-shirt from that day. Father got into the car, and still I didn't look away, but spoke to him as Lucas leaned on the doorframe of his house and continued to meet my eyes.

“What happened?” I asked. “What did you say to Bill?”

“We'll talk about it tomorrow, Tommy. Right now, I just want to get back to the house.”

“Alright.” I could allow him that. We came far that night, Father and I, and I only hoped that we wouldn't return to what we had been. But I've come to see that some things need more than one night, more than even the slowest of summers, in order to be solved. Yes, we had come far, but we still had a long way to go. We all had a long way—I did, Father definitely did, and Mother, too.

And Lucas, where did he fall that night? As I continued to look at him through the window, an awareness grew in me that I had no way of knowing what would happen next. Would we still meet everyday by the elms; would he continue smoking cigarettes while I walked with my bike? What would happen when I started school? The summer of questions would continue then, it seemed, even as some were finally answered.

Father started the car and I, taking my eyes off of Lucas, turned to him. Maybe it was just wishful thinking, but he looked to me as if twenty pounds had been lifted from his shoulders. I knew he was probably exhausted that night, but there was nonetheless a certain lightness in him that I had never seen. Again, perhaps it was wishful thinking, but there are times when that sort of thinking can do some good.

“I think I’ll walk home,” I told him, unbuckling my seat belt. “Just need some fresh air.”

He looked at me and, smiling, nodded. It was that smile that really did it for me—more than the touch of his hand on my neck or the words that he had said. My chest seemed to uncoil, releasing air that I didn’t even know until then had been trapped. I returned his smile and got out of the car. Before shifting into drive, he called to Lucas and told him to make sure that I actually *did* get home. Then the Buick drove away and I walked to where Lucas was standing in the open doorway.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Yeah, you?” he replied, and I nodded.

“Lucas, what did my father say in the house? Did he tell Bill off?”

“No, not exactly—” I groaned and Lucas started shaking his head. “Tommy, you shouldn’t be upset. Your father still helped a lot. He got Bill to leave.”

“Yeah, for now.”

“Yes, for now. And that’s enough.”

We stood silent for a moment as the katydids sang around us, then Lucas started chuckling and I looked at him.

“*On est né pour être petit pain; on ne peut pas s'attendre à la boulangerie,*” he said, and I just stared at him. “It means ‘We are born to be little breads; we cannot expect the bakery.’ It’s

something the Francos say about ourselves, that we have to make do with what we have. I just— I thought you might need to hear it.”

I let it sit in my head for a moment, then smiled and nodded. Lucas returned the smile, putting his arm around me and resting his hand on my shoulder. That was a moment we had— standing in the house-lit darkness, the chirps of katydids in our ears, and the acceptance easing on us that *this was enough*. And that is something that I have not forgotten.