

THE HOUSE ON NEPTUNE

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THE HOUSE ON NEPTUNE DRIVE HAD BEEN WHERE THE CARLSONS—David, Jane, and their younger brother, Jeffrey—had grown up, where their mother, Larabee, had worn a groove pulling her station wagon in and out of the driveway, and their father, Charles, had prospered both as an attorney and as an alcoholic. And it was at the Neptune Drive house that another brother, Matthew, had killed himself at seventeen with a 12-gauge Remington, positioning himself first in a chaise on the concrete deck beside the pool. My family had lived for a time across the street, and I had been Matthew's girlfriend that winter and spring before he died, but it seemed, in keeping with Matthew's covert ways, that this had been a secret from the rest of the family.

David had been married for fifteen years when I began seeing him. Recently, his wife had caught on and told him to leave, and he had moved into Georgetown Apartments, a run-down brick complex on the water that had once been an exclusive place to live in the sixties, but was now where all the separated men struggling with child support and mortgages ended up, waiting for the day things might be settled. He had two children, a boy and a girl he saw every other weekend, whom he had not yet wanted me to meet. Most of his work day was lately spent in the bar at Malio's restaurant, disregarding the careful, moderated calculating of his accountant position. At first, I worried that he would somehow connect me with Matthew, but I discovered soon enough that Matthew was never mentioned, and when I brought up living on Neptune Drive I was only vaguely remembered.

"You were a little odd," David had said. "I gave you a ride to school once, didn't I?"

I'm of the thought that it's sometimes best to let things remain as people remember them.

One afternoon in July, Jane called David up to tell him that she'd been in touch with Betty Vale, the woman who had purchased the Neptune house after the Carlsons had abandoned it twenty-two years ago. Jane said that Betty Vale was ready to sell, and they'd set up a date for Jane and whomever wanted to accompany her, to see the house.

"It's time to go back," she'd told David.

Incredulous, David had called his brother, Jeffrey, but Jane had reached him first, and he was already on board. "We might run into Larabee's ghost," Jeffrey had said. "That place was her heyday."

Larabee had died five years before from cancer. Her death had softened her memory, and moved her into the status of a legend. At family gatherings I knew to expect the stories and the photographs—Larabee in a velvet dressing gown at Christmas, Larabee with dyed blond hair at David's fifth birthday party with the pony, Larabee posing with her husband, Charles, each of them holding high ball glasses, seated out by the pool in chaise lounges, standing in front of the Neptune house with all of the children on Easter, Larabee's hair beehived this time, the boys in suits, and Jane in an organza dress with a petticoat. I realized she had been a woman very comfortable wearing the guise of normalcy she believed a photograph required. I would look at the images over David's shoulder, my mouth a tight smile, grateful I wouldn't ever have to confront the woman in person.

David had refused to go see the house. "I don't know what it will be like," he'd said.

I'd seen the worry creasing his brow, that fear of the unknown, and I'd felt it too. But at the last minute he'd changed his mind, and I found myself driving with him to meet the others, past streets that seemed familiar in a startling way, as if manifestations of things I'd only imagined—Mariner, Spanish Main, Treasure—streets once lined with long ranches built in the sixties and seventies, fronting one of two canals or the cove that led out to Tampa Bay, and sold now for half a million dollars to purchasers who demolished them and constructed waterfront mansions. About a third of the homes were either for sale, or torn down, or in the process of construction. My old house was gone, and in its place was a large Mediterranean with flickering gas lanterns, and iron balconies, and a bell tower that must offer a vantage of the bay. The Carlson house across the street wasn't a waterfront property. Instead, it unluckily backed up against the parking lot of a busy office complex in the Westshore business district. When the Carlson kids had lived there

the parking lot had been trees and native plants growing lush and exuberant like a jungle over their fence.

David pointed this out immediately when we pulled up, along with information about the original color, and the plants and trees that weren't there anymore, the floor plan inside, and the unique aspects of the house as a model home of the seventies—the swiveling chrome cup and toothbrush holders in the bathrooms, the intercom system, the built-ins, and the shiny wallpaper. Now, the house sat plain and unpretentious, at a diagonal on its lot, dwarfed by *Podocarpus* that once served as a hedge, the wood siding blanched in the sun's glare.

We got out of the car, and David stepped into the overgrown lawn and up to the side of the house. He had on a short-sleeved dress shirt. He'd even shaved and applied cologne.

"This was the garage. Larabee and Charles had it converted to their master bedroom."

I nodded, and feigned interest, even though it annoyed me, a little, to be treated as if I was a stranger, and not a former neighbor. I watched David's face light up, slightly lined with age, but still the same face of the boy I'd once loved, and I knew I should have been grateful to have gotten what I'd always wanted. He didn't associate me with the odd girl who used to live across the street. It was as if that girl had never existed, and at this point, preparing to traipse into the old Carlson house, into a past I hadn't acknowledged myself in years, I decided I preferred it. I would play my role, like Larabee did in the photographs, pretending to be the perfect mother.

Jane's appointment with Betty Vale was for three-thirty. We'd arrived in separate cars that filled the circular cement drive—David and I together, Jeffrey in his father's old Mercedes, Jane in the Taurus she wrecked a month before and hadn't fixed, its dented left fender parked away from the gaze of Betty Vale, who stood at the open front door looking dismayed. She wore a purple housedress and white sandals with a small heel that seemed to reflect an effort to dress up a bit.

"My my," she said from the doorway. "Well, I didn't expect so many of you."

Her hair was loose and gray and very long, her face flushed. We waited on the hot stoop for Jane's new boyfriend, Claude, who turned out to be a tall man with brown hair that hung from his part in ringlets. He was young, and easy-going, and when he shook Betty Vale's hand she seemed to relax, as if

finally someone had shown up who she could trust. Claude's arrival did what the flowers Jane brought, an assortment of lilies and delphinium and carnations, purchased at the \$10.00 florist in the KwikMart, could not, which was urge Betty to step back from the doorway and let us all in.

Betty led the way through the foyer, past the mirrored living room, and into the kitchen, where in a tired voice she told us there was not a place for everyone to sit, and we all reassured her we didn't need to sit at all, Jeffrey saying he had sat all day and preferred to stand anyway. We quickly observed that Betty and her husband had moved in and not found any reason to change much of anything—that except for her furniture and photographs and general clutter, the house was in its original, 1979 condition.

We went on our tour, trailing Betty, with David pointing out something in each room that was different, as if who had the best memory had become the contest of the afternoon. His face remained lit up and hopeful, and I could see that the visit was going well, that his childhood had been something mysterious and closed off to him, something he needed to see again.

"That room by the kitchen was a den," he said to me. "That's where Charles used to lie on the couch with his drink balanced on his chest." It was where the stereo's turntable sat, hidden behind an accordion door that also housed the liquor cabinet, the quickly emptied and replaced bottles of Chivas and Johnnie Walker Black, the dusty green bottle of Vermouth.

"There's the pantry, and Elizabeth's room," Jane said, excited, as if she had forgotten the narrow space between the kitchen and the garage existed.

"She used to sit there and iron and listen to the radio and bet on the horses," David told me.

I remembered Elizabeth, their maid, sitting there the day Matthew and I skipped school and smoked a joint down at the end of the street by the canal and came in to find something to eat. She was a large, imposing black woman. She wore glasses and smelled of spray sizing, and she was stern with us.

"If Larabee finds out you aren't in school I don't want to know what will happen to you," she said.

Matthew had leaned over the kitchen counter and put his head in his hand and grinned at her. His shirt slid up and the tanned skin of his back showed above his shorts, and I had looked at it and thought about running my hand up under his shirt, but had not.

“You love me, Elizabeth,” he said. “You’ll make me a bacon sandwich, won’t you?”

And her face had smoothed out and she’d almost smiled back. She had moved him out of the way with her large hip, and pulled the black cast iron pan out for the bacon. “Love you,” she’d snorted under her breath. He’d taken my hand then and we’d gone down to his room at the end of the hall and we’d changed to go swimming. We had always changed in front of each other. It never had anything to do with sex. We hadn’t even had sex yet, I remember. He would even look away, when I thought he should want to look. That was when David had gone off to college, and my heart was broken because I had loved him and he had never even glanced at me long enough to know.

The tour stopped in each bedroom, and everyone squeezed in and someone told a story. David’s old room had its original brown carpeting and same painted walls. Jane showed me the window he would sneak out of at night, a regular window over some shrubbery, covered with the vertical blinds that were there when David’s bed was a wood-framed twin pushed up against a wall decorated with posters of *KISS* and *Boston* and *Three Dog Night*, a bed where he claimed he’d slept with Ginny Malone and CeCe Estandia and Kelly Marquette, and the assorted other high school girlfriends we met out now in restaurants and clubs, in Publix Supermarket pushing huge carts with babies and toddlers, towing children in private school uniforms.

“Where would you go?” I asked, imagining the darkness of the neighborhood, the halos of porch lights, the hum of air conditioning units, the briny smell of the bay and the jasmine growing over fences, and myself across the street in my own canopied bed dreaming of him, wishing he would sneak up to my window and ask to be let in.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Fishing with Timbo Lowry, out riding around.”

His voice trailed off, and I knew that he was finished with the subject. I wondered if I had invented my own teenaged version of him, one his memory could not satisfy because it did not really exist. Maybe I had made up girls he loved better than me. Maybe I had loved who I pretended he was. Once, when Matthew had snuck me in at night I had left his room and gone into David’s abandoned room and opened the dresser drawers and the closet and riffled through his left behind things. I had sat down on his bed holding one of his shirts. The shirt had smelled still of his cologne, the same smell as the inside of his car on the day my mother had asked Larabee if someone

could give me a ride to school. David had come by to pick me up, his jaw tight, begrudging me or Larabee, I could not tell which. His face was pink, freshly shaved, and his hair was still wet, and he had said would I stop looking at him, so I had watched his hand on the stick shift instead, stared out at the passing houses, breathing him in. That night I curled up on David's bed with the smell of him around me, and imagined the two of us under the sheets, how my legs might intertwine with his, and Matthew had come to the door. I had left the door open slightly, and I had seen him watching me through the opening, but he never mentioned the incident, and so I believed he had not thought much of it.

In her old bedroom, Jane said, "This is it," a slight quaver in her voice, and Claude stood beside her and took her hand. But from the look on her face it seemed she'd been expecting something other than the small room with a mirrored closet and peach-colored shag carpet.

We filed into Matthew's room. No one said anything for a moment, and I waited, expectant, for the silence surrounding Matthew to be broken. David cleared his throat, and showed me the built-in shelves and drawers in the closet, and Jane sighed, as if letting out a long-held breath, and told how Matthew had once snuck in a girl and Larabee had accosted him the next morning, her glasses balanced on her nose, her steno pad on the kitchen counter with its lists of things she wanted people to do. I knew I was the girl, and I had been in his room more than once, but no one looked over at me to tell how Larabee had pushed open Matthew's door and found me sitting there on his bed. Larabee and I had both been drinking, I realized later. She had swayed into the room in her floor length robe. She had not had her glasses. I had my shirt off, planning to seduce Matthew, not knowing, really, how to go about it, just with a tentative idea that it involved a mix of nakedness and revelation, something neither of us, fumbling and always high, had figured out yet.

So, that night, when Larabee had come into the room, given me an accusatory look, and asked if I knew what I was doing, I'd had to admit that I did not. Though, of course, I admitted this only to myself. I didn't say anything at all to Larabee, just glared back at her as was my nature at sixteen, thwarted from love at every turn. After Larabee left I'd put my shirt back on, and wouldn't let Matthew do anything except take my hand and hold it in his, quietly, with near reverence, until almost morning.

“She had been angry that someone had seen his mess,” Jane said. “I don’t think she cared about anything else.”

Matthew’s room had been his own chaos—books stacked up with a half-full glass of something balanced on top, clothes in certain piles on the floor, draped from the bedposts, the doorknob. He collected things he saw and admired and then they accumulated—street signs, posters, pieces of debris from constructions sites, branches of trees, record players and albums from the sixties. The door would only open halfway. Once inside you had to be careful where you stepped, and the room smelled of old clothes and mildew mixed with the citrus of the Claire Burke air-freshener Larabee sprayed when Matthew wasn’t home.

In the doorway, David said, “Didn’t he paint it while Larabee and Charles were in Las Vegas?”

“God, some awful color,” Jane said.

“And Larabee went crazy,” Jeffrey said.

The color had been a brilliant orange, like a sunset. Larabee had had the walls repainted, and during the time the painters were working, applying five coats of the room’s current seafoam green, Matthew had slept out by the pool in the chaise lounge to get back at her. She must have let him sleep out there to teach him a lesson. I had come over on a few of those nights, and climbed into the plaid flannel interior of the sleeping bag he’d brought outside. We had put the chaise all the way back and stared up at the jets approaching TIA, and Matthew had made up stories about the passengers on them, intricately plotting their pasts and futures, having them come together and leave each other, confusing them with loneliness and longing, so that I could imagine someone in a window seat, looking out over the 747’s wing at the twinkle of suburban streets, the backyard pools and gas grills, the grid of sidewalks and canals, someone who believed he would never decipher the map of the world below to find a place he might belong.

Matthew had whispered with his husky voice in my ear, while his hand had moved quietly, stealthily over my body within the folds of plaid flannel, and I had been lulled by the stories of lost loves, and let him do whatever he wanted, the feelings his hand aroused matching the sound of his voice, the invented lives of the people moving overhead in the planes’ silver bodies. Matthew never looked into your eyes. He kissed you and you knew behind his closed lids he was somewhere else, believing something about you that

you had never told, making up your life with his mouth on yours, soft and sweet and boyish, full of sadness.

I wanted to tell them if you pulled out the third drawer in Matthew's closet there might still have been the hiding spot where he kept his pot, and a bottle of expensive scotch he stole from Charles' liquor cabinet in the kitchen. Through his bedroom window you looked out onto the pool, and as best I could determine, the spot where he put the pool chaise he sat in the night he died. We walked back through the mirrored living room, and Betty Vale stopped at the sliders to the pool, located behind long, wallpapered vertical blinds. Everyone stood around her, suddenly hesitant. Jane suggested we see the master bedroom first, which Betty Vale had forgotten to show us, and we all turned and knew where to go, and led the tour the rest of the way. The room had the built in dresser drawers in the closet, but with square brass pulls, and a TV on one of the built in shelves, tuned into a soap opera at its point of high drama, a fight between a woman in a low-cut gown and a man in a suit, the cocktails visible on the table top, the woman's hand raised, ready to slap. "Look, how appropriate," Jane said.

David snickered. Jeffrey was the most diplomatic. "Come on, guys," he said.

Charles and Larabee's fights had once been the talk of the neighborhood. You could hear them through the windows of the house, and the sound of them traveled across the street, sometimes into the back yards where people sat out on their patios by the water, entertaining guests who later, returning home full of whiskey sours, would have the same arguments. I knew from my parents' own how they would begin. A husband told another woman her hair looked nice, her dress matched her eyes. In clubs, someone moved onto the dance floor, innocently enough, with his friend's wife. None of my parents' fights were like Charles and Larabee's, so spiked with hatred you could not foresee the reconciliation, expecting only the shattering of glass, something irreparable. I could not imagine where Jeffrey had been—in his room, constructing models of the Millennium Falcon, his senses dulled by the glue's fumes, the sound of David's stereo booming through the wall. Maybe he had just become immune to the pitch of their voices, or had not yet learned to read the virulence in their tone.

In the their old bedroom, Jane spotted the vanity and its mirror with the large bulbs around it, and the low brass chair Larabee sat in to ready herself

for the world, and despite Betty Vale's own Estee Lauder products, her brushes and combs, it was exactly the same. Jane sat down in the chair.

"They did love each other," she said.

David groaned and left the room, and Jeffrey and Betty Vale began discussing the neighbors—who was still around, who had died or moved on. Claude and I wandered out to the foyer. Through the living room sliders I could see David by the pool, just standing there with a cigarette, staring at the water. And then Jeffrey and Jane joined us, and we all watched him through the vertical blinds, until Betty Vale announced, weary by now, that we still needed to see the pool, and we followed her through the sliding doors ourselves, into the cottony heat of late afternoon.

I smelled Larabee's gardenia tree, still blooming large, drooping white flowers in a corner of the yard. The cement table was still there, its mosaic tile top discolored from oak pollen and mildew. The landscaped beds beyond the pool ran together, created a tangle of weeds and society garlic, crotons and creeping Jenny. Here there had been pool parties, K.C. and the Sunshine Band, splashing water, the make-out spot around the corner, along the side of the garage by the Mandeville trellis.

David turned when we came out, wearing a look of bewilderment. He regarded us with the look on his face, unaware that it was there.

"It's in good condition, considering," he said. And so everyone then looked away from him and into the Lima bean-shaped pool to which he referred, examining the aqua-colored water, the pock-marked marcite on the bottom, the steps and the metal railing.

"And the slide is still here," he said, gesturing with his hand that held the cigarette.

"I don't allow smoking," Betty said, sweetly.

David glanced at the cigarette in his hand, as if he was embarrassed by it. Had he been drunk, he would have flicked it into the pool. But David, sober, was confused by his own inadvertent error. I took the cigarette from him and put it out in a clay pot that Betty held toward me, distaste turning down the corners of her mouth. The sun glared off the white scored concrete patio, recoated and painted the year before Betty Vale moved in. It followed the almost horseshoe shape of the house, curving one way toward the garage, and the other past the master bedroom, and Matthew's room, where it stopped to allow for the landscaped bed. Betty walked along, her white heels making a hollow clicking sound, and described the one time the pool area flooded

during Hurricane Elena and some of the plants had to be replaced, and we followed her over the spot where I'd heard Matthew died, right in front of the master bedroom's own set of sliding glass doors.

Everyone stood together, and nodded at Betty Vale, until Jeffrey noticed the missing grand oak, the one with the branches that curved to the ground, that he'd climbed on when he was young. "It was right there," he said. "God, I can't believe it's gone."

The tree, Betty told us, had been struck by lightning in a storm, and Jane's eyes had welled up, and a small sound, like a sob, came out of her mouth, which she covered with her hand. The tour was over.

Afterwards, we decided to meet up at Tapper Pub. No one could agree on where to go, and David had suggested it as a joke, the place where everyone went in high school. We sat in a booth and ordered two pitchers of beer from the same waitress who, twenty years before, had plunked them down without carding. Outside, the parking lot was still and hot, the afternoon heat radiating off the asphalt, the car bumpers, the brittle, pathetic azaleas in the planter out front. Every so often a beautiful girl would pass by the window, an exotic dancer from Mons Venus or Seven Seas, on her way to the tanning salon next door. No one said much, occupied with the ordering and pouring and lighting of cigarettes. Jane spoke first, something like "How could anyone live with that horrible, outdated wallpaper?" and Jeffrey laughed about the Star-Wars-blue carpeting that still covered the terrazzo in his old bedroom. David added that wasn't that the same stove—the *same* stove? He took a gulp of his beer and squinted into the mug, then over at me.

"What did you think?" he asked.

"About the house," I said.

David rolled his eyes and did a hurtful imitation of what I'd just said. Jane told him to stop it, her eyes still bright with tears, her face pointed and fox-like in the dim pub lighting.

"It seems like it was once really nice," I said. I shrugged, not knowing what anyone wanted to hear.

Jane blew smoke rings straight up toward the smoky ceiling. She was animated and happy, pleased with the visit.

"I think Betty Vale liked the flowers," she said.

"The flowers were a nice touch," Jeffrey told her. He supported Jane's idea to buy the house because of the high property values in their old neighbor-

hood, because he believed that Betty Vale might let the place go for cheap. He had been spending the night with a friend when Matthew died, and so the event and the house may have seemed oddly unrelated in his memory.

"You could renovate," I said to Jane, who lit up and agreed with me.

David ordered another pitcher of beer and rubbed his face in his hands.

"Old Betty never gave you a price," he said.

"She wants me to decide," Jane explained. She took a gulp of her beer and looked around toward the door of the pub for her boyfriend, Claude. "Where do you think Claude has gotten to? Wasn't he behind you?"

Jeffrey, too, turned toward the door. "I thought he was behind you."

"Who is going to pay for the house?" David asked. "I mean, let's be honest about this."

The waitress arrived with more beer, and Jeffrey poured it around.

"Did you feel like it was so much smaller inside?" Jane asked. "Wasn't it different but the same?"

"I think it was the same, but we aren't," Jeffrey said.

David tapped his nails on the side of his mug.

"I'm hungry," Jane said.

We asked for a menu. No one seemed in any hurry to leave, and none of us had any commitments in the form of children or spouses waiting at home for us to tell them how it all went. Jane's daughter, whose father she had never married, had just moved out with her own boyfriend, and David's soon-to-be ex-wife wanted nothing to do with him. Jeffrey had a tentative chance at a normal life with a woman named Cicely, but she was out of town visiting her sister, and he had already begun hedging, mentioning a woman he saw the night before at a fundraiser, one he'd gone to school with in eighth grade, whose name he couldn't remember.

We ordered food that might pass for a meal—chicken wings and French fries and nachos, and David wanted a couple more pitchers.

"If we don't drink it, then we don't drink it," he said, intending, I knew, to drink as much of it as he could.

"I sensed Larabee was there," Jane said. "Especially in her room."

"I think I saw her, sitting at her old vanity," Jeffrey said.

David laughed. "Larabee wouldn't be caught dead in that house," he told them.

The conversation turned from the house to Larabee and Charles and their parties—the peanuts in the glass dishes, the liquor cabinet doors accor-

dianed open, the glasses with disintegrating limes and ashtrays full of cigarette butts, and then Larabee herself, her outfits from Lilli Rubin, her array of matching shoes and purses and cigarette cases with the metal clasps, the instant coffee with Sweet and Low, the hair styled weekly with Toni, the smell of her perfume, a clean, cloying scent that clung to her steno pads of lists, her glass of scotch, invaded the car upholstery, and announced her presence in nearly every room of the house.

Just then Claude was there, standing at the end of the table, looking down at us. He had a sixteen-ounce can of beer in a brown bag, which he set on the tabletop.

“Fuck you guys,” he said, smiling genially. “I had to pull through one of those Farm Store drive-thru things to find something to drink.”

He stood there and smiled his affable smile and shook his curls.

“You got lost, baby,” Jane said.

“Yeah, I had no idea where this place was,” he told them. “I forgot the name, even.” Claude was from the mid-west. He’d recently moved to Tampa and bought into a floundering wine shop business. He pulled up a chair and sat down. “Wow,” he said.

Everyone looked at him, and he looked back. “So, what’s going on?”

“We’re discussing the house,” Jeffrey told him.

“That place is a wreck,” Claude said. “I would bulldoze the thing.”

I could tell that Claude probably had a few large empties left back in the car. He waited for everyone to agree with him, but no one dared.

“How can you say that?” Jane said. “I grew up in that house. It was a beautiful house.” She looked shocked.

“I’m sorry, sweetie,” Claude said. He eyed me, grasping for clues. “So, you still want to buy it?”

David grew smug. “Right, she’s going to buy the house.”

“I think it’s an option,” Jeffrey said, his mug poised in the air. “It’s got potential.”

Claude looked back and forth between the two of them. He had worked in construction, and knew a thing or two about renovating, and the chance to show his knowledge won out over placating Jane. “That one bathroom had serious problems—what with the water coming out from the wall and all.”

Jeffrey nodded, and shrugged it off as a small complication.

“And there was some leakage in the air conditioning ducts somewhere.

The air wasn't working right, and you know, that smell, that moldy smell, was probably rotting drywall." Claude had taken a mug from the waitress and he filled it as he talked. His brown, curly hair fell over his eyes, and he was too intent on pouring into the glass to notice Jane's face, which had taken on a closed off look of absence.

"I didn't notice any smell," she said. She squinted at him. "Are you all right?"

I could see, suddenly, that Jane didn't love him anymore, and I wondered if she ever had, if it was that obvious when you lied to someone about loving them, if they read it immediately, or had no clue, like Claude, who sipped from his mug and grinned at her.

"I'm fine, honey," he said.

David chuckled to himself. He was getting that glint in his eye, the one he acquired at every family gathering I'd been to so far—Jane's daughter's seventeenth birthday party, Jeffrey's house warming party, thrown by Cicely, the consolation party they all gave David, impromptu, his first night in the Georgetown apartment.

"You think I'm going to buy that house for you, don't you?" David said.

Jane refused to look up at him, busied with an attempt to scrape the cheese off a tortilla chip. "Of course not," she said.

"Oh, so, good old Jeff is going to buy it?" he said.

Jeffrey had a confused look on his face. He sipped from his mug and set it carefully down on the tabletop. He crossed his arms and leaned toward Jane.

"You said David had basically agreed to fund this thing, if it panned out."

Jane put the chip carefully in her mouth. David laughed out loud.

"No one has said a word about Matthew," she said. She opened her eyes wide, and chewed slowly, furrowing her brow. David stopped laughing. Jeffrey leaned away, against the wall. Claude sighed and rolled his eyes at us.

"Why? Is Matt going to buy the house?" David said.

The silence was filled with people swallowing beer, and Jane's absent-minded crunching. If you were to look at David then, you would believe that he did not love anyone, that inside of him there was no room for love, he was so taken up with regret.

At the end of the tour we had all stepped back inside the mirrored living room, and Jane had discussed contacting Betty in a few days, her hands shaking, trying to wipe at her smeared mascara. Jeffrey and Claude flanked her,

Jeffrey intent on reading Betty's body language, Claude ready to leave, his brow wet with perspiration. David had already been out in the driveway, planning on lighting another cigarette in the air-conditioned safety of his car. And I had wandered down the hall to stand outside of Matthew's bedroom door, remembering the night we did have sex in his tangled sheets, his blond hair smelling of cherry-scented shampoo, the walls muted green, like a psychiatric ward, he'd said, grinning, lighting a joint right there on the bed. The whole time I was worried about Larabee coming in again, and he reassured me that she and Charles had a heavy cocktail hour that night, that nothing would wake them up.

And later I would hear my own mother discussing the accident with another neighbor, everyone calling it that, an *accident*, how Larabee and Charles had not even woken up, that the gun had gone off and they'd slept on, that the daughter had been the one to search the house in concern, though no one would imagine the sound would have been that, such a happy, handsome young man. I heard Betty Vale saying goodbye at the front door, so I followed them, past my blank, mirrored face in the living room, across the slate foyer where I'd stood with Matthew and not told him I'd loved him back, and he had pressed his mouth to mine and said, "Even if you don't."

Our table is still silent in Tapper Pub. There is the commotion of the TV above the bar, and patrons off of work who have filled the black vinyl stools, bantering with the barmaid, thumping their glasses on the bar between sips.

"You didn't have to find him," Jane said. "You didn't have to watch Larabee with the towels, trying to clean it all up."

David flinched. I put my hand under the table to hold his, but he pulled it away and placed it up on the tabletop, out in the open where I found I could not touch it.

Through the plate glass window I saw that it was dusk, a hazy, indistinct time when the sky is still brilliant, but the sun is gone and the heat has begun to dissipate, leaving the blanket of humidity behind, its formless weight. Sometimes we cannot decide things until years of time have passed—who we love, how to live. Years in which the feeling of someone's fingertips on your skin, their smell, the shape of their mouth will linger, meaning something below the surface of your life. Only now could I look above our heads, beyond the smoky acoustic tiles of the Tapper Pub's ceiling, past the grease spilling from the fryer's vent, high enough up to see into the neighborhoods,

the fenced-off yards, the patio gatherings, to smell the gardenia, and the chlorine of the pool on Neptune, to find him, in front of the darkened glass doors, staring at his reflection. I imagined being there to whisper in his ear. *There will be someone to love you, and she does not even know it yet.*