Jodi Picoult

Harvesting the Heart

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For Kyle Cameron van Leer,
through whose eyes I get a chance to rediscover the world

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Harvesting the Heart

prologue

Paige

Nicholas won't let me into my own house, but I have been watching my family from a distance. So even though I've been camping out on the front lawn, I know exactly when Nicholas takes Max into the nursery to change his diaper. The light switches on—it's a little dinosaur lamp that has a shade printed with prehistoric bones—and I see the silhouette of my husband's hands stripping away the Pampers.

When I left three months ago, I could have counted on one hand the number of times Nicholas had changed a diaper. But after all, what did I expect? He had no choice. Nicholas has always been a master at emergency situations.

Max is babbling, strings of syllables that run together like bright beads. Curious, I stand up and climb the low branches of the oak that stands closest to the house. With a little bit of effort, I can pull myself up so that my chin is level with the sill of the nursery. I have been

in the dark for so long that when the yellow light of the room washes over me, I keep blinking.

Nicholas is zipping up Max's blanket sleeper. When he leans close, Max reaches up, grabs his tie, and stuffs it in his mouth. It is when Nicholas pulls the tie away from our son that he sees me at the window. He picks up the baby and deliberately turns Max's face away. He strides over to the window, the only one close enough to look into, and stares at me. Nicholas does not smile, he does not speak. Then he pulls the curtains closed, so that all I can see is a line of balloons and ponies and elephants playing trombones—all the smiling images I painted and prayed to when I was pregnant, hoping fairy tales could calm my fears and guarantee my son a happy childhood.

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On this night when the moon is so white and heavy that I cannot sleep without fearing I will be crushed, I remember the dream that led me to my missing mother. Of course I know now that it was not a dream at all, that it was true, for whatever that is worth. It is a memory that started coming after Max was born—the first night after his delivery, then the week we brought him home—sometimes several times a night. More often than not, I would be picturing this memory when Max awakened, demanding to be fed or changed or taken care of, and I am embarrassed to say that for many weeks I did not see the connection.

The watermarks on the ceiling of my mother's kitchen were pale and pink and shaped like purebred horses. *There,* my mother would say, pointing over our heads as she held me on her lap, *can you see the nose? the braided tail?* We called each other's attention to our horses daily. At breakfast, while my mother unloaded the dishwasher, I'd sit on the Formica countertop and pretend the fine china chime of bowl against mug was a series of magical hoofbeats. After dinner, when we sat in the dark, listening to the bump and grind of the laundry in the double-stacked washer and dryer, my mother would kiss the crown of my head and murmur the names of places our horses would take us: Telluride, Scarborough, Jasper. My father, who at that time

was an inventor moonlighting as a computer programmer, would come home late and find us asleep, just like that, in my mother's kitchen. I asked him several times to look, but he could never see the horses.

When I told this to my mother, she said that we'd just have to help him. She held me high on her shoulders one day as she balanced on a low stool. She handed me a black marker with the powerful scent of licorice and told me to trace what I saw. Then I colored the horses with the crayons from my Wal-Mart 64-pack—one brown with a white star, one a strawberry roan, two bright orange-dappled Appaloosas. My mother added the muscular forelegs, the strain of the backs, the flying jet manes. Then she pulled the butcher-block table to the center of her kitchen and lifted me onto it. Outside, summer hummed, the way it does in Chicago. My mother and I lay beside each other, my small shoulder pressed to hers, and we stared up at these stallions as they ran across the ceiling. "Oh, Paige"—my mother sighed peacefully—"look at what we've accomplished."

At five, I did not know what "accomplished" meant, nor did I understand why my father was furious and why my mother laughed at him. I just knew that the nights after my mother had left us I would lie on my back on the kitchen table and try to feel her shoulder against mine. I would try to hear the hills and valleys of her voice. And when it had been three full months, my father took whitewash and rolled it across the ceiling, erasing those purebreds inch by lovely inch, until it looked as if the horses, and even my mother, had never been there.

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The light in the bedroom flashes on at 2:30 A.M., and I have a little surge of hope, but it goes off as quickly as it was turned on. Max is quiet, no longer waking three or four times a night. I shimmy out of the sleeping bag and open the trunk of my car, fish through jumper cables and empty diet Coke cans until I find my sketch pad and my conté sticks.

I had to buy these on the road; I couldn't even begin to tell you

where in my house I buried the originals when it became clear to me that I could not attend art school and also take care of Max. But I started sketching again when I was running away. I drew stupid things: the Big Mac wrappers from my lunch; a Yield sign; pennies. Then, although I was rusty, I tried people—the checkout girl at the minimart, two kids playing stickball. I drew images of Irish heroes and gods I'd been told of my whole life. And little by little, the second sight I've always had in my fingers began to come back.

I have never been an ordinary artist. For as long as I can remember, I've made sense of things on paper. I like to fill in the spaces and give color to the dark spots. I sketch images that run so close to the edges of the page, they are in danger of falling off. And sometimes things are revealed in my drawings that I do not understand. Occasionally I will finish a portrait and find something I never meant to draw hidden in the hollow of a neck or the dark curve of an ear. I am always surprised when I see the finished products. I have sketched things I should not know, secrets that haven't been revealed, loves that weren't meant to be. When people see my pictures, they seem fascinated. They ask me if I know what these things mean, but I never do. I can draw the image, but people have to face their own demons.

I do not know why I have this gift. It doesn't come with every picture I draw. The first time was in the seventh grade, when I drew a simple Chicago skyline in art class. But I had covered the pale clouds with visions of deep, empty halls and gaping doors. And in the corner, nearly invisible, was a castle and a tower and a woman in the window with her hands pressed to her heart. The sisters, disturbed, called my father, and when he saw the drawing he turned white. "I didn't know," he said, "that you remembered your mother so well."

When I came home and Nicholas would not let me in, I did the next best thing—I surrounded myself with pictures of my husband and my son. I sketched the look on Nicholas's face when he opened the door and saw me; I sketched Max where he sat in Nicholas's arms. I taped these two on the dashboard of my car. They are not technically good, but I have captured the feeling, and that is something.

Today, while I was waiting for Nicholas to come home from the hospital, I drew from memory. I did sketch after sketch, using both sides of the paper. I now have more than sixty pictures of Nicholas and Max.

I am working on a sketch I began earlier this night, and I am so wrapped up in it that I don't see Nicholas until he steps onto the front porch. He is haloed in soft white light. "Paige?" he calls. "Paige?"

I move in front of the porch, to a spot where he can see me. "Oh," Nicholas says. He rubs his temples. "I just wanted to see if you were still here."

"I'm still here," I say. "I'm not going anywhere."

Nicholas crosses his arms. "Well," he says, "it's a little late for that." I think for a moment he is going to storm inside, but he pulls his robe tighter around himself and sits down on the porch step. "What are you doing?" he says, pointing to my sketch pad.

"I've been working on you. And Max," I say. I show him one of the sketches I did earlier.

"That's good," he says. "You always were good at that."

I cannot remember the last time I heard Nicholas giving me credit for something, anything, a job well done. He looks at me for a second, and he almost lets his guard down. His eyes are tired and pale. They are the same color blue as mine.

In just that second, looking at Nicholas, I can see a younger man who dreamed of getting to the top, who used to come home and heal in my arms when one of his patients died. I can see, reflected, the eyes of a girl who used to believe in romance. "I'd like to hold him," I whisper, and at that Nicholas's stare turns dark and shuttered.

"You had your chance," he says. He stands and goes into our house.

By moonlight, I work on my sketch. The whole time, I am wondering whether Nicholas is having trouble sleeping, too, and how angry he'll be tomorrow when he's not one hundred percent. Maybe because my attention is divided, my picture turns out the way it does. It's all wrong. I have captured the likeness of Max—his sticky fists,

his spiky velvet hair—but something is completely off. It takes me a few minutes to figure it out. This time, instead of drawing Max with Nicholas, I have drawn him with me. He sits in the curve of my arm, grabbing for my hair. To an outsider, the picture would be fine. But hidden in the purple hollow of Max's outstretched palm is a faint woven circle of leaves and latticework. And in its center I've drawn the image of my running mother, who holds, like an accusation, the child I did not have.

Part I:
Conception

1985–1993

chapter 1
Paige

When I least expected to, I found Mercy. It was a diner on a seedy side street in Cambridge, and its clients were mostly students and professors who wanted to go slumming. I was down to my last twenty. The previous night I had realized that no one in their right mind would hire me as a nanny without references and that I wasn't going to get into art school on a smile and a song and my meager portfolio. So at five-thirty in the morning I squared up my shoulders and walked into Mercy, praying to a God I had wondered about my entire life that indeed this place would be my deliverance.

The diner was deceptively small and smelled of tuna fish and detergent. I moved to the counter and pretended to look at the menu. A large black man came out of the kitchen. "We ain't open," he said, and then he turned and went back inside.

I did not look up from the menu. Cheeseburgers, clam patties,

Greek antipasto. "If you aren't open," I said, "how come you unlocked the door?"

It took several seconds for the man to answer, and when he did, he came right up to the spot where I was sitting and placed one beefy arm on the counter on either side of me. "Shouldn't you be going to school?" he said.

"I'm eighteen." I tipped up my chin the way I had seen Katharine Hepburn do it in old black-and-white movies. "I was wondering if there might be a position available."

"A position," the man said slowly, as if he'd never heard of the word. "Position." His eyes narrowed, and for the first time I noticed a scar that reminded me of barbed wire, all snaked and spiky, which ran along the length of his face and curled into the folds of his neck. "You want a job."

"Well, yes," I said. I could tell from his eyes that he did not need a waitress, much less an inexperienced one. I could tell that at the present time he did not need a hostess or a dishwasher, either.

The man shook his head. "It's too damn early for this." He turned and looked at me, seeing, I knew, how thin I was, how disheveled. "We open at six-thirty," he said.

I could have left then. I could have gone back to the cool T station, the subway where I'd been sleeping these past few nights, listening to the soft violins of street musicians and the crazy screams of the homeless. But instead I took the grease-spattered paper that was clipped to the inside of the menu, listing yesterday's specials. The back was blank. I pulled a black marker from my knapsack and began to do the only thing I knew with confidence I could do well: I drew the man who had just dismissed me. I drew him from observation, peeking into a small pass-through that led to the kitchen. I saw his biceps curl and stretch as he pulled huge jars of mayonnaise and sacks of flour from shelves. I drew the motion, the hurry, and then when I drew his face I sketched it quickly.

I pulled back to see the picture. Spread over the broad forehead of this man I had drawn the outline of a strong old woman, her shoulders stooped from work and from denial. She had skin the shade

of bootleg coffee, and crossing her back were the memories of lashed scars, which turned and blended into the distinctive twisted scar of the man's own face. I did not know this woman, and I didn't understand why she had come out on the page. It wasn't my best drawing, I knew that, but it was something to leave behind. I placed the paper on the counter and went just outside the door to wait.

Even before I had the power to sketch people's secrets, I had always believed I could draw well. I knew this the way some kids know they can catch pop flies and others can use felt and glitter to make the most creative covers for book reports. I always used to scribble. My father told me that when I was a toddler, I had taken a red crayon and drawn one continuous line around the walls of the house, at my eye level, skipping over the doorways and the bureaus and the stove. He said I did it just for the hell of it.

When I was five, I found one of those contests in the *TV Guide,* the one where you sketch a cartoon turtle and send it in and they give you a scholarship to art school. I had just been doodling, but my mother saw my picture and said there was no time like the present for securing a college education. She was the one who mailed it in. When the letter came back congratulating me on my talent and offering me enrollment in the National Art School in a place called Vicksburg, my mother swept me off my feet and told me this was our lucky day. She said my talent was hereditary, obviously, and she made a big deal of showing off the letter to my dad at dinner. My father had smiled gently and said they sent a letter like that to anyone who they thought would put up the money for some phony school, and my mother had left the table and locked herself in the bathroom. Still, she hung the letter on the refrigerator, next to my damp finger painting and my noodle-glued collage. The letter disappeared the day she left, and I always wondered if it was something she'd taken because she knew she couldn't take me.

I had been thinking a lot about my mother, much more than I had for several years. Part of it was because of what I had done before I left home; part of it was because I *had* left home. I wondered what my father thought. I wondered if the God he had so much faith in

could tell him why the women in his life were always running away.

When, at six-ten, the black man appeared in the doorframe, filling it, really, I knew already what the outcome would be. He stared at me, openmouthed and bothered. He held my portrait in one hand and stretched his other hand out to help me up from the sidewalk. "The breakfast crowd starts coming in twenty minutes," he told me. "And I expect you ain't got no idea about waiting tables."

Lionel—that was the man's name—took me into the kitchen and offered me a stack of French toast while he introduced me to the dishwashing machine, the grill, and his brother Leroy, the head cook. He did not ask me where I was from, and he did not discuss salary, as if we had had a previous arrangement. Out of the blue, he told me that Mercy was the name of his great-grandmother and that she had been a slave in Georgia before the Civil War. She was the woman I'd drawn across his mind. "But you must be a prophet," he said, " 'cause I don't tell people about her." He said that most of those Harvard types thought the diner's name was some kind of philosophical statement, and anyway, that kept them coming in. He wandered off, leaving me to wonder why white people named girl babies things like Hope and Faith and Patience—names they could never live up to—and black mothers called their daughters Mercy, Deliverance, Salvation—crosses they'd always have to bear.

When Lionel came back he handed me a clean, pressed pink uniform. He gave a once-over to my navy sweater, my knee socks, and my pleated skirt—which, after all this time, hadn't lost its industrial-strength folds. "I ain't gonna fight you if you say you're eighteen, but you sure as hell look like some prep-school kid," he said. He turned his back and let me change behind the stainless-steel freezer, and then he showed me how to work the cash register and he let me practice balancing plates up and down my arms. "I don't know why I'm doin' this," he muttered, and then my first customer came in.

When I look back on it, I realize now that of course Nicholas had to have been my first customer. That's the way Fate works. At any rate, he was the first person in the diner that morning, arriving even before the two regular waitresses did. He folded himself—he was that tall—into the booth farthest from the door and opened his

copy of the *Globe.* It made a nice noise, like the rustle of leaves, and it smelled of fresh ink. He did not speak to me the entire time I was serving him his complimentary coffee, not even when I splashed some onto the Filene's ad splayed across page three. When I came for his order, he said, "Lionel knows." He did not look up at me as he said this. When I brought his plate, he nodded. When he wanted more coffee, he just lifted his cup, holding it suspended like a peace offering until I came over to fill it. He did not turn toward the door when the sleigh bells on its knob announced the arrival of Marvela and Doris, the two regular waitresses, or any of the seven people who came for breakfast while he was there.

When he finished, he lined his fork and his knife neatly across the edge of the plate, the mark of someone with manners. He folded his paper and left it in his booth for others to read. It was then that he looked at me for the first time. He had the palest blue eyes I had ever seen, and maybe it was only because of the contrast with his dark hair, but it seemed I was just looking through this man and seeing, behind him, the sky. "Why, Lionel," he said, "there are laws that say you shouldn't hire kids until they're out of diapers." He smiled at me, enough to let me know I shouldn't take it personally, and then he left.

Maybe it was the strain of my first half hour as a waitress; maybe it was the lack of sleep. I had no real reason. But I felt tears burning behind my eyes, and determined not to cry in front of Doris and Marvela, I went to bus his table. For a tip, he'd left ten cents. Ten lousy cents. It was not a promising beginning. I sank down onto the cracked banquette and rubbed my temples. I *would* not, I told myself, start to cry. And then I looked up and saw that Lionel had taped my portrait of him over the cash register. I stood, which took all my strength, and pocketed my tip. I remembered the rolling brogue of my father's voice telling me over and over again, *Life can turn on a dime.*

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A week after the worst day of my life, I had left home. I suppose I had known all along that I was going to leave; I was just waiting

until I finished out the school term. I don't know why I bothered, since I wasn't doing well anyway—I'd been too sick for the past three months to really concentrate, and then all the absences started to affect my grades. I suppose I needed to know that I could graduate if I wanted to. I did just that, even with two D's, in physics and in religion. I stood up with the rest of my class at Pope Pius High School when Father Draher asked us to, I moved my tassel from right to left, I kissed Sister Mary Margareta and Sister Althea and told them that yes, I was planning to attend art school.

I wasn't that far off the mark, since the Rhode Island School of Design had accepted me on my grades as a junior, which of course were recorded before my life had started falling apart. I was certain that my father had already paid part of the tuition for the fall, and even as I was writing him the note that told him I was leaving, I wondered if he'd be able to get it back.

My father is an inventor. He has come up with many things over the years, but it has been his misfortune usually to be a step behind. Like the time when he invented that tie clip with a roll-down plastic screen, to protect the fabric during business lunches. He called it the Tidy-Tie and was sure it would be his key to success, but then he learned that something remarkably similar already had a patent pending. The same things happened with the fogless bathroom mirror, the floating key chain, the pacifier that unscrewed to hold liquid medicine. When I think of my father, I think of Alice, and the White Rabbit, and of always being one step behind.

My father was born in Ireland and spent most of his life trying to escape the stigmas attached. He wasn't embarrassed to be Irish—in fact, it was the crowning glory of his life; he was just embarrassed to be an Irish *immigrant.* When he was eighteen he'd moved from Bridgeport, the Irish section of Chicago, to a small neighborhood off Taylor Street made up mostly of Italians. He never drank. For a time, he tried, unsuccessfully, to cultivate a midwestern twang. But religion for my father was not something you had a choice about. He believed with the zealousness of an evangelist, as if spirituality were something that ran through your veins and not through your mind. I have won-

dered if, had it not been for my mother, he would have chosen to be a priest.

My father always believed that America was just a temporary stop on his way back to Ireland, although he never let us know how long he planned on staying. His parents had brought him over to Chicago when he was just five, and although he was really city bred, he had never put the farm country of County Donegal out of his mind. I always questioned how much was memory and how much was imagination, but I was swept away anyway by my father's stories. The year my mother left, he taught me how to read, using simple primers based on Irish mythology. While other little kids knew of Bert and Ernie and Dick and Jane, I learned about Cuchulainn, the famous Irish hero, and his adventures. I read about Saint Patrick, who rid the island of snakes; Donn, the God of the Dead, who gave souls their directions to the underworld; the Basilisk, whose stale, killing breath I hid from at night beneath my covers.

My father's favorite story was about Oisin, the son of Finn Mac Cool. He was a legendary warrior and poet who fell in love with Niamh, a daughter of the sea god. They lived happily for several years on a jewel of an ocean island, but Oisin could not get thoughts of his homeland out of his mind. *Ireland,* my father used to say, *keeps runnin' through your blood.* When Oisin told his wife he wanted to return, she loaned him a magic horse, warning him not to dismount because three hundred years had passed. But Oisin fell from the horse and turned into a very old man. And still, Saint Patrick was there to welcome him, just like, my father said, he would one day welcome the three—and then the two—of us.

For the balance of my life after my mother left, my father tried to raise me in the best way he knew. That meant parochial school, and confession every Saturday, and a picture of Jesus on the Cross, which hung over my bed like a talisman. He did not see the contradictions in Catholicism. Father Draher had told us to love thy neighbor but not to trust the Jews. Sister Evangeline preached to us about having impure thoughts, and yet we all knew that she'd been a married man's mistress for fifteen years before entering the convent. And

of course there was confession, which said you could do whatever you wanted but always come away clean after a few Hail Marys and Our Fathers. I had believed this for quite some time, but I came to know, firsthand, that there were certain marks on your soul that no one could ever erase.

My favorite place in all Chicago was my father's workshop. It was dusty and smelled of wood shavings and airplane glue, and in it were treasures like old coffee grinders and rusted hinges and purple Hula Hoops. In the evenings and on rainy Saturday afternoons, Daddy would disappear into the basement and work until it was dark. Sometimes I felt as if I were the parent, hauling him upstairs and telling him he really had to eat something. He would work on his latest inventions while I sat off to the side on a musty green sofa and did my homework.

My father turned into a different person in his workshop. He moved with the grace of a cat; he pulled parts and wheels and cogs out of the air like a magician, to make gadgets and knickknacks where minutes before there was nothing. When he spoke of my mother, which was not often, it was always down in the workshop. Sometimes I would catch him staring up at the nearest window, a small cracked rectangle. The light would fall on his face in a way that made him seem ages older than he was; and I'd have to stop myself and count the years and wonder how much time really had gone by.

It wasn't as if my father actually ever said to me, *I know what you did.* He just stopped speaking to me. And it was then that I knew. He acted anxious and he wanted time to pass quickly so I could leave for college. I thought about something a girl in my PE class had said once about having sex: that once you did it, everyone could tell. Was the same true of abortions? Could my father read it on my face?

I waited one week after the fact, hoping that graduation would bring about some kind of understanding. But my father suffered through the ceremony and never even said "Congratulations!" to me. That day, he moved in and out of the shadows of our house like someone uncomfortable in his own skin. At eleven o'clock, we watched the nightly news. The headline story was about a woman

who had bludgeoned her three-month-old infant with a can of salmon. The woman was taken to a psychiatric hospital. Her husband kept telling reporters he should have seen it coming.

When the news was over, my father went to his old cherry desk and took a blue velvet box from the top drawer. I smiled. "I thought you'd forgotten," I said.

He shook his head and watched with guarded eyes as I ran my fingers over the smooth cover, hoping for pearls or emeralds. Inside were rosary beads, beautifully carved out of rosewood. "I thought," he said quietly, "you might be needing these."

I told myself that night as I packed that I was doing this because I loved him and I didn't want him to bear my sins for the rest of his life. I packed only my functional clothes, and I wore my school uniform because I figured it would help me blend in. Technically I was not running away. I was eighteen. I could come and go as I pleased.

I spent my last three hours at home downstairs in my father's workshop, trying out different wordings for the note I would leave behind. I ran my fingers over his newest project. It was a birthday card that sang a little ditty when you opened it and then, when you pressed the corner, automatically inflated itself into a balloon. He said there was really a market for this stuff. My father was having trouble with the music. He didn't know what would happen to the microchip once the thing became a balloon. "Seems to me," he'd said just the day before, "once you've got something, it shouldn't go changing into something else."

In the end, I simply wrote: *I love you. I'm sorry. I'll be fine.* When I looked at it again, I wondered if it made sense. Was I sorry for loving him? Or because I'd be fine? Finally, I threw down the pen. I believed I was being responsible, and I knew that eventually I would tell him where I'd wound up. The next morning I took the rosary beads to a pawnshop in the city. With half my money, I bought a bus ticket that would take me as far away from Chicago as it could. I tried very hard to make myself believe there was nothing for me to hold on to there.

On the bus I made up aliases for myself and told them to anyone

who asked. I decided at a rest stop in Ohio that I would get off the bus in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It was close enough to Rhode Island; it sounded more anonymous than Boston; and also, the name just made me *feel* good—it reminded me of dark English sweaters and graduating scholars and other fine things. I would stay there long enough to make money that would pay my way to RISD. Just because Fate had thrown another obstacle in my way didn't mean I had to give up my dreams. I fell asleep and dreamed of the Virgin Mary and wondered how she knew to trust the Holy Spirit when he came to her, and when I woke up I heard a single violin, which seemed to me the voice of an angel.

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I called my father from the underground pay phone in the Brattle Square bus station. I called collect. I watched a bald old woman knitting on a squat bench and a cellist with tinsel braided into her cornrows. I tried to read the sausage-link graffiti on the far wall, and that's when the connection came through. "Listen," I said, before my father had the chance to draw a breath, "I'm never coming home."

I waited for him to fight me on that point, or even to break down and admit he'd been frantically searching the streets of Chicago for two days. But my father only let out a low whistle. "Never say never, lass," he said. "It comes back to haunt you."

I gripped the receiver until my knuckles turned white. My father, the one—the *only*—person in my life who cared what would happen to me, didn't seem very concerned. Sure, I'd disappointed him, but that couldn't erase eighteen years, could it? One of the reasons I'd had the courage to leave was that, deep down, I knew he would always be there waiting; I knew I would not really be alone.

I shivered, wondering how I had misjudged *him* too. I wondered what else there was to say.

"Maybe you could tell me where you've gone off to," my father said calmly. "I know you made it to the bus station, but after that I'm a bit fuzzy on details."

"How did you find that out?" I gasped.

My father laughed, a sound that wrapped all the way around me. His laugh, I think, was my very first memory. "I love you," he said. "What did you expect?"

"I'm in Massachusetts," I told him, feeling better by the minute. "But that's all I'm going to say." The cellist picked up her bow and drew it across her instrument's belly. "I don't know about college," I said.

My father sighed. "That's no reason to up an' leave," he murmured. "You could have come to me. There's always—" At that moment a bus whizzed by, drowning out the rest of his words. I could not hear, and I liked that. It was easier than admitting I did not want to know what my father was saying.

"Paige?" my father asked, a question I had missed.

"Dad," I said, "did you call the police? Does anybody know?"

"I didn't tell a soul," he said. "I thought of it, you know, but I believed you'd come through that door any minute. I *hoped.*" His voice fell low, dull. "Truth is, I didn't believe that you'd go."

"This isn't about you," I pleaded. "You've got to know that it isn't about you."

"It is, Paige. Or you wouldn't ever ha' thought to leave."

No, I wanted to tell him, *that can't be true. That can't be true, because all these years you've been saying it wasn't my fault that* she *left. That can't be true, because you are the one thing that I hated leaving behind.* The words lodged in my throat, stuck somewhere behind the tears that started running down my face. I wiped my nose on my sleeve. "Maybe I will come home someday," I said.

My father tapped his finger against the end of the receiver, just as he used to do when I was very little and he went on overnight trips to peddle his inventions. He'd send a soft *whap* through the phone lines. *Did you hear that?* he'd whisper. *That's the sound of a kiss runnin' into your heart.*

A bus from I don't know where was coming through the dark tunnel of the station. "I've been out of my head with worryin'," my father admitted.

I watched the bus's wheels blot the herringbone-brick terminal

drive. I thought of my father's Rube Goldberg contraptions, the inventions he'd made just to entertain me: a faucet that sent water down a gully, which released a spinning fan, which in turn blew a paddle that connected a pulley that opened the cereal box and poured out my serving of Cheerios. My father could make the best out of anything he was given. "Don't worry about me," I said confidently. "After all, I'm *your* daughter."

"Aye," my father said, "but it seems you've got a bit of your mother in you too."

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After I'd worked two weeks at Mercy, Lionel trusted me enough to lock up. During the down times, like three in the afternoon, he'd sit me down at the counter and ask me to draw pictures of people. Of course I did the workers on my shift—Marvela and Doris and Leroy—and then I did the President and the mayor and Marilyn Monroe. In some of these portraits were the things I didn't understand. For example, Marvela's eyes showed a man dark with passion, being swallowed by the living sea. In the curl of Doris's neck I'd drawn hundreds of cats, each looking more and more like a human, until the last one had Doris's own face. In the fleshy swell of Marilyn Monroe's peach arm were not the lovers you'd expect but rolling farmland, rippled wheat, and the sad, liquid eyes of a pet beagle. Sometimes people in the diner noticed these things, and sometimes they didn't—the images were always small and subtle. But I kept drawing, and each time I finished, Lionel would tape the portrait over the cash register. It got so that the pictures stretched halfway across the diner, and with each one I felt a little more as though I truly belonged.

I had been sleeping on Doris's couch, because she felt sorry for me. The story I had given was that my stepfather had been making moves on me and so the minute I turned eighteen I had taken my baby-sitting money and left. I liked that story, because it was nearly half true—the eighteen and the leaving part. And I didn't mind a little sympathy; at this point, I was taking whatever I could get.

It was Doris's idea that we do some kind of blue-plate special—tack two bucks onto the price of a turkey club, and you'd get a free portrait with it. "She's good enough," Doris said, watching me sketch the frizzy lines of Barbra Streisand's hair. "These Joe Shmoes would be Celebrity for a Day."

I felt a little weird about the whole thing, kind of like being a circus sideshow, but there was an overwhelming response to the notice we stuck in the menu, and I got bigger tips drawing than I did waiting tables. I drew most of the regulars on the first day, and it was Lionel's idea to make those original sketches free and hang them up with my others for publicity. Truth be told, I could have drawn most of the diner's patrons without their posing for me. I had been watching them carefully anyway, picking up the outlines of their lives, which I would fill in in my spare time with my imagination.

For example, there was Rose, the blond woman who came for lunch on Fridays after having her hair done. She wore expensive linen suits and classic shoes and a diamond wedding band. She carried a Gucci pocketbook and she kept her money in order: ones, fives, tens, twenties. Once, she brought in a balding man, who held her hand tight throughout the meal and spoke in Italian. I pretended this was her lover, because everything else in her life seemed so picture perfect.

Marco was a blind student at the Kennedy School of Government, who wore a long black overcoat even on the hottest days in July. He had shaved his head and wore a bandanna around it, and he'd play games with us. *What color is it?* he'd ask. *Give me a clue.* And I'd say something like "McCarthy," and he'd laugh and say *Red.* He came in late at night and smoked cigarette after cigarette, until a gray cloud hovered at the edge of the ceiling like an artificial sky.

But the one I watched most was Nicholas, whose name I knew only because of Lionel. He was a medical student, which explained, Lionel said, his odd hours and the fog he was always in. I would stare at him point-blank because he never seemed to notice, even when he wasn't reading, and I tried to figure out what was so confusing about him. I had been at Mercy exactly two weeks when I figured it out: he just didn't fit. He seemed to gleam against the cranberry cracked

vinyl seats. He held court over all the waitresses, holding up his glass when he wanted a refill, waving the check when he wanted to pay, and yet none of us considered him to be condescending. I studied him with a scientist's fascination, and when I imagined things about him, it was at night on Doris's living room couch. I saw his steady hands, his clear eyes, and I wondered what it was that drew me to him.

I had been in love in Chicago, and I knew the consequences. After all that had happened with Jake, I was not planning to be in love again, maybe not ever. I didn't consider it strange that at eighteen some soft part of me seemed broken for good. Maybe this is why when I watched Nicholas I never thought to draw him. The artist in me did not immediately register the natural lines of him as a man: the symmetry of his square jaw or the sun shifting through his hair, throwing off different and subtler shades of black.

I watched him the night of the first Chicken Doodle Soup Special, as Lionel had insisted on calling it. Doris, who had been working with me since the lunch rush, had left early, so I was by myself, refilling salt shakers, when Nicholas came in. It was 11:00 P.M., just before closing, and he sat at one of my tables. And suddenly I knew what it was about this man. I remembered Sister Agnes at Pope Pius High School, rapping a ruler against a dusty blackboard as she waited for me to think up a sentence for a spelling word I did not know. The word was *grandeur, e* before *u.* I had stood and hopped from foot to foot and listened to the popular girls snicker as I remained silent. I could not come up with the sentence, and Sister accused me of scribbling in the margins of my notebook again, although that was not it at all. But looking at Nicholas, at the way he held his spoon and the tilt of his head, I understood that grandeur was not nobility or dignity, as I'd been taught. It was the ability to be comfortable in the world; to make it look as if it all came so easily. *Grandeur* was what Nicholas had, what I did not have, what I now knew I would never forget.

Inspired, I ran to the counter and began to draw Nicholas. I drew not just the perfect match of his features but also his ease and his flow. Just as Nicholas was digging in his pockets for a tip, I finished

and stepped back to view the picture. What I saw was someone beautiful, perhaps someone more beautiful than I had ever seen in my life, someone whom others pointed to and whispered about. Plain as day, in the straight brows, the high forehead, and the strong chin, I could see that this was someone who was meant to lead others.

Lionel and Leroy came into the main area of the diner, carrying leftovers, which they brought home to their kids. "You know what to do," Lionel said to me, waving as he pushed his way out the door. "See you, Nick," he called.

Very quietly, under his breath, he said, "Nicholas."

I stepped up behind him, still holding my portrait. "Did you say something?" I asked.

"Nicholas," he repeated, clearing his throat. "I don't like 'Nick.' "

"Oh," I said. "Did you want anything else?"

Nicholas glanced around him, as if he was just noticing he was the only customer in the diner and that the sun had gone down hours before. "I guess you're trying to close up," he said. He stretched out one leg on the banquette and turned the corners of his mouth up in a smile. "Hey," he said, "how old are you anyway?"

"Old enough," I snapped, and I moved closer to clear his plate. I leaned forward, still clutching the menu with his picture, and that's when he grabbed my wrist.

"That's me," he said, surprised. "Hey, let me see."

I tried to pull away. I didn't really care if he looked at the portrait, but the feeling of his hand against my wrist was paralyzing me. I could feel the pulse of his thumb and the ridges of his fingertips.

I knew by the way he touched me that he had recognized something in what I'd drawn. I peered down at the paper to see what I had done this time. At one edge of the picture I'd sketched centuries of kings, with high jeweled crowns and endless ermine robes. At the other edge I had drawn a gnarled, blossoming tree. In its uppermost branches was a thin boy, and in his hand he held the sun.

"You're good," he said. Nicholas nodded to the seat across from him. "If you aren't keeping your other customers waiting," he said, smiling, "why don't you join me?"

I found out that he was in his third year of medical school and

that he was at the top of his class and in the middle of his rotations. He was planning to be a cardiac surgeon. He slept only four hours a night; the rest of the time he was at the hospital or studying. He thought I didn't look a day over fifteen.

In turn, I told him the truth. I said I was from Chicago and that I had gone to parochial school and would have gone to RISD if I hadn't run away from home. That was all I said about that, and he didn't press me. I told him about the nights I had slept in the T station, waking in the mornings to the roar of the subway. I told him I could balance four coffee cups and saucers on one arm and that I could say *I love you* in ten languages. *Mimi notenka kudenko,* I said in Swahili, just to prove it. I told him I did not really know my own mother, something I had never admitted to my closest friends. But I did not tell him about my abortion.

It was well past one in the morning when Nicholas stood up to leave. He took the portrait I'd drawn and tossed it lightly on the Formica counter. "Are you going to hang it up?" he asked, pointing to the others.

"If you'd like," I said. I took my black marker out and looked at his image. For a moment, a thought came to me: *This is what you've been waiting for.* "Nicholas," I said softly, writing his name across the top.

"Nicholas," he echoed, and then he laughed. He put his arm around my shoulders, and we stood like that, touching at the sides, for a moment. Then he stepped away. He was still stroking the side of my neck. "Did you know," he said, pressing a spot with his thumb, "that if you push hard enough here, you can knock someone unconscious?" And then he bent down and touched his lips to where his thumb had been, kissing the spot so lightly I might have imagined it. He walked out the door before I even noticed him moving, but I heard the sleigh bells tap against the steamed window glass. I stood there, swaying, and I wondered how I could be letting this happen again.