

JODI PICOULT

Songs of the Humpback Whale


ALLEN & UNWIN

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TO TIM, FOR EVERYTHING YOU'VE GIVEN ME

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Prologue

REBECCA

November 1990

In the upper right hand corner of the photo is a miniature airplane that looks as if it is flying right into my forehead. It is very tiny and steel-blue, a long bloated oval cut in the middle with its own wings. It is the shape, really, of the Cross. It was the first thing my mother noticed when we received the photo in Massachusetts. "You see, Rebecca," she said. "It's a sign."

When I was three and a half, I survived a plane crash. Ever since, my mother has told me I am destined for something special. I can't say I agree with her. I do not even remember. She and my father had had a fight—one that ended with my mother crying into the garbage disposal and my father taking all of the original paintings off the walls and stashing them in the trunk of his Impala for safekeeping. As a result, my mother took me out to my grandparents' breezy yellow home near Boston. My father kept calling. He threatened to send the FBI if she didn't send me back home. So she did, but she told me she couldn't go with me. She actually said, "I'm sorry, honey, but I can't stand that man." Then she dressed me in a little lemon knit outfit with white gloves. She turned me over to a stewardess at the airport, kissed me goodbye, and said, "Now don't lose the gloves. I paid a bundle."

I don't remember much about the crash. The plane broke all around me; it split in half right before row number eight. All I recall was trying so hard to hold tight onto those gloves, and the way people didn't move, and not being sure if it was all right to breathe.

I don't remember much about the crash. But when I was old enough to understand, my mother told me that I was one of five survivors. She said that my picture was on the cover of *Time*—me crying in a burnt little yellow outfit with my arms outstretched. A farmhand

had taken the photo with a Brownie camera and it had gone out to press and into the hearts of millions of people in America. She told me about fires that reached the sky and singed the clouds. She told me how insignificant the fight with my father was.

A trucker took this photo of us the day we left California. In the corner is that airplane. My mother's hair is tied up in a ponytail. Her arm is casually draped around my shoulder, but her fingers rest unnaturally tight on my neck as if she is trying to keep me from running away. She is smiling. She is wearing one of my father's shirts. I'm not smiling. I'm not even looking at the camera.

The trucker's name was Flex. He had a red beard and no moustache. He said we were the best scenery he'd seen since Nebraska. Flex used his own camera—we'd left in too big a hurry to take ours. He said, "I'll take your picture and you give me your address and I'll send it." My mother said what the hell, it was her brother's rental address. If Flex turned out to be a lunatic and burned the place down no one would really be hurt.

Flex sent the photo to us care of Uncle Joley. It came in a used, readdressed manila envelope snaked with a line of twenty-five one-cent stamps. He attached a Post-it note for my mother that she did not let me read.

I'm telling you the story of our trip because I'm the only one who has really put it all together. It involved all of us—Mom, Daddy, Uncle Joley, Sam, even Hadley—but we all see it different ways. Me, I see it going backwards. Like a rewinding movie. I don't know why I see it like this. I know, for example, that my mother doesn't.

When we got the photo from Flex, we all stood around the kitchen table looking at it—me, Mom, Joley and Sam. Joley said it was a nice picture of me, and where did we take it? Sam shook his head and stepped back. "There's nothing there," he said. "No trees, no canyons, nothing."

"We're there," my mother said.

"That's not why you took that picture," Sam said. His voice hung at the edges of the kitchen like thin silver. "There's more. We just all can't see it." And like that, he walked out of the room.

My mother and I turned to each other, surprised. This had

been our secret. We both looked instinctively at a spot in the highway to the right of our bodies. It is the place where California becomes Arizona—a change that truckers can sense in the pavement; that for everyone else remains unmarked.

1 JANE

The night before I got married I woke up, screaming, from my sleep. My parents came into the room and put their arms around me; they patted my head and smoothed my hair, fine, and I still couldn't stop screaming. Even with my mouth closed, I continued—the high, shrill note of a nocturnal animal.

My parents were beside themselves. We lived in a button-down suburb of Boston, and we were waking up the neighbors one by one. I watched the lights come on in different houses—blue and yellow, blinking like Christmas—and wondered what was happening to me.

This wasn't a common occurrence. I was barely nineteen, a straight-A student fresh out of Wellesley College and in 1976 that was still an accomplishment. I was marrying the man of my dreams in a prototypical white clapboard New England church, and the reception—a lavish one with white-gloved waiters and Beluga caviar—was going to be held in my parents' backyard. I had a job waiting for me when I returned from my honeymoon. There was no foreseeable problem that I could articulate.

To this day, I don't know why that happened to me. As mysteriously as it all started, the screaming went away and the next morning I married Oliver Jones—the Oliver Jones—and we just about lived happily ever after.

I am the only speech pathologist in this town, which means I get shuttled back and forth to different elementary schools in the San Diego suburbs. It's not such a big deal now that Rebecca is old

enough to take care of herself, and since Oliver is away so much of the time, I have less to do at home. I enjoy my work but certainly not the way Oliver enjoys his work. Oliver would be content to live in a sailcloth tent on the coast of Argentina, watching his whales sound in warm water.

My job is to help children find their voices—kinds that come to school mute, or with lisps or cleft palates. At first, they come into my little makeshift classroom one at a time and they shuffle their Keds on the floor and shyly glance at the formidable recording equipment and they are absolutely silent. Sometimes I stay silent too, until the student breaks the ice and asks what he or she is supposed to do. Some students cover their mouths with their hands at this point; I have even seen one little girl cry: they cannot stand to hear their own voices, pieces of themselves that they have been told are ugly. My role is to show them there's someone who is ready to listen to what they have to say and the way they have to say it.

When I was seven, I tell these kids, I used to whistle every time I said the letter S. In school I got teased and because of this I did not have many friends and I did not talk very much. One day my teacher told the class we'd be putting on a play and that everyone had to participate. I was so nervous about reading aloud in front of everyone else that I pretended I was sick. I faked a fever by holding the thermometer up to a light bulb when my mother left the room. I was allowed to stay home for three days, until my teacher called, and my mother figured out what I was doing. When I went back to school, my teacher called me aside. All of the parts had been taken in the play, she said, but she had saved a special role for me, offstage. I was going to be the Manager of Sound Effects, just like in the movies. I practiced with my teacher every day after school for three weeks. In time I discovered I could become a fire engine, a bird, a mouse, a bee, and many other things because of my lisp. When the night of the play came, I was given a black robe and a microphone. The other students got to be just one part, but I became the voice of several animals and machines. And my father was so proud of me; it was the only time I remember him telling me so.

That's the story I give at those Coastal Studies cocktail parties

Oliver and I go to. We rub shoulders with people who'll give grant money. We introduce ourselves as Dr. and Dr. Jones, although I'm still ABD. We sneak out when everyone is going to sit down to the main course, and we run to the car and make fun of people's sequined dresses and dinner jackets. Inside, I curl up against Oliver as he drives, and I listen to him tell me stories I have heard a million times before—about an era when you could spot whales in every ocean.

In spite of it all, there's just *something* about Oliver. You know what I'm talking about—he was the first man who truly took my breath away, and sometimes he still can. He's the one person I feel comfortable enough with to share a home, a life, a child. He can take me back fifteen years with a smile. In spite of differences, Oliver and I have Oliver and I.

In this one school where I spend Tuesdays, my office is a janitorial closet. Sometime after noon the secretary of the school knocks on the door and tells me Dr. Jones is on the phone. Now this is truly a surprise. Oliver is at home this week, putting together some research, but he usually has neither the time nor the inclination to call me. He never asks what school I head to on a given day. "Tell him I'm with a student," I say, and I push the play button on my tape recorder. Vowel sounds fill the room: AAAAA EEEEEIIIII. I know Oliver too well to play his games. OOOOO UUUUU. Oh, you. Oh, you.

Oliver is Very Famous. He wasn't when we met, but today he is one of the leading researchers of whales and whale behavior. He has made discoveries that have rocked the scientific world. He is so well known that people take pictures of our mailbox, as if to say, "I've been to the place where Dr. Jones lives." Oliver's most important research has been on whale songs. It appears that whole groupings of whales sing the same ones—Oliver has recorded this—and pass the songs down over generations. I don't understand much about his work, but that is just as much my fault as Oliver's. He never tells me about the ideas burning in his mind anymore, and I sometimes forget to ask.

Naturally Oliver's career has come first. He moved us to California to take a job with the San Diego Center for Coastal Studies, only to find out East Coast humpbacks were his true passion. The minute I got to San Diego I wanted to leave, but I didn't tell Oliver

that. For better or for worse, I had said. Oliver got to fly back to Boston and I stayed here with an infant, in a climate that is always summer, that never smells like snow.

I'm not taking his phone call.

I'm not taking this again, period.

It is one thing for me to play second fiddle; it is another thing to see it happen to Rebecca. At fourteen she has the ability to take a survey of her life from a higher vantage point—an ability I haven't mastered at thirty-five—and I do not believe she likes what she is seeing. When Oliver is home, which is rare, he spends more time in his study than with us. He doesn't take an interest in anything that isn't tied to the seas. The way he treats me is one matter: we have a history; I hold myself accountable for falling in love in the first place. But Rebecca will not take him on faith, just because he is her father. Rebecca expects.

I've heard about teenagers who run away, or get pregnant or drop out of school, and I have heard these things linked to problems at home. So I offered Oliver an ultimatum. Rebecca's fifteenth birthday next week coincides with Oliver's planned visit to a humpback breeding ground off the coast of South America. Oliver intends to go. I told him to be here.

What I wanted to say is: This is your daughter. Even if we have grown so far apart that we don't recognize each other when we pass, we have this life, this block of time, and what do you think about that?

One reason I keep my mouth shut is Rebecca's accident. It was the result of a fight with Oliver, and I've been doing my best to keep something like that from happening again. I don't remember what that argument was about, but I gave him a piece of my mind and he hit me. I picked up my baby (Rebecca was three and a half at the time) and flew to my parents. I told my mother I was going to divorce Oliver; he was a lunatic and on top of this he'd hit me. Oliver called and said he didn't care what I did but I had no right to keep his daughter. He threatened legal action. So I took Rebecca to the airport and told her, "I'm sorry, honey, but I can't stand that man." I bribed a stewardess with a hundred dollars to take her on the plane, and it crashed in Des Moines. The next thing I knew I was standing

in a farmer's cornfield, watching the wreckage smoke. It still seemed to be moving. The wind sang through the plane's limbs, voices I couldn't place. And behind me was Rebecca, singed but intact, one of five survivors, curled in her father's arms. She has Oliver's yellow hair and freckles. Like him, she's beautiful. Oliver and I looked at each other and I knew right then why fate had made me fall in love with a man like Oliver Jones: some combination of him and of me had created a child who could charm even unyielding earth.

2 OLIVER

Hawaiian and West Indian humpbacks seem less unhappy to me than the whales off the coast of New England. Their songs are playful, staccato, lively. Violins, rather than oboes. When you see them diving and surfacing there is a certain grace, a feeling of triumph. Their slick bodies twist through a funnel of sea, reach toward the sky; with flippers outstretched, they rise from the pits of the ocean like the second coming of Christ. But the humpbacks in Stellwagen Bank sing songs that fill you to the core, that swell inside you. They are the whales with which I fell in love when I first heard the calls—eerie, splayed, the haunted sound your heart beats when you are afraid of being alone. Sometimes when I play the tapes of the Northern Atlantic stock, I find myself sobbing.

I began working with Roger Payne in 1969, in Bermuda, when he and colleague Scott McVay concluded that the sounds made by humpbacks—*megaptera novaeangliae*—are actually songs. Of course there is a lot of leeway in the definition of “song,” but a general consensus may be “a string of sounds put together in a pattern by its singer.” Whale songs are structured like this: One or several sounds make up a phrase, the phrase is repeated and becomes a theme, and several themes make up a song. On the average songs last from seven to thirty minutes, the singer will repeat the song in

its same order. There are seven basic types of sounds, each with variations: moans, cries, chirps, yups, oos, ratchets, and snores. Whales from different populations sing different songs. Songs change gradually over the years according to the general laws of change; all whales learn the changes. Whales do not sing mechanically but compose as they go, incorporating new pieces into old songs—a skill previously attributed solely to man.

Of course, these are only theories.

I did not always study whales. I began my career in zoology looking at bugs, then progressed to bats, then owls, then whales. The first time I heard a whale was years ago, when I had taken a rowboat off a larger ship and found myself sitting directly over a humpback, listening to its song vibrate against the bottom of my boat.

My contribution to the field was discovering that only the male whales sing. This had been hypothesized, but to get concrete evidence required some way of determining a whale's sex at sea. Viewing the undersides of whales was possible but dangerous. Taking a clue from genetics, I began to consider the feasibility of cell samples. Eventually I created a biopsy dart, fired from a modified harpoon gun. When the dart hit the whale, a piece of skin a quarter inch thick was removed and retrieved by a line. The dart was covered with an antibiotic, to prevent infection in the whale. After many unsuccessful attempts I finally amassed a body of evidence. To this day, the only recorded singers in the whale community are male; no female has ever been recorded.

Twenty years later we know a lot about the varied songs of humpbacks but little about their purpose. Since the songs are passed down through generations of males and are sung in entirety only at the breeding grounds, they are seen as a possible method of attracting females. Knowing a given stock's song may be the prerequisite for sex, and variations and flourishes may be an added inducement. This would account for the complexity of whale songs, the need to know the song currently in fashion—females choose a mate depending on the song they have to sing. Another theory for the purpose of the songs is attracting not females, but other males—acoustic swords, if you will, that allow male whales to fight

over a female. Indeed, many male whales bear the scars of competition from mating.

Whatever the message behind the beautiful sounds, they have led to much speculation, and much information about the humpback whale's behavior. If a whale is a member of a specific population, he will sing a certain song. Thus if the songs of each whale population are known, a singing whale can be traced to its origins no matter where the song is taped. Whale songs provide a new method of tracking whales—an alternative to tagging, or to newer photographic fluke identification. We can group male whales by the songs they sing; we can connect females to these groups by attending to the songs to which they listen.

This is my latest professional question: Should we be paying more attention to the individual singer? Won't the personal histories—who the whale is, where he has been sighted, with whom he has been sighted—tell us something about why he sings the way he does?

I have conducted exhaustive research. I have been featured in *Newsweek*, the *Christian Science Monitor* and the *New York Times*. Along the way I got married and had a child. After that, I never felt like I was giving enough time to my family *or* my career. In limbo, that's what I call it. In limbo. Whales never sleep, you know. They are voluntary-breathing mammals, and have to constantly come up for air. They drift in the depths of ocean, unable to rest.

I used to try to mix the two. I took Rebecca and Jane on tracking voyages; I played tapes of the New England humpbacks in the house, piping the melodies into the kitchen and the bathroom. And then one day I found Jane hacking at a speaker in the kitchen with a carving knife. She said she couldn't listen anymore.

Once, when Rebecca was five, all of us sailed to Bermuda to observe the breeding grounds of the East Coast humpbacks. It was warm then, and Rebecca pointed at porpoises we passed on our way out to the reefs. Jane was wearing my rain gear—I remember this because there wasn't a cloud in the sky, but she preferred it to the goosebumps she got from the wet wind. She stood at the railing of *Voyager*, my hired boat, with the sun beating down on her hair, turning her scalp a shade of pink. She gripped the rail tightly; she

never was firm-footed on the water. When we docked she'd walk with tentative steps to convince herself she was on solid ground.

Whales play. When we got to the exact spot and lowered the hydrophone into the ocean, there was a group of whales several hundred yards away. Although we were recording a whale singing way below the surface, we couldn't help but watch the others. Their flukes slapped against the water; they rolled, languorous, stroking each other with their dorsal fins. They shot out of the water, ballistic. They slipped in and out of the waves, marbled in ebony, white.

When the melancholy notes of the whale's song filled the boat, it became clear that we were watching a ballet, executed artfully, except we didn't know the story being told. The boat pitched from left to right and I watched Rebecca grab Jane's leg for support. I thought, My two girls, have they ever been so beautiful?

Although she was only five, Rebecca remembers many things from our trip to Bermuda. The whales are not one of them. She can tell you of the texture of pink sand; about Devil's Hole, where sharks swim below your feet; of an estate's pond with an island shaped the same as the actual island of Bermuda. She cannot remember her mother in yellow rain gear, or the slow-moving humpbacks that frolicked, or even the repeated cries of the whale below, to which she asked, Daddy, why can't we *help* him? I don't recall if Jane offered her opinion. In regard to whales, she has largely remained silent.

3 JANE

My daughter is the family stoic. By this I mean that while I fly off the handle in given situations, Rebecca tends to hold it all inside. Case in point: the first time she experienced death (a beloved guinea pig, Butterscotch). She was the one to clean out the cage, to bury the small stiff form in the backyard, while I cried beside her. She did not cry for eight and a half days, and then I found her wash-

ing dishes in the kitchen, sobbing, as if the world had ended. She had just dropped a serving platter on the floor, and shards of pottery radiated from around Rebecca's feet, like the rays of the sun. "Don't you see," she said to me, "how beautiful it was?"

Rebecca is in the living room when I get home from work. This summer she's working as a lifeguard and her shift ends at two, so she's already home when I get home. She's eating carrot sticks and watching "Wheel of Fortune." She gets the answers before the contestants do. She waves to me. "A Tale of Two Cities," she says, and on the TV, bells ring.

Rebecca pads into the kitchen in her bare feet. She is wearing a red bathing suit that says GUARD across her bust and an old baseball cap. She looks much older than fourteen and a half, in fact sometimes people think we are sisters. After all, how many thirty-five-year-old women do you know who are just having their first babies? "Daddy's home," Rebecca warns.

"I know. He tried to call me this morning." Our eyes connect.

Rebecca shrugs. Her eyes, the shape of Oliver's, dart past my shoulder but seem to have trouble finding an object of focus. "Well, we'll do what we always do. We'll go to a movie he wouldn't like anyway, and then we'll eat a pint of ice cream." She opens the door of the refrigerator lazily. "We don't have any food."

It's true. We're even out of milk. "Wouldn't you rather do something different? It's your birthday."

"It's not that big a deal." Suddenly she turns to the door, where Oliver is standing.

He shifts from one foot to the other, a stranger in his own home. As an afterthought, he reaches for me and kisses my cheek. "I've got some bad news," he says, smiling.

Oliver has the same effect on me each time I see him: he's soothing. He's very handsome—for someone who spends so much time outside, his skin isn't dry and leathery, it is the color of iced coffee, smooth as velvet. His eyes are bright, like paint that hasn't dried, and his hands are large and strong. When I see him, his frame filling the doorway, I do not feel passion, excitement. I can't remember if I ever have. He makes me feel comfortable, like a favorite pair of shoes.

I smile at him, grateful for the calm before the storm.

"You don't have to say it, Daddy. I knew you wouldn't be here for my birthday."

Oliver beams at me, as if to say, See? There's no reason to make a fuss. Turning to Rebecca he says, "I'm sorry, kiddo. But you know the way it is—it's really in everyone's best interests if I go."

"Everyone who?" I'm surprised I say it out loud.

Oliver turns to me. His eyes have gone flat and dispassionate, the way one looks at a stranger in a subway.

I slip out of my heels and pick them up in my right hand. "Forget it. It's done."

Rebecca touches my arm on her way into the living room. "It's all right," she whispers, stressing the words as she passes.

"I'll make it up to you," Oliver says. "Wait till you see your birthday present!" Rebecca doesn't seem to hear him. She turns up the volume on the TV, and leaves me alone with my husband.

"What are you getting her?" I ask.

"I don't know. I'll think of something."

I press my fingers together—this is a habit I've acquired for dealing with Oliver—and head up the stairs. At the first landing I turn around to find Oliver following me. I think about asking when he is going to leave, but what comes out of my mouth instead is unexpected. "God damn you," I say, and I actually mean it.

There is not much of the old Oliver left. The first time I saw him was in Cape Cod when I was waiting with my parents for the ferry to Martha's Vineyard. He was twenty, working for the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute. He had straight blond hair that fell asymmetrically across his left eye, and he smelled like fish. Like a normal fifteen-year-old, I saw him and waited for sparks to fly, but it never happened. I stood dumb as a cow near the dock where he was working, hoping he'd notice me. I didn't know I'd have to give him something to notice.

That might have been the end of it except he was there when we came back over on the ferry two days later. I had wised up. I tossed my purse overboard, knowing it would float with the current in his direction. Two days later he called me at home, saying he'd

found my wallet and would I like it back. When we started dating, I told my mother and father it was Fate.

He was into tide pools back then, and I listened to him talk of mollusks and sea urchins and entire ecosystems that were ruined at the whim of an ocean wave. Back then Oliver's face would light up when he shared his marine discoveries. Now he only gets excited when he's locked in his little study, examining data by himself. By the time he tells the rest of the world, he's transformed from Oliver into Dr. Jones. Back then, I was the first person he told when something wonderful cropped up in his research. Today I'm not even fifth in line.

At the second landing I turn to Oliver. "What are you going to look for?"

"Where?"

"In South America." I try to scratch an itch in my back and when I can't reach it Oliver does.

"The winter breeding grounds. For whales," he says. "Humpbacks." As if I am a total moron. I give him a look. "I'd tell you, Jane, but it's complicated."

Pedantic asshole. "I'll remind you that I am an educator, and one thing I have learned is that anyone can understand anything. You just have to know how to present your information."

I find myself listening to my own words, like I tell my students, to hear where the cadences change. It is as if I am having an out-of-body experience, watching this weird one-act performance between a self-absorbed professor and his nutty wife. I am somewhat surprised at the character Jane. Jane is supposed to back down. Jane listens to Oliver. I find myself thinking, this is not my voice. This is not me.

I know this house so well. I know how many steps there are to get upstairs, I know where the carpet has become worn, I know to feel for the spot where Rebecca carved all of our initials into the banister. She did that when she was ten, so that our family would have a legacy.

Oliver's footsteps trail off into his study. I walk down the hall into our room and throw myself onto the bed. I try to invent ways to celebrate Rebecca's birthday. A circus, maybe, but that's too juvenile. A dinner at Le Cirque; a shopping spree at Saks—both

have been done before. A trip to San Francisco, or Portland, Oregon, or Portland, Maine—I wouldn't know where to go. Honestly, I don't know what my own daughter likes. After all, what did I want when I was fifteen? Oliver.

I undress and go to hang up my suit. When I open my closet I find my shoe boxes missing. They have been replaced by cartons labeled with dates: Oliver's research. He has already filled his own closet; he keeps his clothes folded in the bathroom linen closet. I don't even care where my shoes are at this point. The real issue is that Oliver has infringed on my space.

With energy I didn't know I had, I lift the heavy boxes and throw them onto the bedroom floor. There are over twenty; they hold maps and charts and in some cases transcriptions of tapes. The bottom of one of the boxes breaks as I lift it, and the contents flutter like geese down over my feet.

The heavy thuds reach Oliver. He comes into the bedroom just as I am arranging a wall of these boxes outside the bedroom door. The boxes reach his hips but he manages to scale them. "I'm sorry," I tell him. "These can't stay."

"What's the problem? Your shoes are under the bathroom sink."

"Look, it's not the shoes, it's the space. I don't want you in my closet. I don't want your whale tapes—" here I kick a nearby box, "—your whale records, your whales *period*, in my closet."

"I don't understand," Oliver says softly, and I know I've hurt him. He touches the box closest to my right foot, and his quiet eyes hold the contents, these ruffled papers, checking their safety with a naked tenderness I am not accustomed to seeing.

This is how it goes for several minutes: I take a carton and stack it in the hall; Oliver picks it up and moves it back inside the bedroom. Out of the corner of my eye I see Rebecca, a shadow behind the wall of cartons in the hall.

"Jane," Oliver says, clearing his throat, "that's enough."

Imperceptibly, I snap. I pick up some of the papers from the broken carton and throw them at Oliver, who flinches, as if they have substantial weight. "Get these out of my sight. I'm tired of this, Oliver, and I'm tired of you, don't you get it?"

Oliver says, "Sit down." I don't. He pushes me down by my shoulders, and I squirm away and with my feet shove three or four cartons into the hall. Again I seem to take a vantage point high above, in the balcony, watching the show. Seeing the fight from this angle, instead of as a participant, absolves me of responsibility; I do not have to wonder about what part of my body or mind my belligerence came from, why shutting my eyes cannot control the howling. I see myself wrench away from Oliver's hold, which is truly amazing because he has pinned me with his weight. I pick up a carton and with all my strength hold it over the banister. Its contents, according to the labels, include samples of baleen. I am doing this because I know it will drive Oliver crazy.

"Don't," he says, pushing past the boxes in the hall. "I mean it."

I shake the box, which feels like it is getting heavier. At this point I cannot remember what our argument is about. The bottom of the carton splits; its contents fall two stories.

Oliver and I grip the banister, watching the material drift through the air—paper like feathers and heavier samples in Ziploc bags that bounce when they hit the ceramic tile below. From where we stand we cannot tell how much has been broken.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, frightened to look at Oliver. "I didn't expect that to happen." Oliver doesn't respond. "I'll clean it all up. I'll organize it. Keep it in my closet, whatever." I make an effort to scoop nearby files into my arms, gathering them like a harvest. I do not look at Oliver and I do not see him coming for me.

"You bitch." He grabs my wrists in his hands.

The way he looks at me cuts inside me, says I am violated, insignificant. I have seen these eyes before and I am trying to place them but it is so hard when I can feel myself dying. I have seen these eyes before. *Bitch*, he said.

It is in me, and it has been waiting for years.

As my knees sink, as red welts form on my wrists, I begin to take ownership of my own soul, something that has been missing since childhood. Strength that could move a city, that could heal a heart and resurrect the dead pushes and shoots and stands and (*bitch*) concentrates. With the sheer power of everything I used to

dream I could be, I break away from Oliver's hold and strike his face as hard as I can.

Oliver drops my other wrist, and takes a step backward. I hear a cry and I realize afterward it has come from me.

He rubs his hand across his cheek, red, and he throws his head back to protect his pride. When he looks at me again, he is smiling, but his lips are slack like a carnival clown's. "I suppose it was inevitable," he says. "Like father, like daughter."

It is only when he has said this, the unspeakable, that I can feel my fingers striking his skin, leaving an impression. It is only then that I feel the pain spreading like blood from my knuckles to my wrist to my gut.

I never imagined there could be anything worse than the time Oliver struck me; the time that I had taken my baby and left him; the event that precipitated Rebecca's plane crash. I believed the reason there was a God was to prevent such atrocities from happening to the same person twice. But nothing prepared me for this: I have done what I've sworn I could never do; I have become my own nightmare.

I push past Oliver and run down the stairs. I am afraid to look back, or to speak. I have lost control.

From the dirty laundry pile I quickly grab an old shirt of Oliver's and a pair of shorts. I find my car keys. I pull a Rolodex card with Joley's address and walk out the side door. I don't look back, I slam the door behind me, and still wearing only a bra and a slip, climb into the cool refuge of my old station wagon.

It is easy to get away from Oliver, I think. But how do I get away from my own self?

I run my fingers over the leather of the seat, raking my fingernails into pits and tears that have developed over the years. In the rearview mirror, I see my face and I have trouble placing it. Several seconds later I realize that someone is echoing my breathing.

My daughter holds a small suitcase on her lap. She is crying. "I have everything," she tells me. Rebecca touches my hand; the hand that struck her father, that struck my own husband, that resurrected those dead and buried gaps.