

Disgrace

Winter. Violet light, frozen ground, the sense that his marriage was over. In the term's last weeks, while his seniors soldiered through a unit on short stories, Hollis Martin did his best to hide from his first drink. He took endless walks through the barren cornfields, hungover, chapped hands shoved in the pockets of his Mackinaw coat. He did his best to believe tomorrow could be a new day, that Lisa would come to her senses, that he didn't have to feel so... what? He did his best, but the first drink always found him. Hollis sat alone in his study, listening to Satie on Spotify and drinking Old Overholt, a vague guilt humming in his chest, while a thousand miles south, Lisa zipped Sam into his sleep sack and read *Goodnight Moon* before dinner with her parents. They had spent Thanksgiving with their respective families. Ten years, their first holiday apart. On the Sunday after, Hollis phoned from his mother's in New Orleans.

"Are we really through?"

Lisa sighed. He was not to call after sundown.

"I can't say."

Hollis was surprised and not. In the next room, his mother snored through the Saints game. "That's it?"

"I don't know what you want me to say."

"That's what I was gonna say to *you*."

Now the idea of explaining things, and worse, of hearing other people's opinions. His insane mother. His asshole lawyer brother, newly devout in his marriage to that woman from Tennessee. What would he tell them? Lisa had left before, but not like this, not since they'd had a child. Late that summer, after she and Sam had settled on Fripp Island, Hollis and Lisa made plans to be together for Christmas, if only for Sam. But nothing was settled,

and the longer it stayed that way, the more Hollis knew it wouldn't happen. He'd never been alone on Christmas before. But now here he was.

From outside, the library must've looked like a postcard, an image the school would've happily put up on its website: the study room lit cozily against the New Jersey sunset, a teacher on one side, his pupil on the other. Hollis had come to the final minutes of his final oral defense. In the past week, he'd sat through twenty of these: the same conversation, over and over, just him and his seniors going head-to-head on "A Good Man is Hard to Find." Hollis's students were bright, and a few were brilliant, but most were clever and got by on charm. Not that Hollis could fault them; charm was his last remaining asset. When he'd arrived at the school seven years ago, having just published a collection of his own stories and having secured an agent for a novel-in-progress, he was a campus star. Old Mort—the headmaster who didn't know that his faculty referred to him as Old Mort—called him brilliant, his best hire in years. But success had made Hollis lazy and afraid, and the fear had made him a drunk. He'd hoped Sam would be his cure-all, but the novel was never finished. He hadn't written in years.

"I think it's time," Hollis told his student, "to talk about the ending."

"For real," said Scooter. "I definitely don't, like, fully get it."

Scooter's real name was Eliza Butterfield. Her family was old Virginia money, tobacco and timber, all perfect teeth and Barbour jackets. Her father managed private equity. Her uncle was the state's Lieutenant Governor.

"It's not that you don't get it," Hollis said, "it's just that there's more to get."

"How?" Scooter's beauty was there but faint. She had big eyes and looked half-wild, like she never got a good night's sleep. "Everyone's dead at the end. The Misfit kills everyone."

All of his students had the same read. Hollis didn't even have to listen anymore. His spiel was automatic.

"But what about the Grandmother? What about what she does before he shoots her?"

Scooter frowned. "She's just trying to save herself."

"At first," Hollis said. "But she sees something. She changes."

"And then she gets shot."

"But still. She sees she's been wrong. Sees we're all connected."

Scooter tilted her head. "She does reach out to touch him."

"You're one of my babies," Hollis grinned as he quoted. "You're one of my own children!"

Scooter blinked and let out a breath that seemed to pain her. Hollis remembered she'd only just come back to campus from a Mental Health Break, her second of the term. That's why hers was the final defense; she needed time to catch up. Scooter's big sister, Bonnie, had been the school's queen, a loudmouth with a brash sense of humor and an unreturnable tennis serve. Most of the faculty viewed Scooter as a failed second attempt. She was always getting into ticky-tack trouble—Juuling in the shed behind the garden, sleeping through Sunday Chapel. But she'd been kind to Hollis, warm even, coming by his office to have little talks about her papers, talks that often became real, like something between friends.

Scooter stared down at her Uggs. "Do stories ever have happy endings?"

"Not the good ones."

"So that's all life is? Just wrongness and confusion and selfishness before a quick flash of understanding before you're done?"

Hollis recalled one of his last fights with Lisa. He'd passed out on the couch for the fiftieth time and couldn't be woken for his turn to rock Sam. "What are you doing to us?!" Lisa screamed when she finally roused him. "You selfish fucking fuck!" Hollis had never seen such anger, the hate she had for him in that moment bending her face almost beyond recognition. Upstairs the baby was shrieking. How did we get here, Hollis thought. Where was the pretty girl with big earrings who was his barista in grad school? Where was the woman he used to tickle until she laughed so hard she cried? He thought, too, of that very morning, hungover and watching on the cracked screen of his iPad a video of Sam learning to walk. "That's my big boy," Lisa kept saying. "Look at you go!"

"A moment of grace," Hollis said, "is better than no grace at all."

"I guess so."

Hollis and Scooter looked outside. The last of her peers were leaving campus. In a few hours, he was due at the Headmaster's for the Holiday Party. Hollis would rather get punched in the face than go, but he knew his absence would be another black mark in Old Mort's book of misdeeds. Last year, while his drinking skyrocketed and his marriage tanked, he received a rash of bad reviews. Slow to return papers, distracted, generally unenthused. At spring's end Old Mort and Hollis's chair, George Singleton, called him in. "We need you to take care of yourself, so you can take care of your students," they told him. "We need your full investment." Hollis knew they knew he was boozing. One more slipup, and he'd be gone.

Hollis looked at his watch. The day was done.

"When's your flight to Richmond?" he asked.

"I'm not going."

"What do you mean?"

"I just got *back* from Richmond. My parents have had enough."

"Where to then?"

"I'm taking the bus to see my sister at Barnard, not that she wants to hang out."

"And what's old Bonnie up to?"

Scooter shrugged. "Making the tough call whether to buy ketamine or cocaine."

Hollis failed to stifle his laugh. "Ah, to be a kid in the city."

Hollis again looked out the window and felt a brief brush of joy. A gentle snow had started. In a few hours, it would blanket the campus, and he'd trudge his way to the party. Who would he speak with? What small talk would he endure? He and Lisa used to sneak off to the trails to talk shit and smoke cigarettes, but of course those days were gone.

"Mr. Martin?" Scooter asked.

"Yes?"

"Do you ever think about what happened between Leihuan and Mr. Armistead?"

The joy turned at once to cold sweat. Those names. They meant more to the school than anyone could have ever imagined, but all through this year Hollis had not heard a single student say them. Leihuan Meili. Cool blue eyes and a voice like smoke. She came from one of the big Shanghai textile families. Scooter's roommate and Harold's coxswain. On spring afternoons, while Hollis graded papers on *The Bluest Eye*, he could hear her on the water, leading her boat. "Hold. Hold. Let it run!" And then there was Poor Harold Armistead. Everyone's favorite teacher. Funny and handsome in a boyish way. Rowed for Princeton. But he'd done what he'd done. And though Harold knew damn well that his sins were unforgivable, he never could've foreseen what happened, never could've known that, late on the night Leihuan's parents pulled her out of school, Leihuan would throw a chair through the window of the New York City hotel where they were staying before they flew home. He never could've known she'd jump. The moment before she did, she posted on Instagram. Just her ghostly face and a one-word caption: *Bàoqiàn*. The next morning, everyone at the school woke up and hit See Translation. Sorry.

"Not so much," Hollis said. A pure lie. Harold and Hollis had been best friends. They jogged the trails every afternoon, taught the same novels and stories. Harold's firing and subsequent excommunication had been excruciating for Hollis, and as he covered Harold's sections to the end of the term, he could feel his absence, its permanence, like a death, could feel himself trying to teach "Musée Des Beaux Arts" and "This Is Just to Say" in the wide-eyed, revenant way Harold would. The ordeal left Hollis rattled, but also diminished somehow, like his closeness with Harold made people wonder about Hollis. Like they worried he was some pervert too. "I mean," Hollis went on, "why do you ask?"

"Maybe because it's been almost a year," said Scooter. "And because we're, like, not allowed to talk about it." She sighed. "And I heard Mr. Armistead didn't even get in trouble. Is that true?"

Harold grew up on the Upper East Side. His uncle was a federal judge. That his teaching days were over went without saying, but he'd never see the inside of a courtroom, let alone prison.

"I'm not sure," Hollis said. "That's all I can say."

"Did you know what Mr. Armistead was doing with her?"

"With Leihuan? Of course not!" Hollis's cheeks flared. He was ready to go.

"Sorry," Scooter whispered. "I just don't get how something like that can go on without somebody knowing, without somebody stopping it."

"That's the nature of these things," Hollis said. "They're bound in secrecy."

"But I knew."

"Knew what?"

"I knew what was going on—what he was doing to her."

Hollis almost asked why she didn't tell someone but caught himself.

Scooter all at once let out a sob, one she did her best to swallow. "I knew, Mr. Martin, and I didn't say anything. And look what happened."

Hollis stared at the last page of Scooter's essay. The final section began, clumsily, "In conclusion..."

"It's not your fault, Scooter."

"That's all Mrs. Newman ever says." Margie Newman was the school's counselor and a de facto mom for the student body. Hollis was at first leery of her—just a mama bear who bubble-wrapped the world for anxious rich kids—but she'd been there for him after what happened with Harold. Long talks over too much cheap pinot around the firepit with him and Lisa. The old house, the old life.

"And you don't believe her?"

"I don't." Tears fell, but she wiped them away. "Mr. Martin, I didn't tell anyone." She stopped to breathe. "I didn't tell anyone because he was doing the same stuff to me."

"Harold?" Hollis leaned back. He could feel the world turning. "Does Margie know that?"

"No!" Scooter shot up and gathered her things. "I'm sorry! I shouldn't have...I'm sorry." Hollis stood, too, and put out his hands. "I should've just said merry Christmas. Oh Jesus," she said, rushing out, "You're gonna have to report this now, right? So I'm done, I guess. That's it."

“Scooter, wait!”

But she was gone. Hollis stood in the study room, watching the snow. Then he shivered and turned out the lights.

As the sun sank along the western fields, Hollis arranged to meet with Eric Blaze. Blaze was the school’s painting teacher, a bulldog of Scottish stock with a paunch and a gray beard. The two men were in their studio, a refurbished barn in the corn fields. Over the years, they’d driven there many a Saturday under the pretense of getting serious work done, but more often, they blared The Band or Fiona Apple and drank brown liquor until they both fell down.

Hollis poured two bourbons. Real drinks this early, he knew, was a dangerous game, but his mind reeled with Scooter. He’d no reason to doubt her, but everything with Harold taught him you never really know anything about anyone. Either way, it was nothing he could talk about with Blaze. There was protocol. That he hadn’t already called Old Mort and Margie was enough to get him fired.

Hollis puffed away on a Marlboro Red.

“Careful,” Blaze said. “Those things’ll stunt your growth.” Blaze was up on a ladder, painting in nostril hairs on an oversize nose on an oversize self-portrait, one in a series he’d done in the last few months that he liked to refer to as his Me Period.

Hollis blinked at Blaze’s normal face, then the giant face behind him. “Do you ever feel like you’re on thin ice?”

“Job wise?”

Hollis nodded.

“I’ve had my moments. Why? Something happen?”

He heard Scooter then, her sharp breaths as she ran from the library.

“Just a bad feeling.” Hollis stubbed out his cigarette. “Like Old Mort and George are out to get me. Like my fate with them is already sealed.”

“They are thick as thieves.”

“Jesus,” Hollis said. “First the Mouse House and now this?”

“The hits: they just keep coming.”

Not long after Hollis and Lisa separated, Hollis got an email from Old Mort informing him that, due to the recent tribulations (Mort’s word) with Hollis’s marriage, Hollis was to vacate his faculty home on the main drive and instead reside in a rickety old farmhouse everyone called the Mouse House. “Divorce,” Mort wrote, “is the scourge of the American family. And while it is in some cases inevitable, the School feels it best that the students not witness it from so close a vantage.” Within a week, he was back on campus, supervising as a team of movers, one of whom had the word FEAR tattooed on his forehead, took everything out of the house where he and Lisa had made summer love on the back porch, where they celebrated Hollis’s thirtieth birthday over cheap rosé and Wellfleets, where they first brought home Sam and rocked him crazily while he shrieked pterodactyl sounds from his perfect, angry mouth, and moved it into some peeling clapboard box that had always belonged to a custodian named Minny, an old woman with famously bad breath who, over coffee and store-bought cookies at her retirement party, had said, without humor, “Yeah, I guess it’s been a good life up to here, but now those days is gone, and all that’s left to do is the dyin.” When the move was done, the tattooed man asked Hollis if he might use the restroom, and Hollis, thinking the guy had to pee, said of course. But then it took long enough that Hollis had to ask another mover if the guy was honestly getting down to business in Hollis’s new bathroom before Hollis even had the chance to himself. The mover he asked, a very tall black man in tight shorts and knee pads, tilted his head thoughtfully and said, “Shit, man, that bathroom ain’t new.”

“How is the Mouse House, by the way?”

Hollis groaned. “Filled with unpacked boxes.”

“Sounds like a metaphor!”

Hollis groaned again.

“Well, at least it’s not filled with mice.”

“It’s also not filled with my wife and son.”

“Touché,” Blaze said. “Y’all aren’t really getting divorced, are you?”

“We haven’t talked to any lawyers,” Hollis said. “But we haven’t talked much, period.”

The two men shared a silence. Hollis hoped Blaze, who was married with grown kids, might offer some advice. When it didn't come, he asked, "You going to the party?"

Blaze came down from the ladder. "Shrimp cocktail and an open bar? How can a man refuse? Don't tell me you're not."

"No, I am," he said. "I feel like I have to."

Hollis poured another bourbon.

"Careful, cowboy," Blaze said. "You sure you're okay?"

"I don't know."

Blaze's phone lit up. "You've had a tough year. But people here only get fired if they do something crazy. You've never done anything crazy, right?"

Hollis shut his eyes, took a too-big swig.

"You mean like Harold?"

Blaze shook his head. "You're not Harold, Hollis. Harold's a whole other ball of wax."

"Right," Hollis said.

"So there you go."

"So there I go."

Blaze put down his phone. "Weird email."

"What is it?"

"Scooter Butterfield," he said, "She missed the NYC bus."

A crush of corduroy and tweed. Dim lamplight. The noise of a hundred teachers all talking at once. As Hollis made his way from the vestibule through the living room to the kitchen, stopping every few steps for a handshake or a hug from one of the Trinidadian ladies from the school's daycare—"We been missin' our little Sam I Am!"—he had the strange sense of an ending, that this Holiday Party would be his last. At the bar, where a black man in a tux awaited his order, he felt a familiar sadness. He'd kept drinking after leaving the studio and was too drunk to be in public. On the walk over, he left Lisa a rambling voicemail, harkening back to their first year at the school, how the pair of them had closed the dance floor at this very party, Hollis kicking off his Cole Haans and sliding around in his socks. And now here he was, alone in

his drunkenness in a roomful of people, people who'd made every effort to know and love and support him. He'd been handed an easy life but had done nothing with it, had spent more time hurting himself than anything else. He yearned in a vague way to be punished. He ordered scotch.

"Rocks or neat?"

"Neat."

"Single or double?"

"Triple," Hollis winked.

"Don't worry, boss." The man winked back. "I feel you."

Hollis slogged through the chats. The scene was worse than he'd imagined. He saw that he'd managed to avoid any real back and forth with his colleagues that semester, but now here they were, in a veritable handshake line, and all they wanted to talk about was Lisa. The Italian teacher: "I hope it's okay that I'm asking..." The Latin teacher: "This is coming from a place of love, but..." The biology teacher: "Is this a break, or is this the end?"

"If I knew," Hollis said, "I'd tell you."

"Well, are you gonna fight for her?"

"I don't know what she wants me to do."

"Maybe lay off the sauce."

"It's not that simple."

Then Old Mort and George Singleton. Hollis had just taken a piss, had caught himself making faces in the mirror, a sure sign he was near blackout. He rounded the corner to go to the bar, and there they were, in two winged chairs, like God and the Holy Spirit, sipping red wine, Bach arias fluttering in the background.

"Hollis," Mort said. "Join us."

Hollis sat before them on an ottoman, though he might as well be kneeling.

"How's the novel?" asked George.

Hollis winced. George was a rich person from Massachusetts, and like all rich people from Massachusetts, he was humorless and overly proud, the sort of man who'd tell you out of nowhere he could trace his roots back to the Pilgrims on the Mayflower. He was ten years Hollis's senior but an avid hiker and in excellent shape. Hollis couldn't stand him generally. The scotch only made it worse.

“Oh, you know,” Hollis said. “Plodding along.”

“What’s it about again?” asked George.

Hollis couldn’t help himself. “A boarding school English teacher.”

“Better not be,” Mort said.

Hollis kept on: “He’s fallen on hard times, and the cards are stacked against him, but he gets himself back on track.”

George smiled. “So it’s a fantasy?”

Mort laughed.

“And let me guess,” said George. “In the end, he gets his sweetheart back?”

Hollis imagined breaking George’s nose, the quick snap of the cartilage. He shrugged and stood to leave. “Guess you’ll have to read and see.”

“Just drop the manuscript in my cubby.”

Hollis stopped.

“Don’t push me, George.”

“Easy,” Old Mort said.

“If Daddy wasn’t here,” Hollis said, “you’d be in trouble.”

“Is that right?” asked George.

“Easy!” Mort said again, and with that Hollis turned for the bar.

Hollis pounded one scotch and then another.

“Careful, boss,” the bartender said.

In the dining room, he caught Margie’s eye.

“Well, good evening, young Hollis,” she said. “You’re looking awfully drunk.”

She wore a green dress. Grey hair spilling on her shoulders.

“It’s my way,” he said. “And now I’ve gone and offended Old Mort.”

“Trust me, sweetie, Old Mort’s not worried about you.”

“Why’s that?”

“You’re never gonna believe what I’m dealing with.”

“Something with Scooter?” he asked.

“How’d you know?”

He gulped. “The email.”

“Oh yeah. Well. Old Mort just got a call from her parents.” She sipped her wine. “He’s about to have kittens. I had to convince him not to shut down the party.”

“What’s happening? Where is she?”

“No one knows. She’s not answering calls or texts. Bonnie hasn’t heard boo.”

“Did anyone check her room?”

“All packed up, ship-shape.”

Hollis’s chest tingled. “She probably took an Uber to Princeton Junction.”

Margie shook her head. “Her parents have her bank accounts and that Find Your iPhone thingy. No purchases, and the phone’s pinging on campus.”

“Weird.”

“But that’s not the real shit of it.”

“What is?”

“The *real* shit is, about twenty minutes ago, she posted a selfie where she’s topless and splayed on some floor.” Margie pulled out her phone. In the photo, Scooter was naked from the waist up, her nipples just out of frame, black hair fanned on blue-and-white tiles. The caption read, simply, *Misfit*.

“Oh fuck,” Hollis said.

“Oh fuck indeed.”

Hollis felt suddenly woozy. He stared at his shoes. “God, I’m drunk.”

“I know, honey.”

He got a hold of himself. “Do you—I mean—why would she be doing this?”

Margie shook her head. “Things at home are pretty ugly, and she’s got her own issues. Feels like no one cares about her. Loves you, though—Mr. Martin’s always coming up in our sessions.”

Hollis sighed.

“And maybe it’s the wine talking,” Margie went on, “but she also had at least some idea about what was happening with Harold and Leihuan. Lotta guilt. Don’t repeat that. Ever.”

Hollis sighed again. “It always comes back to Harold.”

“Oh, honey, the stories I could tell you.”
“I don’t want to hear them,” said Hollis.
“No,” Margie said, “you don’t.”

Hollis stood alone smoking in the trails behind Old Mort’s. A panic like nausea welled within him, but the alcohol slackened it. Like always, there was rage and confusion. Like always, there was the sense of inevitability. This was the life he was born to lead. “You’re always the victim,” Lisa had said.

Hollis thought of Harold. He’d seen him only once since Leihuan’s death, at a Bed-Stuy bar called Jackie G’s. It was summer and the city smelled faintly of trash. Harold had gained weight and grown a beard. Lisa was gone but Hollis didn’t say so.

“It’s so, so good to see you, Hollis.”

Hollis said the same but didn’t mean it. In truth, seeing Harold unnerved him. He wasn’t sure whether to bring up the school or Leihuan, so he didn’t, and Harold was eager to talk about anything else—Vampire Weekend, the Jets, the NYU student he met on Tinder and fucked the night before.

“Don’t tell anyone you saw me,” Hollis said at night’s end.

Harold looked hurt. “Why?”

“You know why.”

Harold finished his beer. “You know I’m sorry, right? I’m sorry she died.”

Sorry, Hollis thought.

Hungover the next morning, Hollis marched aimlessly through Lower Manhattan. He’d planned to see a Miró retrospective at the MoMA but felt too rattled. He could not stop thinking of Harold. Just seeing him there, another man at the bar, telling stories, drinking beers. When Harold had invited him to come to the city, Hollis was booze-whipped and lonely and thought the idea fine. Now he was ashamed of himself. Why would he spend time with Harold when Harold had done what he’d done? On Ludlow, a derelict sat atop a packed dumpster and shouted, over and over, “I fucked my destiny!” Hollis hailed a cab to Penn Station and felt like a coward. He knew he’d never see Harold again.

The snow let up. The cold air sharp and bitter. Hollis lit another cigarette and thought to call Lisa, but when he grabbed his phone it buzzed with a text from an unknown number. He knew what it was before he read it.

Sorry for today. You were super good to me. I didn’t mean to freak you out.

He put his cigarette between his lips so he could text with both hands. *Where are you? People are worried!*

The three dots appeared and then: *No need.*

Please, he typed. *Tell me where you are!*

Again, the three dots. *God I’m so drunk.*

Don’t do anything rash! Hollis typed.

No dots.

Then a voice from behind him: “Hollis!” It was George Singleton. “This is a tobacco-free campus. You know that.”

“Jesus, George.” His heart raced. “Lay off. You’re not the goddamn boss of my lungs.”

“That’s your whole problem,” George said. “People are always laying off of you. Makes you think you don’t have to pay for mistakes. Makes you think you’re invincible.”

Hollis laughed. “Is that right?”

“You think you get a free pass to speak to me the way you did tonight because you’re busy wallowing in scotch and sulking over your disgraced buddy and gone wife? We’re all just supposed to bear you?”

Hollis struggled to answer. Over George’s shoulder, Old Mort’s house glowed like a castle.

Finally he said, “You know I’m not Harold, right?”

“We’re only as good as the company we keep.” George crossed his arms. “I see right through you, Hollis. So does Mort.”

Hollis raised his voice. “You’re on thin ice, George.”

“And you’re a cliché, Hollis. It’s no wonder Lisa ran like hell.”

Hollis lunged at him then, tried sloppily and to no avail to smash George’s face. The momentum of the missed slug threw Hollis to the snow and he landed hard enough to knock himself breathless. The moment he stood, drunk and disoriented and panting in pain, George reared back and punched Hollis harder

than he'd ever before been punched. A moan from his chest like a dying animal. His vision: bright white and then black. Nose broken and dumping warm blood. He tried to stand but couldn't. He writhed there, gasping in the dirty wet snow.

"Christ on a bike, George!" It was Eric Blaze, no doubt sneaking off from the party to vape.

"You saw it, Blaze!" George said. His hair was mussed, tie askew. "You saw him come at me!"

"All I saw was you cold-cock Hollis!"

Hollis mashed snow to his face and staggered to his feet. Very soon he knew he'd pass out. While the men argued, he reached for his phone. A message from Scooter, but not for him—an email to the entire school. The subject line: *a picture I stole from his phone.*

"Jesus," Hollis said.

"Hollis," said Blaze, "let's get you home."

Hollis looked at George, who stared at the ground. He knew then he'd be fired.

Eric Blaze drove Hollis Martin to the Mouse House at a quarter to ten—a car ride Hollis would never remember. He passed out on the porch before he made it inside.

A blackout dream. A cloudless day. Hollis on the pond. He's alone in the boat, and no one's rowing, but the boat flies through water, smooth water that becomes a cold, choppy sea. A black sky. A nearing storm. And now she's here, Leihuan, a ghostly coxswain. Her crushed face is bloody, her tiny body flattened from impact. "Push," she tells him, and Hollis sees the oars in his hands. "Push," she says again, and he rows as hard as he can but the boat won't move. "I'm trying," he says. "I'm trying," she mocks. "Leihuan," he pleads, "I'm sorry." She cackles and flies to his ear, whispers one word: "*Bàoqiàn.*" Then she's gone and he's alone and the oars sink into the sea.

Hollis woke shivering face-down in the dirt. Mud on his face, blood in his mouth. For a pure moment he had zero recall and

wanted only to get warm. Then flashes: the party, the fight, Scooter. He reached for his phone. Before midnight. Missed calls from Margie. Missed calls from Mort. Nothing from Lisa. He remembered Scooter's email but could not bring himself to read it. He saw Harold then, the day he told him. They were jogging the trails, the corn stalks higher than their heads. "You have to promise you'll never tell anyone," Harold said, "not even Lisa." Hollis stopped dead and stood there sweating. "You have to promise me you'll stop!" Harold pinched his lips. "It's not that simple." Hollis stared at the sky. "I don't need this," he said. "I don't want to know anything about this!" Harold said he got it and went on without him. Hollis waited there a long time, trying to wish it away. He watched as Harold kept running, around the bend and past the far treeline until he veered off the trails and vanished. Hollis never spoke a word of it to anyone, not even Lisa. He only waited in silent panic for the other shoe to drop. And on the day Leihuan threw herself out of the world, he decided without deciding to do the same, only Hollis would bury himself in a coffin of liquor.

Hollis wiped blood from his phone and opened the email.

A single photo: Leihuan and Scooter, naked beside one another in Harold's bed, sheets to their waists, Scooter cupping Leihuan's small breasts. Both of them stare right at the camera, at Harold, their gazes an eerie mix of arousal and fear. Below it, a message: *there are more. My God,*

Hollis thought. These poor, ruined children. Then he saw the tiles.

Margie picked up on the first ring. "Hollis, sweetie. You all right? I heard George Singleton beat you up. You see the email? It's red alert over here. Mort's called the County PD—"

"Margie," said Hollis, but Margie kept talking.

"We've done a full campus sweep, searched every room—"

"Margie," he said, "I know where she is."

The boathouse. It hadn't quite occurred to Hollis why he'd sprinted the half-mile there, nor that, though he knew he was going to Scooter, the whole run he had pictured Leihuan.

Margie had just arrived to meet him, in yoga pants and a parka. “Jesus,” she said. “Look at you!”

His nose was crooked, his face caked with dirt and dried blood.

“Call an ambulance!” he said.

“For you?”

“No!”

The boathouse had three stories. The first, a bay for the boats themselves. The second, an ERG room. The third, Harold’s apartment. After all that had happened, Old Mort held it vacant.

Scooter had returned to the scene of the crime.

Hollis and Margie raced up the stairs. Hollis kicked in the door.

“Scooter!” Margie shouted in the emptied living room. “It’s Mrs. Newman and Mr. Martin.”

“Scooter,” yelled Hollis. “Come out!”

“Honey, you’re not in trouble!”

Hollis checked the kitchen and the closets. Nothing. Then he knew, she was in Harold’s bedroom. “It’s just amazing,” Harold told him that day on the trails, “knowing whenever you show them something, it’s the first time they’ve ever done it.” *They?* Hollis thought.

Hollis smashed his boot to the door, but Scooter had it blocked. “Scooter!” he screamed.

“Don’t do this!”

Margie’s face collapsed into panic. “Oh my God, Hollis. Get it open. Get it open.”

“I’m trying!” Hollis slammed himself against it. He could feel the bruises blooming on his shoulders, his arms. “Scooter, please!” he screamed. He threw his weight at it again and again, bashed the wood with his fists. She was not ten feet away. “Please!” It had already cost him Lisa. “Please!” Margie wept and fell to her knees. And it was done with, Hollis thought. They were coming: the ambulance, Old Mort and the police, her miserable mom and dad. Harold would shoot himself tomorrow. That left him. “You could’ve been one of my babies,” Hollis said. “You’re one of my own children.” And crying Margie looked at him then, saw him for what he was, a lonely drunk with his face smashed in.

“I’m sorry,” Hollis whispered. He banged and banged and banged some more, but from inside there wasn’t a sound. The picture of what she’d done to herself was already on Instagram.