

Mindy Friddle

The Sea of Tranquility



Edward Hopper, *Automat*

As she drives her dead husband's car down Main Street, Caroline cannot bring herself to go home. She decides to loop through town again. The children are in bed, the baby is asleep. She'll drive around a little longer.

At the stoplight, a man in a Chevy pickup looks her over. She rolls up the window, though the summer evening is stifling. Beneath her short lavender dress, her underwear is thick and matronly. She scratches absently at the heat rash beneath her breasts, she doesn't mind the pain. New lingerie is a luxury she will not allow herself, not even when she leaves. Especially when she leaves.

When the light turns green, she hits the gas, passes the Chevy with the leering man. The grocery bag shifts in the back seat. She rests a hand on the six-pack beside her. She drives Gerald's Pontiac all the time now, it is her car, but *Gerald's car* is how she thinks of it. The idling engine snarls, impatient with her timid touch, as if the car misses Gerald, too. The registration in the glove compartment still bears his name, and Caroline keeps a photograph of Gerald there, too, in case she is ever stopped for speeding. He's in his Navy dress uniform in the picture, and no cop is going to hassle the family of a man who serves his country. Gerald, himself, told her that.

The purple darkness cloaks Main Street, the streetlights flicker on. She passes rows of repair shops—shoes, sewing machines, vacuums, cars—everything here needs fixing, patching, mending. There is nothing new in Sans Souci.

The town wasn't always dying. Caroline has grown up hearing how fine it once was—her grandfather's textile mill, the debutante parties, the parades. But it's all just leftovers now, the leavings of an enchanting ball—dirty dishes, deflated balloons, wilted flowers.

She pulls in behind the television repair shop, parks in a weed-swallowed vacant lot. She rolls down the windows, lets in the night sounds: brazen cicadas, cheerful crickets. The fireflies scatter like sparks. The moon is full but dappled with shadows, like an x-ray of bones.

Caroline drinks a beer to calm her nerves.

It is Friday, August twenty-fifth, 1972. Caroline is twenty-three and she has lived alone just once in her life, for fifteen months. Everyday, Caroline reminds herself of this. *Once upon a time, you had your own home, your own kitchen.* This was after Gerald's first tour in Vietnam, in a dingy, cramped apartment on the base in Savannah. Palmetto bugs skittered under the door, flies thumped against the screen, the mosquitoes whined, but it was her place. *Hers.* Not even Gerald's, really. He was away so often, coming home on leave once after Catherine was born. In their small apartment, he felt corralled, he grew restless. Kicking the stall like a stallion. Until he shipped out.

You can't manage alone, honey. Why don't you come home? Her mother called her after Gerald was deployed again, though it wasn't really a question, they both knew. With two little ones and another one on the way, Caroline moved home again, back to her old room, walled in by faded cabbage roses and dotted Swiss curtains, cushioned by dusty down, covered by frayed chenille.

Caroline drinks another beer. She gets out of the car, leans against the hood. She admires the empty lot with its beautiful weeds and wild stalks—stubborn trumpet vine scaling the telephone pole, Queens Ann's lace poking through ivy and sumac. The shop that stood here once, in this empty space, sold hats and ladies gloves. Now the vacant lot is like a missing tooth, and no one wants to replace it.

Caroline looks up at the moon. It gives her hope, as it always does. Three days ago, NASA launched a satellite, Caroline cut out the article about it this morning, and that satellite is orbiting now, it's taking pictures. Copernicus. It's called Copernicus. She has a fat file of newspaper clippings about the space program.

Her mother cuts out obituaries. Also, the write-up about Gerald in the *Sans Souci Citizen* last year after the funeral. A reporter had come and talked to Caroline and took a picture. Caroline had worn a baggy black velvet dress, heavy as drapes. She'd been a few months along with the baby then. Her mother saved the letter the government sent, and all the cards people mailed, and the folded flag. All of it is in a cedar trunk in the attic. *For the children.*

Caroline cannot live here another day. She knows this now. She's being buried alive in a marble mausoleum, that's what it feels like. It's the right thing to do, to leave, to save herself, so she can save her children. That's what she tells herself.

But when Caroline tries to tell her mother she should work, she wants to find something—her mother says not to worry, *we will get by.* Caroline's widow benefit, the government's monthly checks for the children covers expenses. Barely. They have a roof over their heads—a mossy, leaky roof—they have spare rooms, threadbare furniture, leaky plumbing, three generations of chipped wedding china, strings of pearls from foreign seas, from oysters dead a century.

§

Three months ago, Caroline enrolled in Miss Sylvia's Secretarial School for Ladies. A compromise. Her mother approved, it was a chance to be around *young ladies your age.*

The classes, in an old sweltering building in downtown Sans Souci, were stultifying, tedious. Caroline wouldn't have lasted a week if not for Gigi. Alone, Caroline feels inert and plain as a potted fern. With Gigi, a wild clawing thing grows inside her and wants out.

They sat in three rows of four, with one maverick desk in the back, thirteen women in heels, hose and skirts, faces flushed from the summer heat. The sagging, dusty blades of the ceiling fan moved sluggishly. The IBM typewriters hummed. Sweat trickled like tears down Caroline's back.

Miss Sylvia did not look kindly on tardiness, nor did she tolerate bare arms, slothfulness, poor posture, or inattention. As for the heat? Just wait until they worked in a mill office, Miss Sylvia liked to tell them, where a girl might be lucky to start out, back offices so hot a lady needed to powder her shine every hour.

If you were tardy, you were forced to sit at the back desk and use the sole manual typewriter. Gigi was late the first day. Miss Sylvia's eyes narrowed when Gigi burst through the door, huffing from the stairs, stumbling towards the back desk. They'd already started typing drills, pounding the home keys.

Caroline, horrified, stole a glance back at the poor girl, punching the keys of the old Royal typewriter. Gigi—she introduced herself after class—stifled a yawn and rolled her eyes. She waved to Caroline with her pinky finger.

She was dark-haired, her full lips glazed with white lipstick. She wore zig-zagged printed dresses and two-toned oxfords and gold-hooped earrings as big as her hand. Her father owned the Greek diner all the way over in Spartanburg and he didn't know what to do with her. Hence, Miss Sylvia's.

Gigi walked with Caroline to the parking lot that day. It was the first time in years someone had looked at Caroline without pity. Three children, dead husband, living at home with her mother. Gigi's face betrayed nothing but curiosity. She'd stared back at Caroline as if she were Houdini—chained, underwater. *How are you going to get out of that?*

§

Miss Sylvia often circulated around the class, her French chignon lacquered, her nylons nubby, her blouse worn shiny at the collar, her black pumps impeccable. Expensive shoes were a must for the professional secretary, according to Miss Sylvia, although she didn't bother to elaborate. *Cheap shoes is cheap flooze*, is how Gigi explained the theory to Caroline later. Miss Sylvia kept a sharpened pencil behind her ear, a habit she encouraged, since a lightly penciled mark three inches from the bottom of a letter reminded you to jump to the second page, or conclude with the salutation. Miss Sylvia's heels clacked—tick tock, tick tock. Stop. Tick tock. A blast of mint mouthwash from over your right shoulder warned of Miss Sylvia's scrutiny. Caroline now equated the smell of mint with failure. Caroline's fingers were dexterous enough, it was her mind that wondered, frolicking in a field of daydreams. She punched keys through a gauze of drowsiness. *Bobbie's bride bit a blueberry BBBB bbbbb.*

One day, Miss Sylvia stationed herself at the front of the room. She cleared her throat. The typing, as loud as a summer squall on a tin roof, let up, plinked to a stop. "Our lesson for today." She held up a machine. "The Dictaphone." Miss Sylvia detested newfangled equipment. Caroline suspected the electric typewriters must have been a concession on Miss Sylvia's part, so she wasn't surprised to see disgust cross her face. "This is an appalling machine. A fad. But as you know, earning a certificate from Miss Sylvia's prepares you to serve as secretary for *all kinds of men in all sorts of*

businesses." She sighed. "Keep up your shorthand practice. Classic skills will never go away. I hate to think you may run across a boss who will ask you to use one of these... contraptions. I can't imagine why. He'll have you, his very own professional secretary, to take dictation in person." Her lips thinned with distaste. "But by the end of today's lesson, you can answer truthfully, 'yes, sir, I know how to use a Dictaphone.'" Caroline felt something nudge her foot. A folded, fat note on the floor. She picked it up, and read Gigi's big loopy script. *Sir, shall I use your dick ta phone? Or will my finger do?*

§

By the second week of class, Caroline and Gigi stopped by the Sans Souci drugstore lunch counter every day. It was the only part about the morning Caroline looked forward to—the end, the talks with Gigi.

"I've got a problem," Gigi looked up from the menu. "I've had every float and shake here." She began to tell the soda jerk how to mix up a new concoction. "I don't care. Just throw in some chocolate chips and pineapple and pickle relish—surprise me."

"You're kidding, right?" Caroline asked after the skinny boy behind the counter sheepishly took their order. He was just a kid, too cowed by Gigi to ask questions.

"I wish. I'm not good at being bored."

"Who is?" Caroline laughed.

Gigi looked at her pointedly. Caroline had ordered her usual egg salad sandwich and glass of milk. She needed the iron, as her mother would say.

Gigi took out a newspaper from her purse, snapped it open. "DC today."

"Washington, DC?"

"You've heard of it?"

Occasionally, Gigi's barbs hurt Caroline's feelings. Sometimes she came away from their weekday lunches feeling bruised, but more often Caroline felt exhilarated in a way she couldn't quite put her finger on. She liked hearing about Gigi's weekend escapades and, even more, Gigi's plans to move away. Living vicariously through Gigi's outrageous tales felt daring enough.

Gigi began circling ads in the classified section. Caroline read them over her shoulder.

"How come in every city someone's looking for a Girl Friday?"

"It just means they want you to work your tush off doing everything for everybody," Gigi said. "But at least you're not chained to the desk all day. Drowning in the typing pool."

"Is that from the library again?" Caroline asked, as Gigi tucked the newspaper back in her purse.

Gigi sighed. "I promise I'll return it like a good girl."

"But you've already...written on it."

"Jeez, Care." Gigi wore a maxi dress and sported a new hairstyle with feathered bangs. She'd driven all the way to Columbia to a real salon because she would never trust the shampoo-and-set mummified blue-hair beauty parlor in Sans Souci. "How many people around here are going to need the job listings from *the Washington Post*? Take a wild guess."

"You're really going then?"

Friddle

"Are you kidding? Yeah, I'm splitting. After I get my, ahem, certificate from Miss Sylvia's Ancient Academy of Scrollldom."

Caroline burst out laughing at Gigi's uncanny imitation of their teacher.

The mirror behind the lunch counter reflected Gigi, olive-skinned, black-haired, compact and curved, and Caroline, yellow-haired, willow-limbed, faintly freckled. Summer and winter. Rye loaf and Sunbeam white bread, as Gigi once remarked.

"God, I'm beat." Gigi stifled a yawn, took out two cigarettes, lit them, and passed one to Caroline.

Caroline nodded. They were both tired after class. It was one of the few things they had in common. Gigi recommended coffee and cigarettes. Also, diet pills.

"So...there's this party on Friday," Gigi said. "You should come."

"Where?"

"Not far. About an hour or two from here. This guy I know? His parents are away. Should be a wild scene."

"Oh. I don't know." On Fridays, Caroline drove Petal home early. Caroline and her mother made field peas and cornbread, macaroni and cheese. They watched *The Brady Bunch* at eight, after the children were in bed. "My Fridays are pretty busy."

As usual, Gigi poked at Caroline's reluctance. "You should hang out with me one night. You deserve a breather."

"My mother deserves a breather." Caroline's throat tightened, her eyes stung, the pang of sadness surprised her. She pretended to cough in her napkin.

"You said she's got help, right?"

Help? How could Caroline explain? Petal was ancient, in her eighties, already elderly when she'd helped raise Caroline. Mr. Jack, who mowed the lawn, was her mother's age, but just looked old, gimped from an old war injury and manual labor at the mill until it closed, a hard life that took his youth, and his teeth.

Caroline looked at her watch. "I have to get home."

"No, really, Care. I mean, c'mon." Gigi was jabbing with her sharp stick now. "You deserve a night out...from everything."

Caroline shrugged, gathered her things. "I'll think about it."

"Do you good, sister."

"Maybe."

§

She thought about it all the way home.

But when she walked into her mother's kitchen, Carline lost her motivation, her vision of anything else, anywhere else. That's the way it felt all summer. Her determination to practice her home key drills, to review her shorthand for tomorrow's quiz—her plans seeped away like air out of a tire the minute she arrived home. Her conversation with Gigi and all its crackling excitement and laughter, with its glimpse of the world out there, felt boxed off, contained, tinny voices, ridiculous—like a program on her mother's television, *Bewitched* or *I Dream of Jeannie*.

"Looky there. It's your mama," Petal said.

"Mommy!" Caroline's boy jumped out of his chair, hugged her legs, still holding a crustless peanut butter sandwich. She ran a hand through his bristly hair, close-cropped

the way his father would want it. He knocked over the saltshaker, a fork clanged to the floor. Her mother and Petal looked at Barry, as if he were a wild animal, a raccoon in the attic, plundering out of his element.

"We've been outside all morning," her mother said. Caroline leaned down to kiss Catherine's head, her bangs were damp and fragrant, and Caroline inhaled the sweet sweat of her child. The baby, in the high chair, held up a soft fist, a soggy cracker plastered on her chin. As, usual, Caroline felt both overcome and overwhelmed by her children. Such intense love for them surged through her, terrified her.

"You're just in time for lunch," her mother said. "Petal made pimento cheese."

"In a little while," Caroline said. "I'm not hungry."

She never told her mother she ate with Gigi. She didn't know why. Her mother wouldn't have minded. Her mother might have even been happy she had a friend in Miss Sylvia's class. But Caroline had erected a border, a membrane only she, herself, crossed. Gigi hadn't met her mother or her children, which is how Caroline preferred it. She kept her children, her mother, her memories of Gerald at home. Miss Sylvia's classes and Gigi and their lunches, she left *out there*.

"Now look. You got peanut butter on that good dress," Petal scolded Caroline.

"Go change, honey," her mother said. "Get comfortable."

Upstairs, Caroline found three cigarettes in a folded tissue on her bureau—as if three tiny, filter-headed, faceless dolls were tucked in bed. Petal had put them there. She'd found them and displayed them. It was her way of telling Caroline *she knew*. Caroline smoked in secret, prying open the narrow window in her bathroom, tamping out the butts and flushing them. It wasn't that her mother would scold her, it's just that her mother would be disappointed and hurt, leaving Caroline feeling even more burdened. That was worse than some angry demand to stop.

Petal wouldn't tell, but she would be watching. The way she watched Caroline those first days with Gerald, when Caroline was drunk with such wild love. Petal warned her then, too, in her cryptic way, finally cornering Caroline in her room and blurting out *you keeping company with that man, you better know how to keep from having his babies*. Caroline had sighed, and turned away, sensing Petal's double-pronged iron stare at her back, feeling, too, the flickering like a silvery minnow inside her. By then, it was too late.

Caroline hung her dress in the closet with her two good suits. She stretched out on her bed now, just for a minute. Just to catch her breath. She was still in her slip. She thought of her children's milky breaths, their sticky limbs, their nightly wakings. She fell asleep deeply, quickly, and dreamed of vines—twining, tender shoots that thickened. Hairy roots scaling walls, snaking over iron tines and brick crevices.

They were calling her, someone was calling her. *Let mommy rest*. She startled awake.

She gazed down from her bedroom window. Mr. Jack had the hood up on Gerald's car, checking the oil. Petal held the baby on her hip, following her mother and the children to the garden, where Mr. Pete had hung a tire swing.

Caroline was lucky to have them all, so lucky. She hated herself for not feeling lucky. They were all taking care of her—covering and climbing and holding her—until she could hardly breathe.

Caroline didn't go to the party with Gigi on Friday. She drove Petal home to Pennytown as usual. That afternoon, Caroline loaded jars of blackberry jam, stewed tomatoes and okra in the backseat of Gerald's car—it was Petal's share, a portion of the week's harvest from her mother's garden. "Cushion that good now, I don't want no jars cracking," Petal told Caroline, handing her balled up newspaper. "You know how that road is."

For years, Pennytown had a dirt road running through it. The county had come in once and paved it. Since then, the asphalt had thinned, pocked and potholed again, the way Petal preferred it. *So you can hear when someone is coming. Blacktop too sneaky, folks whizzing by like a secret, cars hissing like snakes, then gone.*

Her mother paid Petal every Friday, crisp bills in a monogrammed vellum envelope and every Friday Caroline drove Petal by the Sans Souci Savings and Loan. The *Savings Alone* Petal called it, because it's where she put cash money she *left alone*.

Petal was saving up for her sister's funeral. Poppy was up in a Baltimore institution, she was never right in the head, she was like a child, and when she passed, her body was going to be shipped back to Petal, laid to rest here, right beside Petal's plot at Pennytown AME. "That's why I come out of my retirement," Petal often reminded Caroline. *Not just for you*, that was the unspoken message, Caroline knew. It was Petal's way of reminding Caroline to *buck-up and step-up* and take care of her children and her mother. Petal had a steely pragmatism her mother did not have.

Caroline's mother had innocence. Not denial, which meant seeing and turning away, but the stubborn innocence of not seeing. Her mother had stopped watching the television news—no war protests, no dead Vietnamese children, no angry Negroes—and *counted her blessings*. When Caroline came down the stairs in the mornings with her stenographer's pad and textbook, dressed in her suit, already perspiring, her mother would be holding the baby, reminding Barrie and Catherine to give thanks, to say a prayer before they ate their eggs and toast. Her mother hummed while the coffee burred in the percolator, while Petal stood at the sink peeling peaches or washing dishes. The children and her mother were always cheerful in the mornings and Petal, only Petal looked at Caroline, her eyes moving over her, knowing, knowing what? Something. Knowing more than even Caroline did.

§

That weekend Henry Junket showed up out of the blue. It was Sunday afternoon, Father's Day, a sad holiday Caroline had dreaded. She was upstairs changing the baby's diaper when she heard the doorbell, then her mother's voice. "Oh, for heaven's sake. Come in."

Caroline stood on the landing with the baby on her hip. The man—tall, gaunt, bearded—looked up as she descended the stairs.

He introduced himself as a friend of Gerald's. They'd been in country together. "Caroline, right?" His handshake was cool but tender. He cupped the baby's foot.

Her mother guided them into the dim, formal parlor with its prim claw-footed furniture lying in wait. Henry Junket seemed to move in slow motion, all pulleys and cranks.

They sat on the camelback sofa, Henry on one end, Caroline on the other, the baby in her lap. Catherine, shy, hid under Caroline's arm and peeked at Henry. Barry stood beside her, one small, sticky hand on her knee, as he fixed Henry with a suspicious glare.

that broke Caroline's heart.

"Hey, little man, you look like your dad, you know that?" Henry told her boy. He showed Barry how to shake his hand, then taught him to salute. "You got it."

Her boy's hostility seeped away, replaced by a wary curiosity.

"They should know about their dad," Henry told Caroline. "What a great guy he was." Henry's eyes watered. He looked away.

Her mother brought out iced tea with sprigs of mint and finger sandwiches, and it embarrassed Caroline, the formality, the hint of courtship, although Henry acted charmed.

"Your dad could do more chin-ups than anyone else," Henry told her children. Outside, he leaped and pulled himself up on the low branch of the live oak, demonstrating, then held Barry up to the limb, too.

Henry's motorcycle sat at the end of the driveway, patient as a horse outside a saloon.

He'd come for an hour, just to introduce himself. That night, he checked in at the Mountainview Motor Lodge on the outskirts of town.

He did not mention a girlfriend. The only family he talked about was a sister down in Florida. He was on the way to see her. "When I get there, I get there."

§

The next day Henry came to dinner. She'd thought he wouldn't come, told herself not to be disappointed, so she hadn't told Gigi about him.

But he did show. At four o'clock Monday afternoon he brought flowers from the florist, tinker toys for the children. Caroline heard the motorcycle roar from the kitchen. Her heart raced as she went outside to greet him, to lead him around to the backyard. They were having a picnic. Fried chicken, potato salad, coconut cake.

Her mother sat at the picnic table holding the baby. Beside her, Catherine cupped a fat yellow crayon in her dimpled hand. Her boy scribbled with a black pen and did not look up.

"Welcome, Mr. Junket," her mother said.

"Please call me Henry, Mrs. Harris."

"Henry." Her mother nodded, there was a faint hint of color on her cheeks, rouge, maybe, that she rarely wore, or maybe it was just the heat. Henry presented the flowers and the toys. He was chivalrous, awkwardly noble, Lincolnesque.

"I asked Mr. Jack to bring out some of our lawn entertainment," her mother said.

Mr. Jack approached, pushing a wheelbarrow heaped with odds and ends, stringless rackets, mangy badminton birdies, cracked wooden croquet mallets, a rusty horseshoe.

Caroline said, softly, "Oh God, Mom, that stuff is ancient."

"What's all this now?" Petal said as she walked toward them, holding a platter of sliced cantaloupe, talking to the children. The table was covered with a heap of crayons. "You making Petal some pictures?"

"Petal? Mr. Jack? I'd like you to meet Henry," Caroline said, and her mother beamed, proud of Caroline's impeccable manners. Petal nodded slightly as she put down the platter on the table and Mr. Jack shook Henry's hand, but Caroline sensed their instant dislike of him.

"We're coloring the moon, aren't we?" her mother said to the children. "Barry is drawing the man walking on the moon." This was for Caroline's benefit, who kept up with

Friddle

space program. "Maybe he'll be an astronaut when he grows up."

"My sister lives about an hour away from the Kennedy Space Center," Henry said. "Hey, Little Man, when you're older, maybe your mom can take you there."

"You watched any of them rockets take off?" Mr. Jack demanded of Henry.

"My sister did. She took her kids. It's a big tourist attraction now."

"You know, I thought men landing on the moon would be something special," her mother said. "I pictured them wading around in something creamy and soft, like coconut cake frosting. Silly, I know."

"Nothing but rocks and dust on the moon," Mr. Jack said, his blue eyes cold as ice chips. "We got that down here."

"Folks say they gonna mess up the weather," Petal said. "All those rockets."

"And what about that spaceship they crashed on purpose?" Mr. Jack demanded of Henry. "Waste of tax money."

"It wasn't a waste," Caroline said patiently, as she always did, even as her throat tightened with irritation. "The scientists planned that. It was a spacecraft that took thousands of pictures of the Sea of Tranquility."

"The government ain't got a lick of sense," Mr. Jack said, shaking his head.

Caroline's face burned. Henry grinned at her, amused.

Her mother—eyes pleading for harmony, appeasing Caroline—said, "Mr. Jack, I bet you could build a little rocket ship for Barry out here by the swing." She turned to Henry. "Mr. Jack can build anything. He's a wonder! Remember your project, Caroline? The map?"

Caroline had made a relief map of Africa for Mr. Ham's geography class in high school, fashioning the Nile, Lake Victoria, the Atlas Mountains and the Sahara out of flour, salt and water. Her mother began to tell Henry how Caroline and Petal mixed the paints. Mr. Jack had built the frame out of wood and an old window screen. The project had grown, finally taking over the kitchen table. Caroline and her mother had to move their meals to the formal dining room, at a table that sat eighteen. "And it won best in the county, didn't it, honey?" her mother said.

Caroline nodded. Her mother had framed the certificate. It was probably in the attic, in that trunk, for the children.

"Wow," Henry said politely. "I'd like to take a look at that map. You still have it?"

"Mice ate it to pieces. Threw it out," Petal said, not looking at them, taking the baby in for a diaper change.

The map was already outdated. The Congo was called Zaire, now. Caroline read that in the newspaper.

She should have made a map of the moon. The Sea of Tranquility—just the name soothed her, even if it was a waterless pool on rock and dust. When the astronauts walked on the moon, the world changed, or so it seemed to Caroline, with everyone gazing up at the sky.

§

She told Gigi about Henry the next day after class, casually mentioned a friend of Gerald's had dropped by to meet her and the children.

Gigi narrowed her eyes. "Ye Gods! A suitor?" She was fascinated, just as Caroline

knew she'd be. And Caroline was both wary and excited about telling her that Henry was staying a week.

Gigi made kissing noises.

"It's not like that," Caroline said.

"Really?" Gigi squinted into her compact mirror. "Something is keeping him here, though."

Henry had left early after the picnic dinner, when it was still light outside. "If I had another helmet, I'd give you a ride," he told Caroline before he cranked up the motorcycle.

The fact that he'd arrived sad and damaged did not discourage Caroline; it helped that she seemed to cheer Henry. Or not her, exactly, but their talks of Gerald. "I drove down from the VA hospital. When they finally let me out," he told her, joking or maybe not. He was piecing together the past, piecing together his own life, after it had blown to smithereens. Almost dying, and then nearly losing his mind, or maybe it's still lost, he joked.

§

The next night Henry brought an extra helmet and after she put the children to bed, she rode on the back of Henry's motorcycle, around the block, through the neighborhood. She pressed her face to his back, between his shoulder blades, the lean muscles there shifted, and a wave of longing moved through her. It was so good to touch a man, she missed it. She was an explorer returning to a foreign land, a dangerous, thrilling place.

Her mother seemed pleased when Henry visited, because Caroline was happy.

But Mr. Jack had eyed Henry's motorcycle suspiciously. "That your chopper out yonder?"

"It's not Japanese," Caroline told Mr. Jack, hoping to head off the discussion entirely. Mr. Jack had fought the Japanese in the war, and refused to buy or work on Japanese cars and appliances.

"It's a Harley," Henry said, "Ironhead."

Mr. Jack nodded, but his pale eyes were cold. It was the McGovern sticker on Henry's motorcycle that had insulted him.

Petal kept mum about Henry until she got Caroline alone in the laundry room.

"It ain't my place to say," a clue for Caroline to suit up in armor. "Any man come in here bawling' like a baby." She shook her head in disgust. "Crying man like a crowing hen. Nothing good come from that."

§

Caroline did not know what Henry did with his days while she was typing letters in Miss Sylvia's classes, but he appeared at her mother's house every afternoon that week in June. He wore jeans and heavy boots, even in the heat. He kept his moustache and beard trimmed, his fingernails were clean. There was a wisp of vanity under the scruffiness. He still stayed at the motel, and wouldn't consider staying with Caroline and her family, in a guest room. Not that her mother offered, but Caroline did. If he'd consented, she would have convinced her mother it would be rude to turn him away, a friend of Gerald's, who was so kind to them, to the children.

Now Caroline's typing classes moved quickly and steadily like a train gaining speed, clacking, clacking toward some destination.

§

On Thursday, she left class early for a doctor's appointment.

Dr. Gallivan was old, so old he'd delivered Caroline, and Caroline's youngest, the baby. But when she called the office of another younger doctor in the next town, the nurse said, well, honey, we're going to need your records.

Dr. Gallivan's nurse wore white hose and shoes, her crisp important hat like a wimple, as if she were a nun. Caroline put on the paper gown and lay down while Dr. Gallivan's hands moved across her, pressing, cool and capable. It was something about doctors that she had come to admire, how capable and divorced from the person their hands were, how each patient was a machine underneath their scientific hard gazes and knowing hands—all the parts fitting and clicking. For a few minutes, you might lose your personal history, and Caroline found that comforting.

Dr. Gallivan was heavy with a saggy, basset face, his glasses perched at the end of his nose, like a kindly shoemaker in a fairy tale. He peered in her ears, his hands fluttered over her neck. "Everything looks good. Weight, blood pressure. Excellent." Her story flooded his pitying face—Myrtle Ann's daughter, married to the soldier too fast, too young, three babies, he's dead.

"Anything else, Caroline?"

She'd come for the Pill.

"I was wondering about..." there was a lump in her throat and The Pill was stuck there, lodged and swollen. She would never get it out. She could never ask him.

Only she must have. She must have squeezed out the words because he was slanting his head, his mouth pursed.

"Well, Caroline, you're a smart girl. Three children, I can see why you'll want to wait." Relief flooded her, buoyed her. "But your next husband might have ideas of his own. Tell you what, when the time comes, in a few years when you've settled down with a good man and talked it out, you come back and we'll get you set up."

His hooded eyes weren't cold when she met them, they weren't warm, they were as neutral as beige.

§

Gigi skittered up the trees of people's private lives like a squirrel, even Miss Sylvia wasn't immune. "When's the last time you think she got laid?"

"I don't want to think about it," Caroline said, appalled but laughing, despite herself. "Speaking of getting laid," Gigi said, fixing Caroline in her crosshairs.

Caroline studied her egg salad sandwich, trying to think of something clever to say. "Make love, not war," Gigi said. "Tell that to your soldier boy."

"We're just...friends."

"Oh, yeah? Let me decide. Why don't you and me and your so-called friend meet for pizza and beer?"

§

It was after eight that Friday evening when Caroline arrived at the Pizza Shack. She had tucked the children in bed, and left her mother playing solitaire at the kitchen table. ("Oh," her mother had said when Caroline explained she was going to meet Henry and a friend from her typing class for pizza. "Oh, good," and Caroline felt her own heart swell

with love for her mother, for believing it was good—a night out with pitchers of beer and loud music and new lingerie, a gossamer lace bra and panties she had bought on impulse that afternoon.)

Gigi waved to her from a booth. The two of them shared a pitcher of beer, waiting for Henry. I'll Take You There, blasted from the jukebox. "Another?" Gigi asked.

She and Gigi were halfway through the next pitcher by the time Henry arrived.

"Oh, geez, honey," Gigi whispered to her. "Not bad." Her smile widened, watching him come through the door. Henry's eyes were scanning, scanning, scanning then landed on Caroline. He slid in the booth beside her, across from Gigi.

He sat close enough to touch Caroline, but he didn't. When she accidentally brushed her knee against his, he moved away. He was so proper. Such a gentleman, that's what she told Gigi when he darted into the restroom later. He's such a gentleman. They talked about nothing, really, the three of them, skimming over subjects like a stone across a pond. After pizza and more beer, Gigi announced, "Hey, ya'll up for a party? Cause this one doesn't get out much." Gigi winked at Caroline. "I think it's our duty, Henry, to take this mama out on the town."

Henry nearly recoiled from Gigi, Caroline sensed it even through her Michelob haze. You're such a funny man, she wanted to tell him now, I just can't figure you out. Maybe she could rub his cheek, the freshly-shaved pink skin above his beard. She allowed herself to imagine it, closed her eyes, it was like a photo album where all the pictures of Gerald spilled out, got mixed up with Henry. Had she already forgotten what Gerald looked like?

"No, thanks," Caroline said. "It's late." But she was smiling, the room was spinning. Henry offered his elbow as they walked out to the parking lot.

"You're not driving home like this," Henry said.

"Oooh, yessir," Gigi gave a mock salute. "Listen to the Sarge, honey."

Again, Henry bristled. Caroline felt it, like invisible quills, but Gigi was oblivious. "It's down by the university, an easy hour. C'mon ya'll, let's par-tee."

"Is there a diner nearby? I'll get you some coffee," Henry told Caroline.

The more you ignored Gigi, the louder she got. Hadn't he figured that out yet?

"Aw, old fogies," Gigi yelled. "Jeez."

Caroline climbed on the back of Henry's motorcycle. Gigi leaned on the hood of her car, waving, mock kissing, and Caroline waved back. Henry drove her to the Pancake Palace, the only place in town that had coffee at night. It was so easy to give in to the joy, the black humid night, the man's back she held onto.

§

At the diner, Caroline pulled out a clutch of letters from her purse.

"I wanted to show these to you. From Gerald. I mean, they're personal, and sort of boring that way, but . . ." She shrugged.

Henry rubbed his eyes, bloodshot in the cruel florescent lighting. He scanned a letter hungrily, then pushed it away.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I thought it might help. To know he was . . ."

"Doing what he had to," Henry said.

"Doing what he loved," she said. "You said he was a born warrior." The statement

Friddle

came out like an accusation, surprising them both.

"Yeah, I did, didn't I?"

"I didn't want him to go back for another tour. I didn't want him to go back at all." But did she tell him that, her own husband? It was always assumed he'd go back, he'd said it from the first. He was a career Navy man, and she never questioned it.

She told Henry how she'd met Gerald, when he'd come home with Billy King one weekend. That was after Billy and Gerald met in basic training. The Kings lived down the street, a block over. That first morning, Billy and Gerald ran through the streets, racing each other, and Caroline saw them from her porch. Or they saw her. Gerald stopped, met her eyes, and said Billy, hey man, introduce me. Billy had always been sweet on her, but Caroline had rejected him. She wasn't going to be tied down to any hometown boy.

"Sounds like love at first sight," Henry said.

She nodded.

Caroline wanted to tell Henry about the time Gerald put a hole in the drywall with his fist over something silly, she can't even remember what it was, something about the laundry. He never hit her, only things beside her—the couch, the refrigerator, the kitchen wall. They were all like that when they came back, another Navy wife told her the next day at the clothesline. She must have heard the commotion through the apartment's thin walls. They get all riled up over there fighting the Communists. Just love him hard back, the neighbor told her before disappearing in the rows of billowing sheets.

Gerald loved her hard. He loved her like a steam iron, a piston, a pressure cooker. He flattened her with his love, left her jellied and spent by his demands. She'd had no choice but to give in to a love like that.

Henry paid the bill. They walked outside and Caroline sat on the motorcycle behind Henry, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, as if they were...a couple. Henry drove slowly back to the Pizza Shack parking lot. They pulled up beside her car—Gerald's car. Caroline unlocked the car and sat behind the steering wheel and Henry leaned inside the window. "You sure you're all right?"

She started up the car, gassed it, vroom vroom; the way she never did, the way Gerald used to. Like a horse neighing under a knight, Gerald was always preparing for battle, even here, at home, in parking lots, in her mother's driveway.

"Hold on." Henry opened the passenger door and sat down, just as she knew he would.

"I'm fine," she said, but Henry was distracted. He hadn't sat inside Gerald's car until now.

"It feels...like him in here."

"Everything's the same," she said. "Even his radio stations." She pushed the station buttons, the red dial jumped.

Henry was silent. She turned off the ignition. She leaned over and kissed him. Her body seemed to have a notion of its own, and some part of her watched. There was the bristle of his mustache, different from Gerald, he smelled different, too, yet she felt she was back to a territory she knew, a land of men. He did not resist. And then he did. He pushed her away, and outrage bloomed slowly in his face, opening like a fist.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry." She stifled a sob. "I just...I got confused, okay? Sitting here in his car like this—"

"No shit. Sitting in his car. Gerald's car and you—" He shook his head, opened the door.

"Wait." She grabbed his arm. "Wait. I'm sorry, Henry."

He half turned to her, not meeting her eyes.

"It's just—you remind me of him," she said. "I think of him all the time, you know?"

He sighed and sat back down, closed his eyes. "I know."

§

The next day Henry did not visit. Or the day after, on Sunday. That evening, Caroline called the motor lodge, and there was no Henry Junket staying there. Not that he'd use his real name; for some reason he didn't seem the type. But he'd checked out. She just knew it.

She tried to be cavalier around Gigi on Monday morning, shrugging off Henry's sudden departure. "Something about his sister. He had to get on the road," she said.

Gigi whispered, "C'mon, Care. When were you going to tell me?"

"Tell you what?"

"About him. Jeez, and here I was thinking you were getting it on with Mr. Dreamy." Gigi's quick dark eyes moved with a restless energy. "I love the poker face, Care. Please. I heard Mr. Dreamy was cruising at the Castle on Friday, after we warmed him up."

"The Castle?" Caroline's voice was a leaden echo.

Gigi rolled her eyes. "The Castle. The bar over on Highway 25? Romeo prefers Romeos, is what I mean."

There was such wicked pleasure in Gigi's face before she hid it. Caroline thought of Henry's comment, you should stay away from that girl. She's not good for you.

"My cousin George is with the police and they check the place out a lot, faggot patrol, he calls it. I saw Henry's motorcycle there Saturday night, I happened to drive by and there it was. Just a hunch. But it explains a lot."

There was the rumble of the pencil sharpener behind them, the smell of pencil shavings. Miss Sylvia cleared her throat.

"But, Care. Come on. You didn't have to make me spell it out. That's just cruel," Gigi whispered in a strange, wheedling tone. "You're a loyal pal, you know that? To sit on a secret like that for him. You should've given me a hint, though."

Gigi was pretending Caroline knew, she was offering Caroline a way to salvage her pride.

Caroline's fingers trembled on the home keys. Miss Sylvia was going on and on about margins, but she couldn't understand a word of it. Her own scolding thoughts filled her head. Where was her judgment? She had such bad judgment, and no homing device. To want to leave clinging to the back of a man who did not love her, who could never love her. She wasn't that desperate to leave, she thought, please not that desperate.

§

Caroline started her list of The Reasons to Leave that night. She wrote in shorthand and hid the notepad in her desk, so Petal wouldn't find it. If she didn't memorize The Reasons they would fly from her mind and she would cry, and her mother would hold her head and sweetly shush her and tell her everything was all right, and then Caroline would not

Friddle

go, she would never go. She'll make money and send it home, that was on the list, just one of the reasons Caroline was leaving this town to live in a big city and work in an office. Money to fix the roof, to buy another car, to pay for piano lessons. The others reasons: she'll start out in a typing pool—like Gigi—and then get promoted. She'll wear nylons everyday, and fine shoes, a pencil behind her ear, she'll be the secretary of a successful boss, a man who ran things, the kind of important man who said *I can't do a thing without Caroline*.

§

She and Gigi planned it for weeks, or rather Gigi planned while Caroline murmured and nodded, carried along like a spinning leaf in a gurgling stream. It was easy to go along with the excitement, as if it were a game. But it wasn't a game. It was life. Her life.

When Caroline and Gigi graduated two weeks ago from Miss Sylvia's—if you could call earning secretarial school certificates graduating—Caroline didn't even tell her mother about the ceremony. Her mother would have felt obligated to attend. She would have dressed up and insisted on bringing the children, Barry and Catherine at least. And all that was a lot of trouble for punch and stale coconut macaroons, and a piece of paper saying Caroline could type.

To Caroline's surprise, Gigi's father attended. He was a big, swarthy man, with a wisp of a foreign accent. Gigi looked chastened sitting beside him. When she introduced him to Caroline, he stood and mopped his forehead.

"Ah, so you are the one." His voice boomed, the same voice that could yell to a short-order cook.

Gigi elbowed him. Shhhh.

"Good luck living with this one. She's a slob."

"Dad," Gigi hissed.

"What? I'm just warning the poor girl." He turned back to Caroline. "She don't cook...raised in our family, and this one don't cook. Don't clean either. I feel sorry for anyone who has to live with her. And husband? Forget it."

Gigi rolled her eyes and ignored him.

But Caroline was shocked and intrigued. That a father would be so brusque and yet attend the ceremony fascinated her.

Caroline barely remembered her own father. She'd visited him once when she was five, maybe six. He'd sat at a table in the hospital visiting room, agitated, not looking at them, sketching things. He wore a crumpled hospital robe, talking "his nonsense" as her mother warned her he would.

"My dad doesn't trust me. He wants to make sure I actually finished the class," Gigi whispered to Caroline later. Her father stood in the corner of the room by the covered typewriters, smoking. Gigi showed Caroline an envelope. "I did my part, so Dad did his."

It was money to get Gigi to Chicago, enough for a deposit on an apartment, enough to live on for a month, until Gigi's first paycheck. "I'm so excited. Aren't you?"

Caroline nodded.

Gigi let out a little squeal. "Just think, in another month we'll be living in a real city, with real jobs. Real lives."

§

Now August was coming to an end, and September, which had felt like a speck on the horizon under the blazing heat of July when Gigi first hatched the plan, was approaching, heavy and inevitable as a locomotive. Their lease on the tiny one-bedroom apartment in Chicago would begin after Labor Day, September fifth.

Caroline was moving to Chicago to work in a typing pool. She would keep her long yellow hair pinned up, wear her pale green linen suit over her ugly underwear.

She had studied a map of Chicago, pored over diagrams of subways and side streets like a doctor memorizing arteries and veins. Caroline was fond of reading maps. It was one of the few things she could think of that she was good at, that she was proud of. Other than her children, of course.

It's all arranged, she planned to tell her mother, with an air of confidence she did not feel, could not imagine ever feeling.

Every day for two weeks she had planned to tell her mother. Every day she hadn't. She would have to tell her mother that night. She had to.

Gigi would call tonight, perhaps she was calling Caroline right then. She could imagine Gigi stepping all over her mother's polite Hello, just blurting out one of her latest bulletins regarding our imminent departure, ditch the sweater set-- capes are in. So says Vogue. Yes, Gigi could very well slip and tell her mother she and Caroline were leaving. That everything was...planned. Gigi assumed Caroline had already told her mother. She assumed Caroline was actually going through with it.

Instead, Caroline was here in this empty lot, groping for her courage in the dark as if it were a lost piece of heirloom jewelry.

She drank another beer. Her last, she told herself. It was barely cold, but it helped her feel stronger. She thought of her List of Reasons. Because I will go crazy like Daddy, that was on the list. That's what will happen to her if she doesn't leave, she will go crazy, she will stop trying to follow the map, any map.

Caroline thought of the joint Gigi had slipped to her yesterday, reserved for an emergency. Like tonight, she thought. Caroline plundered through her purse, found it in her compact, smelling of Maybelline. Three hits. That's all. That would be enough. She was not brave, but she could blunt her fear.

She lit the joint, leaned back in the driver's seat, watched the sky. A bat appeared in the lot, looped like a glove tossed up and descending. Another bat, then another, swooping and chittering.

She met her own eyes in the rear view mirror. "You're high," she told herself sternly. She burped, covered her mouth, and begged her own pardon. Out loud. She laughed at herself. Impeccable manners—something else she couldn't leave behind.

How could she do this? How could she leave her children—even for a few months? A year? Who was she kidding? Even if it was to work as an office girl in a city skyscraper? Even if she did send thick envelopes of money back home.

She started the car. She backed out of the empty lot and drove down Main Street.

The streetlights and store windows passed by, flat and ornate as wallpaper, and Caroline's eyes watered. She thought of the map now, the map to Chicago, and inside her something quivered like a compass needle.

She exited onto the highway.

Friddle

Other than Gerald's car, Caroline was not taking much. Two linen suits, her purse, her new pair of expensive pumps, shampoo, a toothbrush. She wanted to feel the consequences.

The white dotted lines on the highway blurred into a luminous path. Gerald's car speeded up. The black lush night closed behind her. The car windows were down. Her long hair whipped in the wind, stinging her damp cheeks.

People would blame her leaving on childbirth fever, on her widowhood, on her father's lunacy, on her family's lost fortune. Not in her right mind, bless her heart. It's their way of explaining what they can't understand. Out of kindness, they will say these things, as if Caroline didn't know what she was doing taking off like that. But Caroline knew exactly what she is doing. She knew, and she vowed to never let herself forget.

She would call from a payphone eighty miles north, or—

Or, Caroline would turn around at the next exit. She'd drive home and find her mother playing solitaire in the kitchen, waiting for her. Caroline would put away the groceries—sugar, snap beans, Ivory Snow. She'd head upstairs to check on her boy, asleep in his cowboy pajamas. She'd cover up Catherine, who kicks off her covers in dreaming fits. She'd kiss the baby. Her mother would look tired but trusting, just as she always did. And then Caroline would tell her mother—

Caroline was driving Gerald's Pontiac to Chicago and then she would sell it. Gigi would be paying the deposit for the apartment. It was all arranged.

No.

She couldn't tell her mother, she couldn't leave.

Caroline drove Gerald's car on the highway, pasture fences and barbed wire whizzing by, telephone lines sagging and rising, sagging and rising. The moon bobbed along, a gleaming balloon, pulling, tugging at her. How wonderful it was. She remembered now how wonderful the world was. She merged onto the interstate, flooring Gerald's car. She was flying.

It was impossible to leave.

But it was easy to keep driving.

