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Heavy Water: A Novel, Ch. 1-8

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Heavy Water: A Novel, Ch. 1-8

Sophia Shelton

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Undergraduate English Honors Thesis

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Introduction

This semester, I wrote the first eight chapters of a novel, which I have tentatively titled *Heavy Water*. The story takes place in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, in 1962. My main character, Evie Prior, is a sixteen-year-old girl attending Oak Ridge High School, whose father Jack has just passed away in his early forties. It is rumored that his death was the result of exposure to radiation when he worked as a basic machinist on the Manhattan Project toward the end of World War II. Evie, with all the bluster and overconfidence of a teenager, sets out to prove this, hoping to get her father posthumously honored for his service to the country -- but at the heart of this is her grief, her love for him, her desire to feel in some way close to him after his death. Her endeavor leads her to join the high school newspaper and make a number of rash decisions. At the end of the eighth chapter, she has learned that Jack barely managed to get an honorable discharge from the army in 1943, and that whatever happened involved a man named Lowell, who is in a photo with Jack from 1942. Meanwhile, she is navigating the everyday difficulties of being sixteen: trying to figure out where she fits into her group of friends, resenting her mother, developing a crush.

Three major challenges, or perhaps types of challenges, presented themselves as I worked on the first draft of my novel this semester. One comprises the general mundanities, difficulties and surprises that arise from writing the first draft of a novel. Another involves my attempts to capture the historical moment without getting bogged down in esoteric details or focusing too much on accuracy at the expense of the story's heart. Finally, I wrestled with some particular formal concerns, most of which involve the problems of writing from the point-of-view of a character who is queer but does not yet know that about herself.

First I will address what I believe are the fundamental limitations of my thesis. Then I will explore and reflect on the aforementioned three types of challenges and, where applicable, explain how the books I read this semester helped me navigate them.

Wherein I Fly Too Close to the Sun

There are some problems with writing part of a novel for one's final thesis. One of the most difficult things I did this semester was come to terms with those problems. All of them are ultimately symptoms of my own hubris and perfectionism, both of which I had to curb in order to do this project at all.

First, the obvious: writing a novel takes a long time. I recognized from the beginning, in an early moment of clarity, that I would not be able to complete a full first draft in the span of a semester, nor would it be fair to foist a couple hundred pages on my readers even if I could accomplish it. So I decided to focus on part one (of a tentative three-part outline). Clearly this was much more feasible, but it came with several drawbacks.

The first draft of anything, especially a novel, is never pretty or brilliant. I don't say this to disparage my own writing, but to acknowledge a pretty much universal fact. First drafts, by and large, are ventures into a dark cave with no headlamp: even if you have a map, there will always be elements of the journey you had not considered. And this is okay, because all a first draft has to do is exist: its scenes, its sentences, are rough sketches that will sharpen in further drafts and revisions.

Relatedly, I revised and edited only what was necessary to make the eight chapters relatively cohesive. Doing a lot of editing while writing the first draft is the perfect way to get bogged down in every tiny thing that needs to be changed. There is no point in tweaking a

sentence until it sounds perfect when I may not even end up needing the scene of which it is a part. The result of this is that some scenes and chapters feel incomplete or lopsided (especially, I think, chapter seven, which I will definitely flesh out in later drafts).

Additionally, thanks to focusing only on writing part one of the novel, there is not a lot of emotional payoff in the eight chapters that constitute my thesis. Mostly I have established characters, put plots into motion and generally set things up. Thus, these first chapters make far from a complete or satisfying narrative. But if I have succeeded in writing them, hopefully a reader will reach the end of the eighth chapter and want to read more. This seems as a good an indicator as any that I have crafted a compelling story.

The Minutiae of Writing

The most immediate challenges of *Heavy Water* resulted not from any academic or formal concerns, but from the humbling act of writing itself, which sometimes felt beautiful and affirming, and sometimes felt like pulling teeth just to cobble a sentence together. There were days at a time when I couldn't stand to open the document on my computer, days when I would pore over it for hours and then delete one adverb; there were also days when I couldn't get the scene on the page fast enough. On most days, though, I just sat down at my computer and made myself write a certain number of words, then left it until the next day.

The literal act of putting one word after another on the page -- not planning future scenes, not thinking abstractly about the story -- produced plots and character quirks that never would have appeared from simply outlining or brainstorming. For example, in chapter two, Evie's friends persuade her to go on a double date with them and a boy in their math class. When I was writing this scene, I needed a quick placeholder name for the boy, so I invented Walter Scott,

intending Walter to be his first name and Scott to be his last. By the time I remembered that that was the name of an old Romantic novelist, I had already written it several times, so I just tacked on a new last name (Campbell) and had Walter Scott be two first names. This off-the-cuff throwaway decision ended up having an impact; in chapter four, Evie bemoans, in her teenagery way, that her friends have decided to set her up with some boy who has two first names. Similarly, I couldn't think of a good first name for another character, Bishop, so I just made it an in-text mystery: Bishop goes by her surname, and no one's really sure what her first name is, which fuels Evie's fascination with her even more.

Other significant narrative and character features of the novel could only have been realized in the writing process. Evie needs to go to specific places and do specific things that require a car, but she doesn't have one, so she spends a lot of time in the passenger seat of other people's. Many pivotal scenes take place, then, in cars. This ended up reflecting nicely Evie's reliance on other people, both positive and negative, and her feeling of being trapped in a particular life that she cannot control, as well as her desire for independence that, at the end of the first eight chapters, she has not yet reached. This was not borne of any lofty thematic goals or symbolic intent, but of the straightforward challenges of writing.

Were this story still a jumble of ideas, or even a detailed outline, none of these predicaments or their solutions would have come up. This semester, I was made aware -- more than I have been with any other story I've written -- just how huge the gap is between planning something and actually writing it, and the fact that in that gap lies a wealth of creative possibility.

The Burden of History

Before *Heavy Water*, I had never written any fiction that took place before I was born. I was daunted by what I imagined to be endless research: mapping things out, fact-checking every sentence. At first, in my research and planning stages for this project, I still felt that I needed to understand and depict accurately everything, or else it would be bad fiction. This is evident in the first couple of chapters -- even in the first sentence, which references a funeral home that I studiously googled because I thought I needed to know exactly where it was, what it was called and when it had been erected in order to write about it. The first chapter especially has a certain rigidity to it, which I think is due equally to the unfamiliarity of Evie's perspective and to my misguided focus on historical accuracy above all else.

As I grew more comfortable with the story, I stopped thinking so hard about every tiny detail. It was not, in fact, necessary to know whether there was a bowling alley in Oak Ridge in 1962, or what the dress code might have been for girls at the public high school. However, much of my preliminary historical research was necessary, and at their best, the books I read certainly made the world of my story richer. The texts most useful to me were typically not technical histories (though Richard Rhodes's *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* was thrilling and informative), but explorations of how the people in these situations felt and spoke and acted.

In particular, *Longing for the Bomb: Oak Ridge and Atomic Nostalgia* by Lindsey Freeman, was crucial as a work of social history and a nuanced portrait of the people of Oak Ridge. In it, Freeman outlines how we remember the Manhattan Project, its social repercussions and what constitutes the nostalgia Oak Ridgers in particular feel about their role in ending the war (which is how many of them phrase it). Freeman's research, along with some of my own

excursions to places like the American Museum of Science and Energy, revealed a great deal not just about what went on in Oak Ridge, but what it was like to live in the midst of it.

These Are Our Voices: The Story of Oak Ridge, 1942-1970 was also useful, though not in the way I expected it would be. Frankly, the recollections here gave me a marker of how I did not want to tell this story. Most of the firsthand accounts of growing up in Oak Ridge here are saccharine, dripping with the atomic nostalgia that Freeman ably dismantles, and I only hope that *Heavy Water* does not come across as so blithely unadventurous. However, I did appreciate one moment that captured perfectly, and perhaps unintentionally, the cognitive dissonance of the mythology around Oak Ridge. Ellison Taylor says, “No, there aren’t any haunted houses in Oak Ridge. They’re all too new” (482).

I would be remiss if I did not also pay homage to *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War Two* by Allan Berube. Though it was two years ago that I read it for the first time, Berube’s affecting history of gay Americans in the armed services during WWII is what first got me thinking about the potential for a story about one Jack Prior, who I imagined joining the army, falling in love with another soldier, and then having to return home to a nuclear family in every sense of the phrase.

Queering the Narrative

My protagonist, Evie, is a lesbian, but does not realize it. Her father Jack was gay, and initially she does not know this either. Ultimately, *Heavy Water* as a full novel will see her realizing and coming to grips with both her attraction to other girls and her late father’s sexuality, but in part one, she remains mostly unaware of either. This led to a particular predicament. How can I make a character and a narrative recognizably queer? There is a long

literary history of implied queerness, coded queerness, homoerotic desire masked in figurative language and ambiguous sentiments. I wanted to acknowledge this canon of implication and participate in it to an extent -- which I tried to do, in my little references to things like *ONE Magazine*, and Evie's revulsion at the idea of marrying -- but I also have a personal and political stake in moving past it: in 2018, we can and must do better than that as LGBTQ writers.

Once again, the setting of *Heavy Water*, as scaffolded by the historical texts I used, was unexpectedly useful here. The language used to describe the "Secret City," as we still call Oak Ridge even today, is rife with queer metaphorical potential. Workers on the Manhattan Project often lived double lives, in which revealing their work to anyone was -- sometimes quite literally -- a death sentence. Billboards strategically placed around Oak Ridge emphasized the importance of, more or less, keeping your mouth shut so as not to give anything away. How fitting, then, that Evie goes searching for what she believes is the untold story of her father's life -- his work on the atomic bomb -- and ends up uncovering an entirely different secret history, one that forces her to reconfigure not only Jack's life, but her own role in it.

I also relied on other works of literature to put together *Heavy Water*, both structurally and emotionally. Two works of nonfiction in particular helped me explore the nuances of Evie and Jack's relationship, especially in terms of what it means to learn the most about your father after he has died. *Home Before Dark* by Susan Cheever is the author's biography of her own father, the writer John Cheever, who was closeted. It is a painstaking reconstruction of him, and a testament to the power of someone's material life; Susan learns most from letters and journal entries, which inspired a pivotal scene in my story when Evie goes through her father's papers in a desperate attempt to find something tangible. *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel, though markedly different from my story in genre/form (hers is a graphic memoir), helped me envision how Evie

might navigate her relationship with her father, and the narrative shape that her discoveries might take. The similarities are significant: Bechdel's father, Bruce, was gay, while Bechdel is a lesbian, and they share a love of stories and literature, through which they mediate their complicated relationship. After Bruce's suicide at 44, Bechdel uncovers and unspools the secrets of his life through tape recordings, photographs, recasting her own memories in a new light and grappling with their respective identities. *Fun Home* is appropriately told in a nonlinear narrative; Bechdel has said in interviews that she structured it as a labyrinth in which she went over "the same material, but starting from the outside and spiraling in to the center" (Bechdel 4:57). I took a similar route with *Heavy Water*, interspersing Evie's 1962 narrative with scenes of her and her father, which come not in chronological order but in an order that reflects the emotional trajectory of the story, as they become meaningful for certain reasons in certain moments. This tactic is meant to evoke both the recursive nature of memory and the strange, complicated ways that people come out, which do not often follow the neat, tidy narratives of self-discovery that populate much of gay literature.

Finally, Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms* was my primary fictional touchstone. The protagonist, thirteen-year-old Joel, sets out in search of his father -- who turns out to be very much alive, but not anything like the heroic, larger-than-life figure he had spent his whole life picturing. Meanwhile, Joel learns of his strange cousin Randolph's homosexuality -- Randolph, incidentally, is probably the closest thing Joel has to an actual paternal figure -- and comes to terms by the end of the novel with his own. In an anthology of essays, Capote described the "central theme" of *Other Voices, Other Rooms* as the "search for the existence of this essentially imaginary person" (Capote 8). I would argue that it is equally the search for self-

discovery. Funny how inextricable the two ultimately seem: you try to solve the mystery of another person and end up facing yourself.

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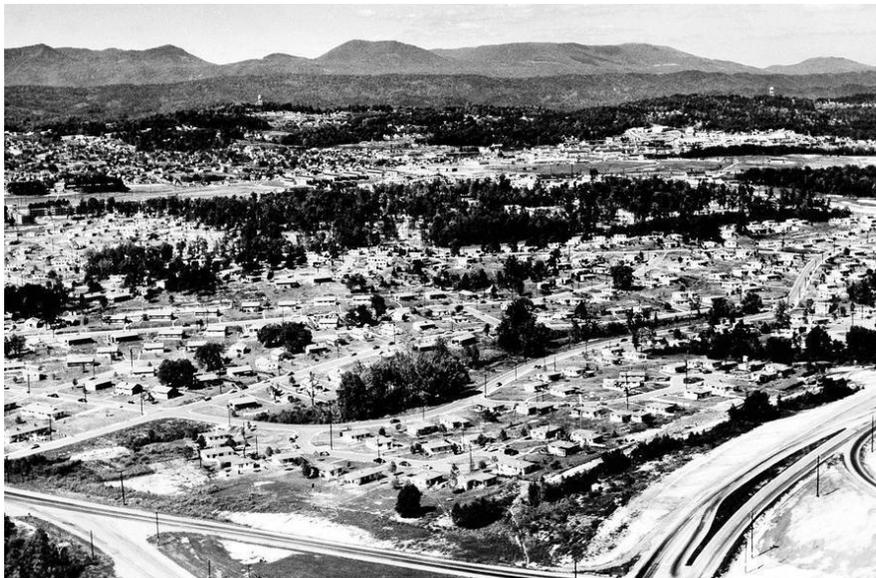
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Heavy Water



Oak Ridge as captured by Ed Westcott on April 21, 1959.

Sophia Shelton

*for two great-grandfathers: Paul Evans,
whose tenure as director of information at TVA
catalyzed my obsession with local history, and
Jack Shelton, who lived a secret life.*

1

Martin Oak Ridge Funeral Home had been around, like many of the oldest businesses and buildings here, for about twelve years. It didn't feel right that I was older than the place in which I'd say goodbye to my father. He would probably think it was funny, that he'd been born in a town that no longer existed, and we were holding his memorial service in a building that hadn't existed then. He'd wanted to be placed next to his own father in the makeshift graveyard the Loyston people had cobbled together once they moved. But we'd scoured the lot and couldn't find a Harold Prior anywhere, so Dad was to be buried in the church cemetery, alone.

The funeral parlor was sweet-hot, caked in perfume, as if the director planned to accrue more business by way of suffocating his living visitors. I sat in the second row between my mother and my little brother, Denny, who was nine and had been obsessed with President Kennedy ever since someone pointed out that his own name could be assembled from the letters of the president's. Mom was rigid in her black dress, unblinking and unsmiling. It was as if she'd sent a statue in her place.

"Well, folks," said Reverend Williams, tapping his thin fingers against the podium. "Normally we'd be doing this in the church, but it's under renovation, as I'm sure you're all aware."

Most everyone here was from the Methodist church we attended, and there was a low murmur of tasteful laughter in response to this. The church had been under renovation for three months for a minor leak in the roof. Apparently, contractors kept flaking.

"Today, we gather to celebrate the life of Jack Paul Prior." Rev. Williams cleared his throat and shuffled through some papers—looked like printed hymns and handwritten notes. "Jack served his country better than many of us."

He mentioned something then about “an illness,” but didn’t go into any further detail. How about this: Jack Paul Prior died slow and wasteful, as if his very bones were turning to dust from the inside. And the treatments were intrusive, alien, unreliable. At the hospital, when it first got diagnosed, the doctors tried some method just once. They stopped when Dad said it felt so awful they might as well go ahead and put him in the ground—it’d be easier and cheaper too. I imagined he was here, sitting next to me on the stiff bench, shifting against the flowered upholstery.

This sure is uncomfortable, Evie, he would say. Shit. We had a better gig in the trenches.

You weren’t in the trenches, Dad. Wrong war.

Details, he’d say, dismissive, knuckling my knee with two quick raps. When’s this over, anyway?

“Gone before his time,” droned Reverend Williams. “Taken home to be with his parents and with the Lord God...”

I looked around the stuffy parlor. There were fifteen, maybe twenty people scattered across the benches. Our neighbors, the Hansens, sat in a prim row on the other side of the room. They were the image of civilized propriety in smooth, starched black, their faces empty of emotion. Helen Hansen fanned herself with a folded memorial program where Reverend Williams couldn’t see.

Two men Dad had worked with sat clustered among churchgoers in the third row. I had seen them at the house a few times, speaking with my father late at night on the lamp-lit porch. I was never allowed to join, and when I sneaked down anyway Dad always said, We’re only talking work, Evie. Here, you can have a cigarette if you go around the side of the house to smoke it. Don’t tell your mother.

Just once had I heard them talking about anything that really interested me. A couple years ago, when I was maybe thirteen or fourteen, they described where they'd been and what they'd been doing on the day the first atomic bomb was dropped on Japan. I only caught snippets of Dad's words—something about no more secrets. I swear, he said, it was the first time I knew what the hell I was supposed to keep quiet about. Once it didn't need to be quiet anymore.

“We will best honor Jack's spirit by committing our own lives wholly to Christ and His teachings,” Rev. Williams was saying. Wholly/holy, I thought, and had to catch myself before I smiled. “And so we will honor him now with the music of the Lord. Mary?”

The organist, somebody's great-aunt who had been around since forever, sank onto the ruffled bench. She heaved a sigh and plunked out the first wavery notes of “Amazing Grace,” and we all stood up and sang.

At the second verse, Rev. Williams invited us to pay our respects at the front of the pews, where Dad's coffin sat open. He gestured to my mother and said, “Martha, if you'd like to—” and Mom stood, nodding, and we filed after her. She bent down to the casket for a long, suspended moment, whispering something fast that I couldn't hear. And then she stood up, dry-eyed, and took a step away.

I knelt beside the casket—it seemed like the right thing to do, or the expected thing, at least. The carpet scratched my knees through my skirt, and after I made a brief attempt to rest my elbows on the casket, my arms hung awkwardly by my side. I swallowed hard and looked inside.

He appeared no more dead than he had during the last week of his life, and I had long gotten used to the sight of him sick, gray and fading. Only now the pallor was grotesquely painted over: his gaunt face bright pink, his hands folded, what hair he had left arranged in a stiff

puff. Really it didn't look anything like him. It was a blessing that we hadn't, after all, brought an old army photo to prop up somewhere.

I kept waiting for something to happen to me, for the well of grief to spill over, for the tears I had not shed to materialize and blur my vision. But all I could feel looking at this unfamiliar body was cold disgust.

Outside, the sun shone bright and cool down onto the bleached grass. Dad's friends stood at the edge of the funeral home's porch, facing out toward the field, and one of them—I thought it was Sharpe—tapped his cigarette against the white railing. A thin line of smoke ribboned up.

They were speaking in low, gruff voices, and they didn't see me as I leaned against the wall, listening.

"They put you around all these—these radiating materials, parts for the damn bomb, and of course you're gonna get sick," said Sharpe. "Can't believe there's no compensation."

"Sure you can."

"Well. It isn't surprising but that don't make it right."

"It's the same way Bobby died too," Milton said. "And his family had to bury him up close to Kentucky at their own expense. No recognition from the government or nothing."

"Awful," said Sharpe. "It's sure awful."

"What is?" I asked.

Milton whipped around and stuffed his hands in his pockets, suddenly red-faced. "Oh, Evie. I'm so sorry about your father, sweetheart."

"Thank you," I said. I could feel my heartbeat in my ears. "What were you saying? Recognition from the government for what?"

"Oh, nothing," he said. "Just talking work."

That morning, before the funeral, our power went out. It was only for half a minute or so as I lay in bed, dreading the events of the day, but the humor of the situation was not lost on me. He would pull that kind of cheap trick from beyond. When my lamp flickered back on and I heard the whirr of the refrigerator one room over, I felt strangely betrayed.

2

“You have to get up, Evie, I’m not telling you again,” said my mother, yanking open the starch-stiff curtains on my bedroom window.

It was Monday, two days after the funeral. I shut my eyes to the sunlight and turned over in bed, buried my face under my pillow. “No,” I mumbled where I knew she couldn’t hear.

And then my blanket was yanked from me, and goosebumps rose on my arms and legs. Mom stood with her arms crossed at the foot of my bed. “What are you doing?”

“Hibernating until spring.”

“Evelyn.”

“Fine.” I sat up and dangled my legs over the edge of my bed so she’d know I was getting up. “I’m awake. I’m going to school.”

“Breakfast is in ten minutes,” she said.

Breakfast, it turned out, was a bowl of cereal for everybody. I sat down at the tableclothed linoleum and made faces at Denny. I hadn’t done my history homework that was due today, but I was thinking I had a legitimate excuse in my father’s funeral and I could use that to leverage another day.

“I’m going back to work today,” said Mom, sitting down at the table and patting at her hair: dark and shiny and smoother than mine would ever be. “So I’ll drop you both off at school. Evie, can you get a ride from a friend afterward?”

“I guess,” I said around a mouthful of grape-nuts. Mom had taken off work from Thursday and Friday last week to deal with the logistical aftermath of Dad’s death, which had occurred early Thursday morning. “As long as Laura doesn’t have band today.”

“Thank you, honey. That makes things easier for me.”

I stared up at the ceiling, my appetite gone. Right above my head was a dirtbrown water mark blooming outward. It seemed almost to expand, to creep farther across the ceiling as I watched. “Mom, when can I get a car?”

“When you get a job.”

“I won’t ever have a job,” Denny declared. “I’m going to explore the bottom of the ocean forever and ever. No one will find me.”

On the way to school, I sat with my bookbag in the passenger seat and watched houses zip by outside the window. Since we’d dropped Denny off already Mom lit a cigarette, the smoke ribboning upward like blood in water, and turned the dial of the radio, which flickered from station to station—news about something with the Soviets, pop music, an ad for a refrigerator. Suddenly the air felt cotton-thick against my skin: it was a Monday and I was alive and breathing and my father was dead, my dad who fought in the war and taught me how to read from Sunday comic strips, gone forever and nothing had changed, and it was so profoundly unfair that the people in the cars around us had woken up today to the same world they had faced each day before.

During lunch, I sat with my best friends Laura and Frank. I had history and art in the morning without them, which used to be a drag, but they’d started going out together recently and become a unit in which I wasn’t sure how I fit anymore.

At any rate, I still ate with them every day at our old table in the corner. When I walked in after art amidst the throng of other students, Laura and Frank had already staked out our spot and gone through the lunch line. I sat across from them—Laura was methodically organizing her tray of food, Frank reading a book—and braced myself for the inevitable interrogation about this weekend.

“How was the funeral?” Laura asked, like it was a party. I had to lean in to hear her over the clamor of the cafeteria.

“Ugh,” I said. I had brought to school a sandwich and a clementine for lunch, and I turned the clementine over and over in my hand. “They made him look like some old grandmother who wears too much makeup. It was revolting.”

Laura twisted her mouth into a grimace and threw back a glass of water as if it was alcoholic. “I’m sorry we couldn’t be there. Well, I’m sorry I couldn’t be there. I can’t speak for Frank.”

Frank looked up from his book. “Obviously I’m sorry too, Laura. Jerk.”

“But truly—how are you doing, Evie?”

“I have a plan,” I said. I sat back in my chair.

Laura’s eyes flashed up to mine, pale and inscrutable. “Okay…”

“I heard my dad’s friends talking about someone else who worked with them and died the same way as him,” I continued, picking at the scabbly clementine peel with my fingernails. “Something to do with his exposure during the war. I’m going to figure out what happened.”

Laura and Frank glanced at each other. Laura cleared her throat and as I watched she tapped her fork against the lunchtray. “Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

I blinked at her. Already in my mind I was deep in the lab’s archives, to which I imagined I’d been granted special access, and reviewing my father’s file. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

Laura kept her eyes down and traced circles around in her peas with her fork. “Well, you know how you get about things.”

“How?”

“Like with the mathematics club last year,” she said. Frank nodded. “You know.”

“Look,” Laura said, leaning back in her chair. “What do you want out of this anyway?”

My face was hot. “Recognition. From the—from the government. For the fact that my father died for his country and now he’s buried in some stupid cemetery and nobody will remember in fifty years.”

My voice had risen without my knowledge, and when I shut up, there was a hush fallen over the nearest couple of tables. I glanced around, daring someone to say something.

“We thought you might like to do something fun to take your mind off things,” said Laura. “Do you want to go bowling tomorrow night? You, me, Frank, maybe Walter Scott Campbell, maybe a double date?”

“I barely know Walter Scott.”

Laura raised her eyebrows and took a conspiratorial bite of chicken. “I think he wants to know *you*.”

“Oh,” I said. The thought of doing anything with Walter Scott, a perfectly nice scruffy-haired boy in our math class, sort of disgusted me, but at least it would ensure I wouldn’t be the odd one out. “Um, sure.”

“It’s a date then,” said Laura, satisfied, sitting back in her chair. “Don’t look so horrified, Evie, it’ll be fun.”

I nodded and tore away the last of the clementine peel. My fingernails were white-orange crescents.

I thought all day about how I could possibly obtain the information I would need for my investigation. A couple of years back, I remembered, the Oak Ridge High School newspaper had done some piece on the war that involved student reporters obtaining special access to the

calutron building. There was a big commotion about the event, as very few actual reporters had been let in, ever.

To get access to the kinds of places and information I would need to bring justice to my father's death, I figured the easiest plan of action was to join the school newspaper and write an article that got me into the facilities. When I got out of my last class, I hightailed it downstairs.

In a dusty trophy case outside the school gymnasium sat some newspaper cutouts from August 1960. I got close enough that my breath plumed white across the glass. A front page article with a title in bold—"How Oak Ridge Girls Won the War"—was attributed to "Bishop." There was a tiny picture of her at the end of the article.

I had heard of a Bishop; everyone had. She was a senior now—a year older than me—and the kind of bizarre girl who kept her first name a secret somehow, so everybody knew her by her last name. Apparently even the teachers when taking roll the first day of class skipped right on past it too, just asking, *Miss Bishop?* I wished that I could just up and invent myself like that. Start telling people I went by Prior.

The seniors' lockers were just down the next hallway, and everybody's were organized by last name, so I walked there as fast as I could, hoping I could catch her as she came out of class or dropped books in her locker.

Several of the seniors had gotten out of class already. A girl I thought might be Bishop stood at one of the first lockers, rifling through her bookbag for something.

"Um," I said. "Excuse me. Bishop?"

She turned around. "Hmm?"

“Hi,” I said, staring up at her. She had a good three inches on me, and her light brown hair was short, boyish, like little shards of broken bottles that softened to wisps against her neck.

“I want to join the school newspaper. I was told you’re the person.”

She smiled and leaned against the wall. She had a little constellation of freckles on her nose. “Yeah? It’s a little late in the semester, don’t you think?”

“It’s March,” I said, refusing to let my heart sink. I wasn’t sure why I was nervous. “The beginning of March. We still have three months.”

“Fair enough,” she said. Then she seemed to size me up: her calculating gaze raked over me, and I resisted the urge to bolt, to make a run for it out the nearest exit and regain my breath. “All right. We meet every Thursday right after school in Mrs. Breyer’s room. Try to bring a couple of ideas for things you want to write about -- goings-on at school or in the city in general. We’ll probably put you on sort of mundane things at first -- softball games, the like.” She grinned suddenly. There was a sliver of a gap between her two front teeth. “Prove your mettle, or whatever it is they say. What was your name?”

“Evie,” I said. “Um -- Evie Prior. I’m a junior.”

“Well, it’s nice to meet you, Prior.” She stuck out her hand and shook mine with the kind of firmness you could classify as aggression. It was the way I imagined businessmen shaking hands, or the president. “I’m Bishop. See you Thursday. I’ve got to go.”

And she turned and strode off down the history hallway, all long and lanky and boyish. Her skirt barely hit her knees.

As if she had planned it, the final bell rang to mark the end of the school day. I stood against the cinderblock wall and watched absently as people spilled out of the classrooms,

chattering, knocking into each other, jangling the locks on their lockers. Bishop. Bishop. What on earth was her first name?

In my meandering thoughts, I'd forgotten that I had asked Laura for a ride home. As I slid books into my locker I felt a couple taps on my shoulder and turned: there stood Laura, her mouth a curt line of annoyance. "Hi. You told me you'd be by the parking lot five minutes ago."

"Oh -- I'm sorry, Laur, I completely forgot." I shut my locker and slung my bookbag over my shoulder. "Really, I'm sorry. I was talking to the editor of the school newspaper."

Laura had started down the hall, and I jogged up to catch up with her. "The school newspaper? Why? Who's even the editor?"

"A senior. Her name is Bishop." We emerged into the bright sunlight, and I squinted. "I want to write for the newspaper, I decided."

She stopped halfway to her old blue pickup, turned and gave me a long look that somehow said that she knew me better than I knew myself. "Is this about figuring out your dad's death?"

I shrugged. "Yes and no."

"Lord help me," she muttered, or I thought she did. We reached her truck and I climbed into the passenger seat and put my bookbag on my lap. She turned the key in the ignition. "Evie, I love you, but you're just going to obsess over this and get frustrated when you can't just sleuth around and figure out the answer you want."

"But what if I do?"

She shook her head. "These things never work out how you want them to."

I stared out the window, where a group of boys were clustered by a truck, passing a pack of cigarettes around among them. "How would you know? You've never lost your father."

“Okay, but I know you.”

I wanted to say, *Do you?* but I didn’t want to start a fight. “Well, I guess we’ll see.”

“Make a deal with me,” she said after a few moments of rumbling silence. “If you haven’t made any kind of real lead on the cause of your dad’s death two weeks from now, you call it quits before you get too obsessed with something you can’t answer. If you have made a lead, I’ll take back my warnings and shut up about it.”

Two weeks. I could figure something out within two weeks. “Okay,” I said. “Deal.”

That night I lay in bed and tried to remember if Dad had said anything during the year he was sick that might give me a starting point. I would have to visit his friends Milton and Sharpe and wheedle information out of them, because clearly they knew something they wanted kept secret. Just talking work, Evie, one of them had said at the funeral. Had it only been two days ago?

When I shut my eyes tight and pressed my fingertips to my eyelids, the darkness turned to staryellow tunnels inside my head spiraling off into nowhere. I remembered: not two months ago, when we knew with lead-heavy certainty that Dad was dying and dying soon, he had started talking about writing down the story of his life, something dramatic like that. He had lain on the flowery couch, too skinny by half and his remaining hair clinging to his head. There were good days and bad days and the bad days were rising in frequency then.

“Evie, honey,” he’d said. We had the radio set to the news -- Dad didn’t trust televisions for some reason -- and I started to get up from the armchair, expecting him to ask me to turn the volume up.

Instead he said, “Do you remember when we went out to Norris Lake a few years ago?” and I sat back down. “On a Saturday, I think. We went fishing?”

“Yes,” I said. “And threw rocks off the top of the dam.”

He laughed short and hoarse. “That was the day. Do you remember if I had a map with me?”

Lord, I couldn’t remember. “I don’t think I noticed.”

“Shit,” he muttered under his breath. I always kind of liked that he cursed around me, but never my mother or Denny -- that there was some special-access bond between us. “I need that map for the next part.” And he sighed and went quiet, and on the radio crackled out a singsongy ad for women’s tennis shoes.

He did that a lot the last few months: got fixated on some tiny moment or detail, as if he needed to commit it all to memory before death, as if it would be safe there and somehow outlast him. One day it had been about his own father’s birthplace, which Dad thought he had written down somewhere, and Mom just about had a fit when she saw the flipped-through papers and torn notebooks littering the living room.

And now he was gone and I had no idea if he had figured any of it out, or why he wanted to. Maybe he had written it all down somewhere, and it was my turn to scour his desk for trivial scraps of information. Maybe, if he had been trying to gather the records of his life, he would have something about his wartime Manhattan Project work that I could use.

I rolled over in bed and looked at the little clock I kept in my window. 11:38pm. I was supposed to be asleep an hour ago, but, well, I was awake now and I didn’t feel tired. Imagining myself a spy, I slipped out of bed and pulled some socks on, crept to my bedroom door wide-eyed in the dark. I opened it slow enough that it barely creaked.

In the hallway I could hear something -- someone speaking, maybe, or humming? I tiptoed down, grateful for once for the ugly carpet I’d always hated, inexplicably nervous.

Mom was sitting at the kitchen table, her nightgowned back toward me, and she was crying. I froze and listened to the sound: low and kind of pitiful, unlike anything I'd ever heard from my mother, not even during any of the time that Dad had been sick. I was witnessing something I shouldn't. Still I couldn't bring myself to move: I imagined if I was very still and quiet she wouldn't be able to see me. I stayed like that for a few long minutes before I crept back to bed, adrift.

3

Dad must have told me a thousand times the story of how he and his father Harold had been forced from their land in 1933, when Dad was only twelve. Dad's older sisters Margaret and Beatrice had already left home a couple years before that. He liked to say that Beatrice went off to get married and Margaret went off to somewhere she'd never have to get married.

He was as good with stories as he was with machines: each of them made up of moving parts, he said, that only had to be assembled again and again until you got them right.

"The Priors lived in Loyston for damn near two hundred years," he told me once, when I was maybe nine. "On the same piece of land. Same neighbors. I was baptized in the same place as my father and his father before him and so on. Well, I always told Pop that I was going to go work in a city or someplace I could do things with machines, beyond just fixing people's clocks and farming equipment around town. It used to rile him up really bad, the idea that I might leave like my sisters when somebody had to stay and work the farm.

"So I think he couldn't help but blame me a little when the federal government showed up and told us we had about a month to pack up and go someplace else so they could flood the land. I remember—" he laughed— "I remember the day they showed up with clipboards and explained it all to us. They got annoyed with me because I couldn't wrap my head around the idea that they could just flood the valley. I couldn't work it out. I was picturing a bunch of men standing around on the hills and dumping water onto Loyston one bucket at a time.

"We used to play this game as kids — mumbly-peg. You took a pocketknife and tried to flip it off of different parts of your body — like your elbow and chin — and get it to stick up in the ground. You could only play when it was the right kind of muddy outside: not dry crumbly dirt, the knife would just fall over, and not squelchy mud puddles—just soft and damp, like a few

days after a good rain. Anyway, I kept thinking maybe they'd make this lake and build this dam and we'd have places to play mumbly-peg forever."

"Where did you go?" I asked, even though I knew the answer, even though I'd heard this so many times before. I always asked it.

And he always answered. "My uncle Charlie had a house out east a little ways, so we moved in with him and his family. And a couple years later I got a job with the CCC and mostly stayed near the dam while I worked. Then my father died, and then the war..." He shrugged. "The last I saw of home was when we'd packed up to leave and were on our way out of Loyston, and I turned and looked back at the house. I thought, at any moment now the water will come crashing in, like a Biblical flood. Of course it didn't. But I remember thinking that more than I remember what the house looked like in those last moments." He laughed.

It was impossible, sometimes, to think of Dad without also layering on the dozens and dozens of stories he told about growing up in what seemed to me a mythic place. I knew the name of every church in a town wiped out before I was born, but I couldn't tell you Dad's favorite color or who he considered his best friend.

The last time he took me to the lake, he had just learned that he was going to die within the year. Have the lights turned off, he said. So to speak.

"It's ironic, Evelyn," he told me, driving one-handed, the other dangling a cigarette out the rolled-down window. "You know, with Loyston getting flooded and then electricity and all that."

"I understood it, Dad," I said. I was slumped in the passenger seat. Above the leafless trees, flat gray clouds scraped the sky into pieces. Mom and Dad had fought over us going out to the lake today: Mom furiously whispering that it was selfish of him to spend any time away from

the whole family when the time was now limited, Dad answering that it was in fact selfish of her to try and rule how he would spend said time, and anyway, he was taking me with him. In the end, Mom stood tight-lipped in the doorway and watched us leave. For my part, I always liked going to the lake: I got to wear pants and tennis shoes and romp around like I imagined boys did.

Now, though, today, my throat felt full with the news of his encroaching death -- I refused to couch it in poetic terms -- and I couldn't believe he was joking so much about something so horrible. Well, maybe I could. But I didn't want him to.

When I trusted myself to speak, I said, "Where are we hiking today?"

"Hmm." He tapped his fingers against the steering wheel. "Maybe over toward the grist mill."

"That's where we've gone every time for the past month," I said.

"Well, it's an interesting place, don't you think?"

"It's too cold to catch crawdads, and that's the best part."

He sighed and slowed to take the always inexplicable breakneck turn onto the dirt road that ran alongside the grist mill and Lower Clear Creek. "I'll tell you what. We hike for a little bit, and then I'll let you drive the car. It's about time you learned, anyhow."

"Next to a body of water?" I couldn't help my voice rising. "Dad. Don't be absurd."

"Oh, it's only a creek, Evie, and the water's low." He was, for some reason, grinning at me. In the weak afternoon light, his gaunt cheekbones were even more pronounced than they had been the past few months, shadowy concavities around which it was impossible to focus on the smile. *Grotesque*: a vocabulary word from a couple of years ago popped into my head unbidden. Disturbing, malformed, monstrous. I had never thought my father to be any of those things before.

I realized he was waiting for me to respond. “Well -- all right. But Mom will kill us if we die today.”

He laughed and put the car into park at the side of a particularly wide stretch of rutted road. “That she will, Evie. That she certainly will.” He took the keys out of the ignition and tossed them to me. “Now that would be ironic. Hold onto these for me, okay?”

“Okay,” I said, dubious. I slid them into the pocket of my jeans and followed him into the calf-deep water of the creek. It was, I would realize later, the last time.

4

“You’ll have a good time,” Laura told me. We were sitting on the front porch steps of my house Tuesday night, waiting for Frank to stop by with Walter Scott and pick us up to go bowling. “Promise me you’ll have a good time.”

“I won’t give you a promise I’m not sure I can keep,” I said, hugging my knees, aware I was being difficult but not willing to do much about it. “I barely agreed to this. Walter Scott? From math class, really? The boy with two first names?”

Laura sighed and turned her eyes up to the sky as if asking God for patience. It was a streaky blue day, the kind that tricked you into thinking it was spring already, and her redbrown curls shone in the chilly light. “We didn’t want you to be the odd one out, or for Frank to be the odd one out between you and me.”

“We have other friends,” I said. “You didn’t have to put me on a date—”

“Walter Scott is one of our friends, Evie, come on — oh, they’re here.” Laura stood and so did I, slow, my knees popping.

Frank waved and grinned, pushing his glasses up, and Walter Scott — who had apparently been relegated to the back for optimum couple seating arrangements — gave a goofy half smile. I liked him all right but he was impossibly earnest.

I opened the door and sat behind the driver seat after giving Walter Scott a quick once-over. His hair was blond and slicked back and his face dimpled, making him look a little too much like a golden retriever.

“We should bowl in teams,” said Laura, twisting around in the passenger seat as Frank pulled out of the driveway. “That would make it fun, don’t you think?”

“Sure,” said Walter Scott. He nodded vigorously, as if he had water in his ears and was trying to shake it out. “Evie and me versus you all?”

“You’ll lose,” said Frank. His eyes met mine briefly in the rearview mirror, and my mouth twitched into a smile.

“I never lose,” I mumbled.

“Evie doesn’t *like* to lose,” said Laura. “She just pretends she never does. It’s been known to happen.”

“Well, if she’s half as good as her word, and if I’m a decent bowler, our odds are pretty good,” said Walter Scott. He grinned sideways at me and flung one arm across the back of the seat, like I couldn’t tell what he was doing as he inched it to my shoulder.

“I never lose,” I repeated. Outside, the sun was creeping down into the ragged horizon of trees. I never lose. I never lose.

Once we got to the bowling alley, I had slid back down into the particular kind of despair that arises when you are on a date with a boy you don’t care much about. The bowling shoes were stiff and smelled of old feet and detergent: I imagined some poor employee halfheartedly scrubbing them at the end of a shift. Laura and Frank had abandoned me with Walter Scott at lane 14 so they could go buy snacks. They were still in line.

So I stood with him and tried not to emanate a hateful aura. He made a show of picking up increasingly heavy bowling balls, all scuffed and purple-marbled, and pretending they were getting lighter and lighter.

I must not have been successful, because after a minute of his little display, he came back over to me and stood with his shoulders drooped, still hanging onto a bowling ball. “Is everything okay?” he asked. “You don’t seem like you’re having fun.”

“My father died last week,” I told Walter Scott, savoring it, watching his expression fall apart. “So forgive me if I’m not in the best mood.”

“Oh,” he said, his brown eyes almost comically wide. The slick bowling ball dangled from three of his fingers. “Oh, Evie, I’m sorry. I knew he was sick but I didn’t — I didn’t know he passed.”

I nodded. And then, inexplicably, I started crying and found I couldn’t stop. I covered my face with my hand — damn you Walter Scott with your double name for bringing this on — and started to turn away, but he made a soft pitying sound and pulled me into a hug. “Oh, Evie. Evie.”

I wished he would stop saying my name like an incantation, but I just let him smush my face into his shoulder. I stared up at the bright-hot ceiling lights until I stopped crying. Laura and Frank were hurrying toward us from the concession stand, their faces pale and moonlike and stricken under the artificial glow.

Walter Scott finally relinquished me but held my hands loosely between us. At some point he had set down the bowling ball. “Let’s pray,” he said. Then: “I’m a children’s leader at the Baptist church,” like he felt he needed to explain himself.

Jesus, I thought. Please take me now, don’t subject me to this. I’m a Methodist anyway.

He shut his eyes and squeezed my hands. “Lord God, we ask you today to say a special hello to Evie’s father -- what was his name Evie?”

“Jack,” I said.

“Her father Jack,” he said. I opened my eyes into a squint: he was nodding, his eyebrows furrowed. “We ask that you tell Jack that Evie’s thinking about him and she misses him, but she knows she’ll see him again someday when they reunite in Your kingdom. Just keep a real good

eye on Evie and speak to her, Lord, in Your wisdom and goodness. She needs it, as we all do. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.”

It took everything in me not to start laughing at the wide-eyed look on Laura's face over Walter Scott's shoulder. I swallowed the instinct and instead said, “Thank you, Walter Scott. That was very nice.”

He beamed and finally released my hands from his Baptist children-leader grip. It really was so easy to make him happy.

“Well,” said Laura. She set a bag of popcorn and a few bottles of Coke on the table. “Who's ready to lose?”

Twenty minutes later, Walter Scott and I were getting thoroughly beaten, and I had worked out in my head that there was no chance of redemption even if we both struck out for the rest of the game, so I was over it. When it wasn't my turn, I sat and ate popcorn and watched the people at the other lanes while Walter Scott attempted to redeem his name.

Most everyone else here was also a student at the high school, along with a few couples just a couple of years older than us and a handful of really elderly people who played with the lightest bowling balls. If Dad were here he would say, They might as well play a game of marbles, huh?

A loud pealing laugh rang out from several lanes over. There was something familiar about it -- I leaned back in my chair and inspected.

There at lane 10, with another senior girl, Bishop from the school newspaper expertly flicked the bowling ball right down the center of the lane with no guard rails. As I watched, the ball crashed into the pins and sent them toppling down.

Bishop turned, grinned at the person she was with, held her hands up as if to say, Well, I told you. She was wearing a sleek button-down and a loose pair of trousers with her hat. Somehow she made the bowling shoes look fashionable.

“It’s your turn, Evie,” said Walter Scott. I blinked and turned back to look at him. “Listen, I think we’re toast.”

I had to take a moment to process what he’d said. “Oh,” I said finally. “Yeah. I figured that out a couple of rounds back. There’s no way we can win.”

He flung his arms out and lifted his face to the ceiling in mock anguish. “Why didn’t you say something? You could’ve put us out of our misery sooner.”

“Pride,” I said. It was more or less true. Nonetheless I stood and picked up a bowling ball from the little rotating conveyor belt, approached the lane and tried to fling it as gracefully down the middle as Bishop just had.

I must have done something wrong, because my bowling ball thunked against the slippery floor and immediately veered off into the little valley next to the line, where it rolled down and disappeared without knocking any pins over. Frank cheered as I turned, and I shrugged, wanting to seem as casual as Bishop had.

Laura knocked down seven pins in the last move of the game, and she and Frank unequivocally beat us. I wasn’t paying much attention to that though: I had sat back down next to Walter Scott and was watching Bishop’s game a few lanes down. Or, more accurately, I was watching Bishop.

Her short hair fascinated me more than anything. I had never seen a girl in real life with hair so short and spiky. I wondered: did her parents approve of it? Had they known about it when she cut it? Did she get it done, or just snip it off herself? I didn’t know her too well -- or at all,

really -- but somehow I suspected that it was the latter. I could picture her with a pair of scissors just chopping it off one day after deciding she was tired of it.

As I watched, she went up to the girl she was playing against and put her arm around the girl's waist, grinning. She glanced around and then pressed her lips briefly, playfully, against the other girl's.

It wasn't too odd -- I'd kissed Laura when we were in junior high, when we were having a contest to determine who could go a longer time without laughing. Still seeing it filled me with some strange, reactive anxiety that I couldn't explain.

I did the only logical thing then: I turned to Walter Scott and stood up on my tiptoes -- which was difficult in my bowling shoes -- and gave him a quick kiss just off the corner of his mouth, sort of half on his cheek. I couldn't bring myself to give him a full kiss, but I had to do something. After all he'd prayed for me and tried to salvage this game of bowling for me.

When I leaned back down, I looked sort of shyly at his face, which was flushed red. I thought, Good grief, he really is like a puppy dog.

"Jeez," he said, one side of his mouth pulling up into a half-smile. "Thanks, Evie."

"You're welcome," I said. Laura was smiling at me from the next table over, and under the unforgiving fluorescence of the lights I felt suddenly sick with dread. I had done this, and now I would probably have to go on another date with Walter Scott because I had encouraged him, and really he was a very nice guy -- nicer than most that I knew -- but imagining a life with him or even just an immediate future of flirtation and courtship made my stomach turn over with panic.

I tried discreetly to look around for Bishop, but she and the girl she was with had apparently left. She was nowhere in sight.

Walter Scott put his hand flat against my back. “Do we want to play another game, or call it a night?”

“Call it a night,” I said, maybe too quickly. “We have school tomorrow.”

Laura frowned at me. “Since when are you so concerned about school?”

I opened my mouth, closed it, tried again. “Since we have a test in math tomorrow afternoon, and I’d rather not fail this class and get a year behind.”

Walter Scott groaned. “Oh, Lord. You’re right. I completely forgot about that.”

“Yeah, we should head home,” said Frank. He rubbed his eyelids with his knuckles.

“Study for the test during lunch?”

“Sounds good to me,” I said.

We traded in our bowling shoes for our regular ones and piled into Frank’s car. In the front, Laura and Frank held hands, and Walter Scott laid his own palm-up on the seat between us -- hardly a subtle move. But I just stared out the window, acting like I could see something in the rapid blurs of darkness, and pretended not to notice.

5

Thursday all throughout my classes I was a nervous wreck, thinking about the newspaper meeting after school. I had successfully navigated Walter Scott for the past two days and was pretty sure I'd been nice and receptive while dodging any actual romantic advances. I felt bad about kissing him -- really. I shouldn't have done it. He was like a dog that you feed once and it keeps coming back, expecting a pattern of encouragement after one anomalous event. *Anomalous* was a vocabulary word in literature and composition. An adjective describing that which deviates from what is standard or expected. Irregular, aberrant, peculiar.

It occurred to me when the bell rang to signal the end of classes that I did not in fact know where a Mrs. Breyer's room was, the place at which the newspaper meeting occurred. I hurried out of math class, packing up my things and slinging my bookbag over my shoulder much faster than I usually did, and had started down the snappy tile of the hallway amidst the throng of students before I realized that I didn't know where I was going. I slowed to a stop.

Someone bumped into me, knocking my right shoulder forward, and I stepped out of the way against a row of lockers so I wasn't a solitary stone in the stream of people. Breyer. Breyer. I didn't know who she was; I'd never heard the teacher's name before. Okay, Evie, think. It's a school newspaper. Surely the leader -- editor? boss? -- was an English teacher. I knew where the English wing was: upstairs and to the left.

Just as I took a step toward the stairs, pretty proud of myself for logicking my way through the problem, I saw at the end of the hallway someone start to head down the stairs, tall, thin, with cropped hair that somehow looked both soft and spiky. Bishop.

Well, maybe I was wrong about the English wing and Mrs. Breyer. Bishop clearly knew where she was going, so I hurried after her and weaved sideways between other people on the

stairs until she was in my line of sight again. She walked so fast, with long loping strides, that it was difficult to match her. Only her hair and her height over the other girls made her stand out.

I imagined, as I had taken to doing recently, that my father was with me, helping me investigate. It didn't make much sense -- I was investigating his death, after all -- but I pictured him walking alongside me, asking if I had any ideas yet. Evie? Have you tried just going to the facilities and telling them you work there?

I'm sure they ask for IDs, Dad.

Well, there's only one way to find out.

I grinned in spite of myself. Yeah, I'll let you know how that works.

It occurred to me that I was now standing in the middle of the hallway, smiling, probably gazing into the distance. The last thing I needed was a referral to the guidance counselor. And Bishop had disappeared. She kept doing that.

I leaned against the wall and pretended to flip through a notebook as if looking for something. Math notes, biology notes, history notes — and then I glanced up, because Bishop had emerged from a classroom and was walking my direction. Then back down, quick, hoping she hadn't seen me and I could follow her back to wherever she was going.

“Prior,” she said. “What are you doing?”

I looked up. She stood in front of me with her arms folded and her eyebrows raised. “Hi,” I said.

“You know you're not exactly subtle.” She turned and started toward the stairs again, and I slung my bookbag onto my shoulder and hurried after her. “You could have just asked me where the classroom is.”

For one gut-lurching second I had thought she meant that she'd noticed me watching her not only today but also at the bowling alley on Tuesday, and that I was creepy or weird or immature rather than just kind of awkward. But I didn't say any of this. I said, "Well, you could have slowed down for half a second and maybe I would have."

She laughed at that, her face turned up toward the ceiling, the line of her throat exposed under the yellow lights. "Okay, I'll give you that one."

We were back in the English wing of the academic building. Tattered flyers for various extracurricular organizations hung on a cork bulletin board: drama club and debate team and intramural softball. In one corner someone had scrawled *W + J 4EVER*, and someone else had tried unsuccessfully to scratch it out.

"This is Mrs. Breyer's room," said Bishop, pointing to a little placard on the door. "See how it says *Jane Breyer* on it—"

"All right," I mumbled, feeling my face flush.

"After you," said Bishop. She held open the door.

Two boys and one girl sat at desks in a rough circle at the front of the room, each with notepads and pencils in front of them.

"Lee," the one girl was saying. Her palms pressed together like she was in prayer. "You moron. You can't just say that you support the Soviets. Somebody will report you to the FBI, I'm serious, it happened to my cousin's neighbor."

"Maybe I like the way they run their ship over there," said a dark-haired boy, presumably Lee. "So what. And anyway I didn't say I support the Soviets, I said I support President Kennedy's attempts to come to an agreement with them so we don't all die in a nuclear war. Hi, Bishop. Hi, stranger."

“Hi, Khrushchev sympathizer,” said Bishop. Lee spluttered indignantly. “Everyone, this is Evie Prior, the newest addition to our team. Prior, this is Lee Stooksbury, Anne Mitchell and Matthew Wallace. Idiot, copy editor and columnist, respectively.”

I waved sort of meekly and wished I was more assertive, more snappy. Lee pointed at me. “Prior is a Loyston name. Your family from there?”

“So is Stooksbury,” I said. “And yes.”

“Mine too.” He leaned back in apparent satisfaction while Bishop pulled two more desks to the circle and gestured at me to sit. “Where’d yours relocate? Well, here, obviously. But that couldn’t have been until at least late wartime. Mine headed east a bit, past Norris.”

“Lee Stooksbury,” said Bishop, her head resting in her palm. “The newspaper meeting is not, and will never be, your personal therapy session. Let’s get to work.”

Work, as it turned out, meant brainstorming what would go into next week’s newspaper and who would do each task beyond their allotted roles.

“I’ll do the boys’ soccer game again, I might as well,” said Matthew, several minutes in. Bishop was scribbling everything down, drawing lines and making notes I couldn’t decipher. “What does that leave?”

“Some kind of opinion piece, or something like that,” Bishop said. Everyone groaned; Anne threw her pencil onto her desk. Bishop lifted her hands, palms out. “No, no, listen. We need to have something. It’s like listening to the news on the radio -- people tune in to hear what the weather’s going to be, right, and whether their baseball team won last night -- but what they really want is the promise of an interesting story.”

“This is a high school newspaper, not the *New York Times*, Bishop,” said Anne. “Do a student profile piece.”

Bishop nodded, slow, and pointed at her. “Okay. You want to?”

Anne shrugged, her mouth twisted in a kind of chagrined smile. “I suppose I walked right into that one.”

I was beginning to feel like I was just sitting in on something rather than participating. The clock on the wall behind me ticked, I imagined, into oblivion. Or a countdown. “I can help,” I said. My voice sounded embarrassingly tiny and uncertain even to me.

“No, I’ve got something special for you,” said Bishop. “Well, it’s more of an errand. Don’t look so scared, it’s not an initiation rite. Sheesh. By the way, did you bring any article ideas?”

My stomach dropped: I had completely forgotten she’d asked me to do that. I racked my brain for something to say, anything, stared down upon by the four of them and the hot unfriendly gleam of the ceiling lights. “Um,” I said. My collar felt tight-hot against my throat. All I could think of was my father, standing over my shoulder urging me to help him out. “Maybe -- maybe something about illness rates in people who worked on the Manhattan Project?” Attagirl, Evelyn. He only brought out the whole name when he was especially angry or proud.

Lee whistled and Matthew sat back in his chair. Bishop tapped her pencil against the desk. “A little ambitious, don’t you think?” But before I could answer: “It’s a nice idea, though. Why don’t you interview people at school whose parents worked on the bombs, see what their general feelings are about it? We can shape that into a nice little article about how Oak Ridge students think about their heritage.”

I had the feeling that she was doing me a kindness right now, so I nodded, grateful for it. “Sure. Yes. I’ll start talking to people.”

“Great,” said Bishop. She smacked her palm against the wooden desk. “I say that adjourns this meeting. Anyone up for a cafeteria run?”

“I thought you’d never ask,” Lee said, spreading his arms out behind him and closing his eyes as if in rapture. “I don’t know that I’d get through these meetings if not for the sweet promise of half melted ice cream. Take me away.”

“Are Lee and Bishop dating?” I asked Mary. The two of them had gone up ahead, laughing about something.

Mary started laughing too. “Oh boy.”

“What?” Why did everyone think something was hilarious except me? We stepped out into the grass, green-brown and caked into the muddy ground of the courtyard. “What’s so funny?”

“Evie wants to know if you two are *going steady*,” said Mary to Bishop and Lee as we caught up to them.

“Only in her dreams,” said Lee, at the same time that Bishop said, “Oh, he wishes.”

Lee started walking again, still chuckling, and Bishop fell back in step with me.

For a long moment, silence, only the crunch-crackle beneath our feet. Then: “Lee’s not really my type.”

I’d heard people say that plenty of times, but still never really understood. How do you come to know what your type even is, in order to classify boys properly? I ought to have known my type by now. I guessed it certainly wasn’t poor old Walter Scott. Tall, maybe; I could see myself going out with someone who was tall.

Bishop seemed to be expecting a reply, so I cleared my throat and tried to remember where we were. “Oh. Um, how come?”

“He’s a damn commie,” said Bishop, raising her voice as we neared the cafeteria. Lee glared back at us and made a crude gesture. “I’m only joking. Well, he is a commie, but that’s not it. He’s like a brother to me. Since diapers and all that. It’d be gross.”

“Oh,” I said again.

Lee held the door open for us and then jogged ahead.

“What are we doing in the cafeteria anyway?” I asked. “They’re done serving food, aren’t they?”

Lee turned around and walked backward, wagging his eyebrows at me. “One would assume, yes.”

As we approached the line from which ladies doled out food during lunch every day, one woman wiping down the counter with a damp cloth glanced up and smiled at Lee. “Is it already Thursday again? Feel like I just saw you in here yesterday.”

“Yes ma’am,” said Lee. “What have you got?”

“There’s a little bit of chocolate ice cream in the freezer.” She nodded over toward a big silver box. “Wash your bowls and spoons.”

“Of course.”

I followed Lee, Mary and Bishop in dishing some ice cream into a little bowl. We sat down and Lee pointed his spoon at me.

“See,” he said, swallowing, “the perks of an after-school club. If the cafeteria has any leftover ice cream that they would otherwise have to throw away, they give it to me.”

“Your aunt is one of the lunch ladies,” said Bishop.

He waved his hand. “Details.”

We sat for about twenty minutes, and I mostly listened to them argue. Was Lee my type? I wondered, watching him in particular. He was tall, and funny. It would make sense. I tucked the idea into the back of my mind for further deliberation.

Mom picked me up afterward. Actually she kept me waiting for about half an hour because she was just going to stop by on her way home from work, and we got done at 4:30. I sat on the front steps of the school and hoped nobody I knew would pass by. Evie Prior: carless, jobless, fatherless, always waiting for somebody. The newspaper group had all asked if I had a ride, and I'd lied and said yes. I didn't know why.

It was only as I saw our car pull into the parking lot that I realized Bishop had never told me what special errand she had planned. Probably some newspaper grunt work that nobody else wanted to do -- distributing them or something like that. I would ask her tomorrow.

"Please don't slam the door, sweetheart," said Mom when I got into the car. "How was your meeting? What club was it again?"

"It's not a club," I said. "It's the school newspaper."

"Oh. Well, how did that go?"

I stared out the window, watching the trees float by. "Fine."

"Fine?" I could feel Mom looking at me. "All right. What will you be doing?"

"Writing articles and proofreading," I said. Suddenly a headache throbbed at the back of my eyes, and I pressed my knuckles to them and imagined I was outside the car, floating frictionless through the air and trees, like easy swimming.

"How was bowling on Tuesday? I feel like I've barely seen you this week. You've been holed up in your room so much..."

Oh, Lord. I had almost forgotten about that eventful evening, the date. I'd been avoiding Walter Scott with tact and skill. He was so nice but his puppyish face filled me with vague dread, and also I still couldn't believe he had prayed for me at the bowling alley. I opened my eyes. "It was fine."

"Do you know any words besides fine?"

"No," I said. A horrible thing drifted through my head: I wish Mom had gotten sick instead of Dad. I put it away, imagined hurling the thought out the window. "Ask me again tomorrow."

"That was five words besides *fine*, Evelyn. So it is possible." Mom reached over and tucked a piece of hair behind my ears, then left her hand there, just barely cupping the back of my head as if I was a baby. Guilt flooded through me. "You know you can always talk to me."

"Fine," I said.

Mom shook her head, smiling. "Now you're just being difficult on purpose." She took her hand from my hair back to the steering wheel and turned onto our street. I wanted to ask her not to stop, to go back to stroking my hair but not ask me to say anything, but for whatever reason I stayed silent.

6

Dad's desk was less a functional workspace and more a final resting place of anything Mom wanted him to get rid of. The drawers were stuffed with papers and notebooks, old receipts, lists, unidentified scraps. He never let something go if he imagined it might be useful later. And he was creative with regards to what counted as useful.

If I was going to find anything about his job at the Manhattan Project, it would be stowed somewhere in the desk.

Mom took Denny to one of his little friends' birthday parties that Saturday, so I turned on the radio and sat down at the desk to start rifling through Dad's stuff. On top sat a snowglobe he said he had gotten during the war, some yellow pencils, books, a couple of records. Not very informational, any of it.

I stared at the blank dusty bottom of the drawer. All these papers, all these magazines and random newspaper clippings and bridge scorecards, and there was nothing to show for anything he had done the last year and a half of the war.

I looked into the right bottom drawer, which I'd also emptied, and then back to the left one. They looked uneven somehow, as if the left drawer was higher above the ground -- but when I stepped back and examined, the bottom of the desk was the same few inches off the floor all the way around.

Maybe I was missing something. A memory flashed into my head: I was young, four or five maybe, playing in the living room and watching Dad hammer his desk together.

"My father built my bedframe from nothing, Evie," he'd said. He was splayed out on his back tinkering with the wood. "Cut down the trees himself. He made it real big to account for me growing up and whatall, but still I was too tall for it once I hit thirteen." He stuck a nail between

his teeth and spoke around it, in a kind of a garbled low voice. “But I never let him know that. I told him I liked being all curled up, that it made me feel safe.

“And,” he added, removing the nail from his mouth, “when I was eleven I added a little box myself, just to the inside, where I put cookies and things that I wanted to save for later, like a squirrel pre-hibernation.” He laughed. “The best-built pieces of furniture function in some way that surprises you. Sure as hell surprised Pop, anyhow. He couldn’t figure out where we got so many ants in the house.”

In some way that surprises me. I squinted at the desk now. Surprise me, Dad.

I pulled the left drawer all the way out and upturned it on the floor, pressed on the wood, felt around for a little ribbon, anything. I looked at the back: nothing strange there except possibly an extra slab of wood on the bottom of the drawer, which would explain the way the right side had looked deeper. There was a notch on the middle extra flat. I fit my fingernail into it and pulled gingerly, and the inside bottom of the drawer slid out neatly like a tray, revealing underneath it a flattened stack of papers.

My heart leapt into my throat and I dumped the papers out onto the floor. This was it, this had to be it, something about the job he wanted kept secret or had been told needed to be kept secret. Maybe, I imagined, it was some kind of liability waiver exempting the U.S. government from responsibility for injury resulting from war work. Even if so, he should have gotten recognition. Should still get recognition.

The paper on top -- there were only three, I saw now -- was a map, folded up, the corners soft and round as moth wings. I picked it up and unfolded it with care, smoothed it out on the linoleum floor.

Norris Lake and the surrounding area. That's what it was. It had been marked all over, places circled and exed, arrows and question marks in multiple colors. Somebody -- I assumed Dad -- had written up his own legend in the corner. Circle = place to check, circle crossed out = checked/not possible, star = remember here, arrow = go back.

What on earth could he have wanted to find? Was this map what he'd been asking me about that afternoon, late in his illness, when he asked me whether I remembered him having a map all those times we went out to the lake? He had been searching for something -- he must have been -- and I thought he just wanted to spend time with me outside.

I would deal with that later; I had more to tend to. I folded the map up, careful, trying not to tear it at the fragile creases, and set it aside. Under it was a photograph with a caption scribbled underneath. Not Dad's handwriting.

In the photo, two young men -- in their late teens, maybe, or early twenties -- stood gangly and grinning, facing the camera, their bare arms around each other's shoulders. They wore only rumpled swimming trunks and dog tags. One of them was my father: slightly shorter, hair darker and longer, but swept up off his freckled face. I had never seen him smile like that.

The other boy -- man -- was tall and blond. I didn't recognize him, and I didn't know where they were from the photo: all I could see was some kind of forest behind them, and just barely in frame, the edges of a body of water. But with the dog tags, surely it had to be during the war.

Dad rarely told us stories about what happened during his time in the army. I wasn't even sure where he had been stationed, let alone what he did on a day to day basis, or whether he had *seen combat*, as people called it. A girl at school a year younger than me had a father in the war - well, we all did, but hers got messed up in the head and startled at loud noises even today and

had flashbacks or something. I hadn't seen her since we were little, she must have switched schools or moved away. But she talked about her father all the time and made the rest of us uncomfortable.

At any rate, my father truly never acted like that, never freaked out at anything or had breakdowns. It was just -- odd, now that I was thinking about it, now that I was sitting criss-cross on the living room floor surrounded by the papers that apparently made up his life, that he only ever mentioned his two years of service in passing or when asked. He told stories about his boyhood in Loyston -- so many that some of the stories even contradicted each other -- and about working on the dam, and about coming to Oak Ridge to work on "the project," even if he never described the work itself. He seemed almost to enjoy keeping that particular secret. But it was radio silence from 1941-1943.

I blinked back to myself and inspected the photograph again. Unlike the map, it had no folds, no evidence of being stuffed in pockets or even looked at often.

I had to squint to read the slanting, faded handwriting that inched along the bottom white space of the photograph. I put the edge of my fingernail along each word as I read it. "Me and Jacky -- California, June '43 -- it was a HOT one."

I flipped the photo over; several more lines of the same cramped writing occupied two inches or so at the top. "Hi Jacky -- remember this? Cleaning out boxes of stuff to make room for the baby and found this from the GOOD OL DAYS. Thought you might like to have it. I remember you calling this 'the most beautiful summer' before everything of course. Hope you're well -- maybe I will visit sometime -- who knows. Love always, your buddy, L.C."

The most beautiful summer. California, 1943. I had no idea who L.C. was -- other than, presumably, the other person in the photo -- or why this might be tucked so carefully away, like a state secret. I had never heard anyone call my father Jacky, either.

The paper beneath the photograph looked to be a draft card, stiff and yellowed, and it didn't reveal much from a cursory glance. I carefully laid the three things on top of each other again and took them to my room, slipped them between the pages of a book. Now to clean up the mess I'd made in throwing Dad's life all over the living room.

I would never see him again. Never. The fact of this collapsed against me, and all I could do was sit dumb and unseeing on the floor. It didn't matter who the person in the photograph was, or what the map meant; if Dad wanted me to know he would have told me and it was too late for that. I had been wondering and wondering what his life had been like before me, without me, and here I was moving forward in a direction he could not follow, and I wanted to call back down the line and stop where something had gone wrong. Get to the root of the problem, Evelyn. I felt I hadn't looked at him directly in years. It had barely been a week.

7

When I was eleven, we went on vacation to the beach for a week with Dad's sisters Margaret and Beatrice, Beatrice's husband and their three children. There were ten of us in total packed into a three-bedroom beach house, and from its front porch you could see the ocean.

I didn't see my aunts or cousins very often, so I mostly watched them in curiosity the first day. Beatrice lived up in Kentucky with her husband's family, and Margaret was "flitting around somewhere," according to Dad, who always had a flicker of wistfulness in his voice when he mentioned his sister and her cross-country adventures -- wistfulness that sometimes bordered on sarcasm. Margaret is in New York working with people who worked on *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Margaret has struck gold in California. Margaret will be the first woman on the moon.

"The Pacific Ocean is colder than the Atlantic," Margaret told me our second day there. "Did you know that?"

"I think so," I said. I hadn't, but I wanted Margaret to think I was smart. I had heard her use the word *precocious* about me, and I didn't really know what it meant, but it had three impressive syllables. I dug my toes into the damp sand.

"Jack," said Margaret, one hand holding down the brim of her hat as it flapped up into the wind. "We should get seafood tonight. Go out to a restaurant."

My father was lying on his back on a towel a few feet away, a book open-spined next to him. He gave a thumbs up with his eyes still closed. "Ask your sister."

"She's your sister too."

"Not when I wanna ask for things," he mumbled, sounding oddly like a child. "I'm the baby, remember? You two haggle it out and I come in afterward to get my share."

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Margaret said. She was still holding onto her hat. I buried my feet slowly, dug down deeper and deeper into the sand. After several long moments of silence, the only sound that of the ocean rushing in: “I’ll talk to her, fine.”

She stood, stretched, started walking back toward the beach house where Beatrice and my mother were trying to get my youngest cousin and Denny to lie down for a nap. I removed my feet from the ground and wiggled my toes to dislodge the grains of sand out from between them.

They kept doing this, Dad and Margaret and Beatrice: not quite having fights, prodding each other and then falling back again. I wondered if it would be like this between Denny and me when he was old enough to hold a real conversation.

Dad shifted on his towel. I couldn’t believe he had his eyes closed outside on a day like this -- how could he stand the thought of missing anything? The sky above us was an overturned bowl, streaked with thin ribbony clouds that somehow made the blue look bluer. And the ocean, which I could hardly believe was in front of me, nothing like the glassy stillness of Norris Lake: the dark greenish-gray water shifted around, turned into lips of white foam, and every few seconds surged up and crashed against the sand before being dragged back to sea. As I watched, seagulls circled dozens of feet above the water and then drove straight down to it. Some emerged with glistening little fish in their beaks. I knew about the moon and the tides, but still I imagined a giant or something kneading the water.

“Dad,” I said. “Is it true that people who get lost at sea and die usually die of dehydration?”

“Mm. I’m not sure, Evelyn.”

“I read that in a book.” I dug my toes into the sand again and lay on my back. “Does the ocean ever freeze during the winter?”

“I’d say probably not.” In my periphery, he put on his sunglasses and folded his hands on his stomach. *Periphery* was my current favorite word: it sounded sweet and sharp, like sugar-snap peas.

“Well do you think--”

“Evie,” he said. In front of us the waves gusted into the sand. I looked at him, at the crease between his eyebrows just above the little bridge of his sunglasses, which I imagined walking over. “Maybe we could just be quiet for a little bit, yeah?”

Aunt Margaret would never tell me to be quiet. Still I shut up and stared out over the water. If I went inside, Mom and Beatrice would no doubt enlist me in chore duties, and that would become the rest of my day. I couldn’t allow it.

Margaret came back down several minutes later. I heard her approach by the soft squelch of her feet in sand: Beatrice and Mom both wore sandals whenever they came down to the beach, “the water,” as Mom called it, even though she never stepped in the actual ocean. And when they trekked back up to the house they had to take their shoes off and hose them so as not to track anything into the house, but that never worked. It seemed to me a lot of hassle for the same result that everyone else got, which was sand everywhere.

“Get up, Jackal,” she said, nudging Dad’s shoulder with her bare toe. “We’re discussing dinner up there.”

“Let me know what you decide.”

Margaret made a noise halfway between an incredulous snort and a laugh. “No, I’m telling you to come up and help us figure it out, champ.”

I sat facing the ocean as Dad sighed and removed his sunglasses, set them on top of his book. “I’m fine with just about anywhere.”

“Okay. So come say that to, you know, the rest of the adults.”

“Lord God, Maggie,” said Dad, an edge to his voice. “Just decide something and let me know. You’re the one who wanted to go out somewhere to eat in the first place.”

“You are such a child,” said Margaret. “Come on. Grow up.”

“You’re the women, you have the supertime authority if nothing else.”

Even I felt the cut of that one. And in the elastic silence following it, Margaret turned on her bare heel and strode back to the house with the loping, confident gait of a woman who’d long neglected skirts. I couldn’t quite look my father in the eyes.

8

I figured I needed to go talk to Milton and Sharpe, Dad's friends who had been so cagy at the funeral. I had pored over the map of Norris Lake for days, trying to find any recognizable pattern in his labels and markups, but all I achieved was a headache, staring at it so long my eyesight spiraled the map into pieces and it became unreadable.

The problem with Milton and Sharpe was how to find them. I had mostly just seen them that handful of nights at our house, but I didn't even know their first names, let alone where either lived.

"Mom," I said at dinner one night. "You know Dad's friends, Milton and Sharpe? They were at the funeral?"

She squinted at me across the table, her spoonful of soup suspended halfway to her mouth. "Yes... not very well."

"Do you know what their first names are?" I had decided I would ask this instead of outright asking where they lived; that would be too obvious. I would get to that information another way. I wasn't sure why, but I felt my investigation needed to be kept secret from Mom.

She swallowed her soup and kept her eyes on me, suspicious and narrow. "George and Charlie. Why?"

"Oh," I said, and shrugged, trying for nonchalance. "I was just curious. Someone at school mentioned a Milton, and I wondered if it was the same person."

"Me too," said Denny. He'd been doing this the past couple of weeks: imitating everything he heard me say or saw me do. "I wondered too."

"Denny, you weren't there."

“You don’t know,” he said. He stabbed at a carrot in his bowl, and his soup sloshed over the side onto the tablecloth. Mom sighed, grabbed a dish towel from the counter, started mopping it up.

At the front desk of the high school, there was a thick binder that served essentially as a directory of Oak Ridgers, and when I told them I was part of the school newspaper staff they let me stand there and flip through it. George Milton’s address was listed, but I couldn’t find a Charlie or Charles Sharpe anywhere in the book. Well, that was all right; I’d just go to Milton.

The opportunity didn’t come until the next newspaper meeting. I had devised the perfect plan: I would ask for a ride home from someone, and I’d direct them to Milton’s house instead of mine. I would talk to him, ask what I needed to ask, and then either walk home (depending on how far it was) or ask him to drive me. I figured he couldn’t say no if it came down to it: what were his other options, to leave me out in the cold?

We didn’t go to the cafeteria for ice cream after today’s meeting. It had been raining all day, the lazy, chilly kind that washed the world gray and upended worms from the ground, and the cafeteria was on the other end of the high school campus. Nobody wanted to wade through the courtyard.

After I had put my things back into my bookbag, I hung around awkwardly, waiting for a chance to ask. Lee was dropping pieces of chalk on the floor to illustrate some point to Bishop that I’d long since lost track of, and Mary watched them argue with a long-suffering set to her mouth. Matthew had hightailed it to a muddy baseball game the moment the meeting ended.

“So don’t tell me you can just throw any two things from the same distance and they’ll have the same impact,” Lee said. “There’s too many variables. You couldn’t possibly take them all into account.”

“But why, then?” Bishop had her arms folded across her chest. “They’re falling at the same rate.”

“I don’t know. I’m not a physicist.”

As I watched, Bishop rolled her eyes and turned away from him, shoved loose papers into her bag. “Good grief.”

Lee bent over and started picking up the crumbled bits of chalk off the floor. I shifted my weight from one foot to the other, ran my tongue over the inside of my lip. “Do you think -- could someone give me a ride home?”

“Of course,” said Mary. She tucked her long blonde hair behind her ears. “What’s the address?”

I told her -- I’d written Milton’s address on my hand that morning in preparation for this moment -- and Bishop straightened. “That’s really close to where I live. I’ll take you.”

“Thanks,” I said, taken aback. I hadn’t thought of that possibility. What if she decided to invite me over to work on the newspaper or something?

We said goodbye to Lee and Mary, and I followed Bishop downstairs to the parking lot. She seemed not to have any awareness of her height, or subsequently how fast she walked: her long strides left me half jogging to keep up. It was as if she didn’t know how not to be in a hurry. Like everything was urgent all the time.

She drove a beat-up light blue wagon, scratched and dented so bad I couldn’t help but say as we approached it, “Are you sure that’s street legal?”

I had my bookbag sort of balanced on top of my head with one hand to keep my hair as dry as possible — any extended contact with rain and it would frizz irreversibly, I knew — so I

couldn't see Bishop as she fumbled with the driver side door, but I heard her laugh over the heavy thrum of water.

"Yes, I am, thanks," she called. She opened the door and sat down, leaned over in one smooth movement to unlock and open the passenger door. "She's just been through a lot."

I plopped into the passenger seat and set my bag by my feet, slammed the door shut. "Like what, a train wreck?"

Bishop shook her head, smiling, and turned the key in the ignition while I wrangled the seatbelt over my lap. "You know, Evie, you're being awfully judgmental about the state of my car for someone who doesn't have one."

My cheeks went hot, and I sat there in silence for a second as she started toward the road. "Sorry. I was just —"

"Oh, I'm only joking, Prior." She leaned forward, glanced left and right before turning. The windshield wipers cut clean lines across the fogged-over glass. "You're right, and anyway you couldn't possibly insult my car any more than Lee has. That bastard."

She said it lightly enough, but it was still a little jarring to hear another girl curse. Laura never even said *hell*. I hid my grin by turning to look out the window, watching little raindrops splatter and unspool down it. The way she'd said "Bastard" reminded me of Dad. Quite a new friend you've made, Evie. A girl after my own heart.

"Had no idea you lived in this area," Bishop was saying. Guilt flashed through me at my own dumb lie: why hadn't I just said this was my uncle's house, something innocuous like that?

I didn't respond: a question was clamoring in my mind. "I've been wondering. How did you get access to the laboratory and the special buildings and things last year?"

"Hmm?"

“For the big article you wrote for the school newspaper,” I said. I wasn’t sure why I’d brought this up now of all times. “I thought no one ever got to go in those places.”

We reached a stoplight, and she rolled the car to a stop and stared ahead, eyebrows furrowed. “I said I was writing about the girls who worked the calutron machines, and how they helped us win the war. Basically, I sold the idea as good PR for the project under the name of amateur journalism.” The light turned, and she started forward again. “It put everybody in a flattering light, not least because I was a local schoolgirl reporter. All very go-America. It didn’t actually reveal much about the operations. I didn’t ask and they didn’t tell me.”

It sounded like she knew something I didn’t. As she turned onto a side road, I fidgeted in my seat. “So you didn’t find any, um, state secrets or unsavory details?”

She laughed. “No, Prior. We’re a high school newspaper. Hang on,” she said suddenly. “Prior -- are you related to Ruth Prior by any chance?”

“That’s my mother.”

“She was one of the people I interviewed.” Bishop turned left. “You could ask her.”

I sat up, my heart thrumming in my throat. “My mother helped build the atomic bomb?”

“Well, she worked a calutron machine. You didn’t know?” We reached a fork in the road. The rain had started to let up, and my thoughts were unraveling in a thousand directions. My mother, my flesh-and-blood mother, might have answers I needed. “What’s the address again?”

I scrambled to remember it, and where I was going -- Milton’s house, right, I needed to talk to him -- and told her. She peered at the rain-blurred street signs and turned right. “I live that way about a block down,” she said, jabbing her thumb to the left. “Stop by sometime.”

“Sure,” I said. I had forgotten to keep track of exactly how we got here. I wouldn’t be able to walk home if I needed to, if it came to it.

“You’ll have to tell me which one it is,” Bishop said, slowing the car to a crawl. “I can’t see house numbers through the rain”

Well, it was time for me to start winging it. I swallowed hard and examined the row of houses on my side, divided by short driveways. A greenish-gray one up ahead had no car, so I pointed. “That’s the one.”

Bishop slowed the car to a stop, as close to the edge of the road as possible without tracking into the yard. “Is this good?”

“Great, thanks.” I hurried to hoist my bookbag up over my shoulder. “See you later!”

I opened the door and jumped out, slammed the door behind me. Rain was still falling in blurry sheets, and I hunched my shoulders -- like that was going to do anything -- and slogged through the yard. I figured I’d go around to the back of the house to give Bishop time to drive away, and so she wouldn’t notice that I wasn’t actually going inside.

At the corner of the house, with an army of pine trees behind me, I ducked to the back and waited, listening, until I heard the watery screech of tires against road and Bishop’s car rolled back the way we’d come.

Now the tricky part. I went back around to the front. Already my clothes were half pasted to my rain-slick skin, and I folded my arms tight as I squinted at the door for -- ah. There it was, the street number. Only two down from here, then, was Milton’s place.

Fortunately, Milton had a porch, so once I was up the wooden steps I just stood there for a moment, shivering. This had better be worth it.

I rapped my knuckles against the solid door and waited. If there was someone in the house, I couldn’t hear him moving over the rain. I knocked again. Nothing.

A white swing hung from the porch ceiling, beaded with water. I sat down on it and tried to think. Maybe he wasn't home from work yet, but it was after five, and as far as I knew he still worked in Oak Ridge. Errands, maybe? He probably had a wife that took care of that sort of thing. But, then, wouldn't she be home at this time?

Think, Evie. I closed my eyes. What if Dad were here with me? Have you tried just opening the door, Evie, it might not be locked. How about that.

That doesn't help me if there's no one here, Dad.

Well, at least it's out of the rain and the cold.

I stood and walked back to the door, turned the doorknob, my pulse hammering in my throat. It swung open.

I exhaled sharp and grabbed my bookbag from the swing, and stepped over the threshold. "Well. Let's go."

It was dark inside, the kind of full weighty darkness unique to a place you've never been before, where every shadowy corner . I left the front door cracked so there was a grayish slice of light across the floor: enough to illuminate the silhouette of a lightbulb on the ceiling, and a string dangling down from it. I set my bookbag on the creaking floor as quietly as I could and pulled the string, and blinked when the room flooded with yellow light.

"Hello?" I called. In the living room sat a desk, a couch, an armchair, all scattered equidistant from each other as if these few items of furniture were meant to make the otherwise empty room look lived-in. Maybe it was my paranoia, but it felt strategic, a pale copy, an approximation of someone else's house.

“Hello,” I said again, slinking catlike into the kitchen, imagining myself invisible. It was a useless exercise; no one was home. I checked the cracked bedroom door and the bathroom, too. Nothing.

So I ended up back in the living room where I’d started. It hardly seemed like anyone lived here, let alone that anyone was here now.

After a few moments of deliberation, I walked to the desk and sat down at it, opened drawers at random. This had gotten me somewhere with Dad, right?

The drawers were stuffed with papers, some so full that I couldn’t close them again once I’d yanked them open. I pulled a stack maybe inch-thick from the top of one drawer and smoothed the paper where it had crumpled against the wood. Most of the pages seemed to be letters, or articles handwritten. The paper on top, the crinkled-up page, had *ONE* printed in big block letters across the header. The first sentence, in tiny scrawled handwriting, started, *Our last issue saw approx. 20 recipients in this area, and regionally we...*

“Evelyn Prior?”

I whipped around, my heartbeat in my ears. Milton stood in the doorway, his short hair wet and plastered to his head, his mouth fallen open as he stared at me. “I just--” I cut myself off, uncertain of what I was going to say.

“What the hell are you doing?” He dropped his bag to the floor and scrubbed at his eyes with two fingers, like if he could just take a second look, I would no longer be here.

I pushed the drawer closed and meekly put the stack of papers on the desk. “I -- I wanted to talk to you.”

“Do you figure that’s what talking to me entails?” he asked, gesturing in my general direction, presumably at the desk and the papers.

“I didn’t know when you’d be home,” I whispered. I was trying to be as small as possible. “I wanted to ask you about something.”

“Well, ask me, and then go.” He shook his head. “You’re lucky I don’t call the police.”

But I’d lost my nerve, and he certainly wouldn’t tell me anything he knew now about Dad’s death, when he had been so cagy about it at the funeral in arguably the best of circumstances. I focused inexplicably on a floorboard that was crooked, a tiny gap between it and its neighbor. “What’s *ONE Magazine*?”

“Nothing that matters to you,” he said. He closed his eyes. “I know that’s not what you came to ask. You want to talk about Jack, right.”

I nodded. I felt as though there was a balloon at the base of my throat, slowly expanding, making it harder to speak and breathe.

“Even if he did die of some illness related to the atomic bomb,” said Milton, “there’s no way you could prove that. Even if you were the mayor of Oak Ridge, or the director of the National Laboratory, or the damn President of the United States, there’d be no way. You can’t ask for compensation or even recognition, Evie. You think you’re the first person who’s ever had that idea?”

I shook my head.

“Well.” His voice softened. “I’m sorry you went to all this trouble. Your father barely managed to get an honorable discharge from the army to make it possible to work in Oak Ridge in the first place. They were already doing him a favor. Now come on, why don’t you go on home.

“I lost my father too,” he added suddenly. “I understand, all right? I do.”

No you don't, I thought, petulant. Still I stood up and hoisted my bookbag onto my shoulder. I would not ask him for a ride home; I refused. I would rather walk to Bishop's house and lose my pride there than be treated like a pitiful child here.

"Wait," I said. I didn't want to leave without getting something out of this. I opened my bookbag and rummaged around until I found the photograph of Dad and the strange man I'd never seen. I held it out for Milton to examine. "Do you know who this is with my father?"

He rolled his bottom lip between his teeth, and I didn't think he was going to answer me. Then he said, ushering me toward the door, "You don't want to know, Evie, it doesn't matter."

"Sure I do."

"I believe his name was Lowell," said Milton. "Now go on -- wait, you didn't walk here, did you?"

I shook my head, hardly trusting my voice. Lowell, Lowell, Lowell... "My friend drove me."

He muttered something I couldn't make out, then: "I'm calling your mother."

So I had to sit there in the living room like a misbehaving child in time-out and wait for my mom to pick me up. I tried to listen to what Milton said to my mother on the phone, but all I caught was the snippet of something that ended with, "Would have given me a heart attack if I were an easily spooked man, Mrs. Prior."

When she finally arrived, I ducked out of the house without saying anything to Milton and slunk into the passenger seat. The rain had let up some, but I was still damp and would be for what felt like the rest of time, and I set my still-soaked bookbag down carefully so as not to get too much water on the floor of the car.

Mom said nothing to me as I buckled my seatbelt. She just pressed on the gas and drove steady down the road, her hands white-knuckling the steering wheel.

I watched houses out the window, trying to remember everything Milton had said. I didn't think Dad had ever mentioned a Lowell to me. And had Milton said something about Dad fighting to get an honorable discharge? I'd heard over and over again what I thought was the story: a bad injury, an army hospital, a call for men who were good with machines and mechanical work back on the home front, my father volunteering for the job and returning to work in East Tennessee on what ended up being the construction of the atomic bomb. Dad loved this story maybe more than any other, with its arc of patriotism and redemption, his own flashy heroism front and center. And I had believed it, always. What if I shouldn't have?

When we reached a stoplight, Mom's grip on the steering wheel loosened. "Evelyn," she said, quiet, breaking me out of my thoughts. "What on earth were you doing there?"

I shifted on the seat. "Trying to learn about Dad."

She shook her head. The light turned and we rolled forward. The street glistened under the weak sunlight, a black frozen river. "And did you learn anything?"

I thought of the one thing I'd gleaned: the name Lowell, one Lowell C., and the fact that Dad had lied to us -- to me -- about why he'd left the army and come home. I turned to look out the window again. "No. I didn't learn anything."

Outside, the rainwater on the road floated up as mist and disappeared into the air.

[END OF PART ONE]