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The Last Crack of the Hammer

Lucy had not intended to take their child. Perhaps it was the stabbing heat, or the wavering orange light that seemed to burnish every act and image with a strange beauty, but that morning, as she threw the pancake scraps onto the back lawn and watched the waiting crows squabble, she'd thought about nothing but how her life seemed to be rushing up on her like sneaker waves. And if she went down, she'd be going alone.

The thought was comforting.

For the last three hours, Harry, her husband, had moved complainingly through the house, muttering about the heat and the drive ahead, stopping only to ask, accusingly, where she'd put his blue windbreaker or his deck shoes or the ventilated hat he'd bought in Fort Lauderdale. Already the sun was a shiny blister in the haze and Lucy considered declaring illness to avoid the trip, but knew Henry wouldn't believe her. Into her bra she'd tucked a three by five card listing phone numbers of people to call in the event of an emergency, though this measure of caution was risky, as lately everything she did evoked one of two insults from Harry: She was either quite stupid or clearly insane.

There was something lyrical in the phrase "clearly insane," and Lucy found herself saying it out loud as her next door neighbor Julie Gordon walked past the kitchen window. Julie Gordon was likely looking for her daughter, Anna, who was eight and had decided she was against the Presbyterian church and often disappeared on Sunday mornings. Lucy rinsed the crusted pancake batter out of the bowl, watching the line of Julie Gordon's sharp spine beneath her thin cotton dress as she bent to look behind the

tomato plants, and Lucy ran her hands down her own back, waist, and hips, feeling the skin indented by her underpants and the waistband of her slip. When she'd married she was tiny—thin shouldered and narrow-hipped—and Harry joked that he would never have to go anywhere without her: She could fit in a suitcase, a glove box, a bicycle basket. He was always afraid of misplacing her, he said. And he might have, he said, if not for her hair. Creamy-blond, the color of wheat and milk, the diameter of her ponytail was thick as a silver dollar, and Harry sometimes held it as if it were alive.

“Let's get moving, Lucy,” Harry said, sternly enough that she realized he must have said it before and she'd not heard him. “I'm going to take Momma home and then we should go.”

“I've been ready for *years*,” Lucy muttered, running her finger inside the porcelain sink. She reached for the Comet, sprinkled its gritty dust in sweeping patterns and scrubbed with her new boar bristle brush. The Gordon's mini van sped down the driveway, dust rolling behind it in grey waves, and Lucy wiped her hands on the damp dishtowel and squinted into the yard, sure she'd seen Anna's white-blond hair in her periphery, but it was empty except for a grackle who was clacking his strange song and looking for insects at the base of the Chinese elm.

The front door banged shut. Lucy listened to the station wagon's droning muffler and the gravelly fluttering of the loose fan belt. She had suggested having the car looked at before the trip but Harry simply held up his hand and waved it toward her without taking his eyes from the cheery weather girl on the local news station. She stared into the cool white of the refrigerator; the egg-salad sandwiches she'd made the night before and wrapped in waxed paper now seemed diminished and sad among the brighter things in

the refrigerator. She pulled out the pitcher of Hawaiian Punch and poured some in a plastic tumbler.

The camellia bushes had spread wild and pink against the east side of the house, and Lucy walked slowly, rattling the ice cubes in the cup. The thick heat pressed her lungs and in the stillness the electric whirring of cicadas fell in waves, coming closer, drifting away. She stopped at the porch near the sunroom and bent down, the smell of the black, moist dirt hanging heavy in the space beneath the house. Spots of gold and white appeared before her eyes and she closed them for a second, dizzied. Anna Gordon giggled and crawled forward, the front of her shorts and t-shirt smeared dark, the gap between her front teeth larger than Lucy remembered. She held the cup toward the child. “I was going to drink this myself, unless you want it...”

Anna nodded, stood up and tried to brush the dirt from her clothes.

“I can wash those for you,” Lucy said. “Why don’t you come inside?”

Anna sang the refrain from “*California Dreaming*,” including the echo, while she changed into Lucy’s favorite sundress in the laundry room.

“You have a lovely voice,” Lucy said, as the girl came around the corner. Her brown toes were just visible beneath the hem of the flowered dress. Harry did not think pants were appropriate for women, and, luckily, Lucy liked dresses, as they hid the sweat that formed beneath her breasts, on her lower back and behind her knees, during the long, disagreeable summers. Her body had changed from lithe and bony, to padded, full. She looked at other women who came into the art supply store where she worked, attempting to gauge her size, but found her perception faltering. Her body seemed now to be the

right shape for someone with children, someone who had carried a life and understood the weight and significance of that burden.

Harry seemed to enjoy her new softness; even on the hottest nights he'd reach for her, bumping slowly and purposefully against her. She had lately been sleeping in sweats and a long-sleeve t-shirt after waking suddenly one night, the dark pressing her eyeballs, to feel him hard, trying to enter her. She said nothing, only sighed and shifted away as if groggy and dreaming, but was disgusted, terrified. It was ridiculous; she knew this. He was her husband, and he loved her. But what, finally, was the point of his attention if she wasn't able to turn it into something alive?

"You know, we're going to the beach today," Lucy told Anna, who was spinning around the kitchen, jumping from one foot to the other and watching the dress balloon and twirl.

"The beach?"

"Harry's family has a beach house that looks right out on the water," Lucy said. "It's beautiful. There are seagulls and pelicans everywhere."

"What about seals?"

"Sometimes there are," Lucy said, but this was a lie; there were no seals in the Atlantic.

"I want to go with you," Anna said. "We *never* go to the beach."

"But your parents would be worried sick."

"Oh please? Please can't I?" Anna whined, clasping her hands tightly.

“Well, I don’t know,” Lucy said. She handed Anna a cookie, picturing shared meals, searches for sand dollars, dried star fish and smoothed stones on the shore. Harry would never hurt her with a child around. “You really want to go?”

“I said I did.”

“Well, why don’t you run home and get your bathing suit and I’ll write your mother a note.”

Anna skipped out, banging the screen door behind her. Lucy watched her moving through the hedges that separated the houses, skinny shoulder blades sharp in the sun. “He’s going to kill me,” Lucy said. She packed the sandwiches, cookies and iced tea in the blue cooler, and lugged it into the entryway, then sat on it, waiting. She peered through the shutters beside the front door into the heat, then pulled the doll she was making out of her bag. The eight-inch doll was creamy muslin and had a beaded expression of wonder on her face. Beneath the eyelet dress were two perky breasts and pubic hair of brown embroidery floss.

Lucy had started the dolls as a joke, using her mother’s old glass beads, but her friends liked them so much they were paying her to make them, and her boss had made a little display at the store. Now Lucy had seventeen dolls to make, dolls with specific characteristics, and it was getting tricky to finish them as Harry was certain to hate them and perhaps do something crazy. He couldn’t know, that was clear. Lucy threaded a needle and pushed it through the doll’s skin, changing the expression from slow wonder to a thin smile. She stared at it, held it close to her face, then held it against her chest, cradled it.

Anna rapped on the screen door and pressed her mouth against it to ask. “Did you write a note for my mom?”

“Oh, honey, that screen’s filthy. Come in, and we’ll write our farewell letter. You can help, all right?” Lucy got a piece of stationery from the hutch in the dining room and they both sat down, arms and elbows resting on the cool cherry table. *Dear Mrs. Gordon, Lucy wrote, I found little Anna hiding under our house. Apparently she didn’t want to go wherever it is you folks go on Sunday mornings (ha ha) and I thought she might want to go with us to the beach. We’ll only be there until dinnertime but we’ll give you a call when we arrive. Don’t worry your pretty head about anything; we’ll be fine. Taa taa, Lucy Carter (your neighbor)*

“How’s that?”

Anna pulled on her lower lip with dirt-arc'd fingernails and said nothing.

Soon the station wagon rattled up the driveway and Lucy steered Anna out of the dining room, squeezing her shoulders softly. “Do me a favor, honey? Wait in the laundry room until I talk to Harry, okay? Don’t make a sound. Not one word,” she said, and put her finger to her lips. She handed Anna a cookie. The Gordons barely ate sugar, and never store-bought sweets.

Harry stood in front of the pile of luggage, frowning. A patch of sweat shaped like a head of cabbage had darkened the back of his grey shirt.

“Hot out there?” Lucy asked.

“The bank temp gauge said 102,” he said, wiping his face with his forearm. “Did you pack all the food?”

“It just needs to be loaded in the car.”

Harry grunted and busied himself with the arrangement of the luggage. He left the backseat completely empty save for the cooler, and while he was in the bathroom Lucy hurried the child out, made her crouch behind the passenger seat and covered her with a blanket.

“I’m too hot,” Anna whimpered, showing her unsightly teeth.

“Sweetie, listen. As soon as Harry gets in he’ll turn on the air, okay? And let me tell you you’ve never known happiness until you’ve gone swimming in the ocean on a Sunday afternoon. And we’ll have candy. Here comes Harry, now, remember to keep quiet or it will ruin the surprise.” Lucy put her finger to her lips and gently pulled the blanket over Anna’s face.

Harry settled into his seat, turned the key and swore when a blast of hot air rushed from the vents. Sweat ran down Lucy’s neck; she thought she could feel the life draining from her. The humidity seemed to change the light, and through the clean windshield the leaves of the verbena were vibrant green, more in focus than they normally were.

The road to the beach was straight and wide, and live oak and dogwood trees clustered at the edges of the fields of wheat. Lucy pushed the seek knob of the radio, resting only seconds on a station before switching it. Drumbeats, snatches of salsa music, and three or four syllables of a soprano aria flicked through the speakers. “Find something and leave it, will you?” Harry said.

Lucy got a country station playing Johnny Cash and said, “Okay?” knowing he wouldn’t answer. She fished her address book out of her bag and began going through it slowly, letter by letter.

“Did you know Bill and Judy had twins?” she asked, squinting at the penciled birthdate.

“So now they have eleven kids?”

“No, Harry. Four. It’s not against the law to have four children,” Lucy said.

“Yeah, but she’s sixty-one years old.”

“She’s thirty-six,” Lucy said. She flipped the pages, wondering how many people she had known that would be happy to hear from her, even if it were due to a crisis. Anna sniffled beneath the blanket and Lucy remembered suddenly that the note she’d written to Mrs. Gordon was still on the table at home. She felt heat flash through her arms to her fingertips. Anna sniffled again.

“Are you getting sick?” Harry asked.

“I think there’s pollen in the air.”

“No there isn’t.”

“Well, I feel sort of allergic.”

“Well, *I* don’t want you complaining about it all day.”

“Harry, I wasn’t.”

“So don’t,” he said. “I want to have a peaceful day.”

They didn’t speak again for at least twenty minutes and Lucy turned the radio up loudly to mask Anna’s sniffles. Though Harry disapproved of snacks between meals, Lucy made a show of going through the cooler to get him a cookie, and smuggled a couple to Anna. They were lemon-frosted sugar cookies, and the citrusy smell wafted through the car until replaced by a different and much more pungent smell, accompanied by the strangled pull of retching. Lucy whipped the blanket off Anna’s head and said,

“Oh, sweetie pie, I’m *so* sorry.” She tried to wipe the child’s face with her shawl but Anna began wailing and pushed her hands away.

Harry’s face went ashy red, and he kept trying to look behind him without veering off the road. “I *do not* know what to say,” he said, several times.

“Well, *Jesus*, Harry, pull over, will you?” Lucy blanched, surprised at her tone, but this was an emergency.

Harry pulled onto the shoulder, snapped off the radio and turned around.

“But I *liked* that song,” Anna whimpered, looking helplessly at her vomit-smearred dress. Lucy didn’t look at Harry as she helped Anna out of the car, and with a plastic jug of water and a beach towel managed to clean most of the girl, the dress and the seat. Lucy’s hands trembled as she worked, feeling the heat of Harry’s rage, and she reluctantly helped Anna back in the car and snapped the seat belt across her lap. But Harry wouldn’t hurt her with a child around; he couldn’t, especially if the child wasn’t theirs. This was why Anna had come to her this morning, Lucy reasoned—to protect her. Children were incredibly intuitive, like beautiful sponges, soaking up all the psychic energy around them. She would have to be calm beside the ugliness of Harry’s anger.

She climbed in beside her husband and was about to explain why Anna was there when he asked, “What’s *wrong* with you? The things you do make *no* sense to me.”

Lucy had been imagining herself full of control, almost peaceful, but the familiar tone of Harry’s disgust made her snap, “Listen, I’ll bring her back, okay? We’ll get unpacked, have some lunch—it’s only an hour and a half drive. I can bring her back a little later. It’s not going to affect your day at all.” She felt her throat tighten with tears.

“Please don’t turn around, Harry, please?”

“Do her parents know she’s here?”

“I wrote them a note, and I’ll call them when we get there,” she said. She tensed, waiting for the rest of his anger. But Harry was watching Anna, as if he’d never seen a little girl before and didn’t know what he was supposed to do. “Want a cookie or something?” he asked, finally.

“I already had some cookies, sir,” Anna said. “They made me throw up.”

Harry smiled at her in the rearview mirror and cocked his finger as if to say “You’re right; you’re the smart one here,” but didn’t say anything. Lucy stared out the window watching the pale, flat landscape spread to the horizon, the properties divided by faint grey trees, listless and resigned in the heat. She tried to sleep but couldn’t—thoughts of the conversation she’d soon have with Mrs. Gordon made her blood feel prickly and cold in her veins, and she wanted to forget where they were going and pretend that Anna was her child, that there was nothing unusual about this outing, just a family going to the beach. She sighed loudly, took off her shoes and socks and placed them in the pocket in the car door, then pulled the doll halfway out of the bag before remembering where she was.

“What is that?” Harry said.

“A project for the store,” Lucy said, turning away slightly and pushing it back into the bag. “It’s nothing.”

“Let me see it,” he demanded.

“It’s silly.”

“Let me see it,” he said, and she knew she had to show him. She held the naked doll, bouncing it a little, in front of his face.

“That’s horrible,” he said. “You call that art?”

Lucy shrugged. She lay the doll across her lap and smoothed its yarn hair. It was smiling crookedly, perhaps smirking. Harry shook his head and breathed loudly through his nose. In the back seat, Anna was quiet but seemed to have decided this was a more interesting place to be than home. She looked out the window, smiling faintly, and Lucy wondered if they should play a traveling game, like Geography, or My Aunt Tilly, but the stillness was like a soothing balm. She wanted to weep with gratitude. *Please, let this bubble of calm remain and keep us safe in it.*

The dirt driveway had been rutted by wind and rain, and Harry kept the car running a moment as he surveyed the old beach house. The screen door, caught by a sudden gust blowing off the water, slammed repeatedly against the weathered siding. Anna was asleep and Lucy shook her gently. “We’re here, sweetie.”

Anna blinked and yawned, then unhooked her seatbelt and followed Lucy into the house without a word.

“You should give her another dress to wear.” Harry said, coming in behind them. He balanced the cooler on the edge of the kitchen table and glanced around the darkened house.

Lucy watched Anna picking up old magazines, dried starfish and dusty pillows. “Maybe you want to change into your bathing suit?”

Anna shrugged and reluctantly stood on the wide front porch and watched Lucy unhook the panels that kept the windows safe from hurricanes. The pale light flooded the

front room in wide swaths, illuminating dust motes that rose from every surface. “Yuck,” she said. “Everything’s filthy.”

“I’ll take her down to the water,” Harry said, fitting a can of beer in a insulated sleeve that said, *GO GET ‘EM, CHAMP* and handing Anna a can of Coke. “You can clean things up, yeah? But, hey, call her parents first. This is the kind of thing that gets people in big trouble.”

The screen door slammed behind them and Lucy went to the window and watched the pair make its way through the sea oats toward the beach. She sighed and sat heavily at the kitchen table, scanning the familiar room, its relics and junk. The bright pans hanging from the ceiling clinked together as the breeze came through the screen.

Harry’s grandfather had built the beach house seventy years earlier, and the grey, weathered boards shimmered in the strange red light blooming over the ocean. The kitchen was draped with cobwebs but its large windows looked over the slippery seagrass hills, over miles of smooth beach and large granite boulders Harry said had been there since before he could remember. Here Lucy felt she had stepped into a place gutted by time, haunted by the lurking presence of all the things that had happened. Harry said when he was growing up there were always parties, always people, many nearly strangers, sleeping in every bedroom, on couches, on the floor. Even after eight years, she sometimes thought she could hear laughter, screaming, the clinking of glasses. The framed pictures of him as a child, deep-dimpled and grinning, always overwhelmed and saddened her, as that person—eager, pliant, tender—was gone.

Harry’s grandmother had wandered out on the beach during a storm and drowned, and that his father had broken his mother’s collar bone when he threw her down the

wooden stairs leading to the beach. She never stopped loving or needing him, and once during a fight he'd pressed the muzzle of a .38 to her forehead and pulled the trigger six times, counting out loud with each pull. "She didn't know the gun was empty until the last crack of the hammer," Harry told Lucy a few months before their wedding, in a rare outpouring of sadness and honesty. "No one knows if he intended to kill her or was just playing around."

No one ever found out, either, because Harry's father left soon afterwards, leaving everything he owned behind. His clothes were still stacked neatly in his bureau drawers, his papers and magazines filed in his desk and cabinets and a packed pipe sitting on the broad arm of his leather easy chair, waiting to be smoked.

Harry had never hurt Lucy, physically, though she could often feel his anger, moving thickly under his skin like blood, slowed only by his will. Once Lucy had spilled a mug of hot coffee in his lap and he'd raised his hand to strike her, then stopped, his hand inches from her cheek, repelled, like the poles of two magnets. People worried; when Lucy announced her engagement her sad, intuitive mother had said, "Violence is carried on. It might weaken through the generations, but it's always in the genes."

Lucy walked out to the front porch and squinted over the beach, at the lines of pelicans skimming above the choppy water. Harry lay on his back on a big granite slab, eyes closed. She scanned the shoreline for Anna, who was standing knee-deep in the sea, looking out at a fishing boat with rigging gone bright and silvery in the sun. Lucy squinted, making the composition before her simple and well-balanced. From where she stood everything was perfect, and she didn't want to leave her vantage point, but after a

few minutes she felt so guilty about not calling the Gordons that her stomach was clenched and queasy. She found their number in her phonebook, dialed, let the phone ring twice and then hung up. “Come *on*, stupid,” she told herself, took a deep breath and dialed again, forcing herself to stay on the line until the machine picked up. “We are out looking for Anna,” Mr. Gordon’s tense, polite voice announced. “If you have any information on her whereabouts please, *please*, will you leave a message?”

Lucy thought she heard wailing in the background. She took a deep breath and pinched herself, hard, as she waited through the series of beeps. “She’s with us at the beach. The Carters; this is Lucy Carter. I’m so sorry. It isn’t a joke. Anna’s fine, don’t worry, please. Sorry. I’m so sorry; it wasn’t thoughtful, but we’re just here for the day, you know, and she wanted to come. We wrote you a note but it’s on the kitchen table. Mine, I mean.” She left the number and hung up, then took a bottle of Jack Daniels from the liquor cabinet and poured. She drank it fast, feeling the warm flutter along her limbs. *You didn’t used to be scared like this*, she thought, then walked slowly down to the beach.

“Hey,” Lucy said, stretching her towel in the sand beside where her husband was lying face-down.

“I’m sleeping,” he said, without lifting his mouth from the towel.

Lucy sat and watched Anna at the shoreline, bending down to poke at the sand, her hair a fuzzy halo against the dark water. “She’s a sweet girl, isn’t she?”

“Did you call them?”

“I left a message. It’ll be fine.”

“They’re going to lock you up, Lucy. I’m not kidding.”

Children on inner tubes and Styrofoam boards laughed and wrestled and splashed. Seagulls and sandpipers darted about, and she watched a crab push sand methodically from his burrow. Harry turned over to sun his chest.

“Do you remember how silly we used to be?” Lucy asked, watching the shadow of his eyelashes on his cheeks.

“No.”

“We were.” Lucy looked out to the water, up at the blank sky, then stood up and brushed off the back of her skirt. Nearby she found an orange, ridged shell, completely rectangular, and was about to put it under her lip and say, “Look, I’m a beaver,” but instead stood there, watching him. He did not open his eyes, and she felt suddenly ridiculous, young, and reprimanded. She placed the shell over his bellybutton and walked down to where Anna was skipping in and out of the foaming tide.

“Hey there,” Lucy said.

Anna looked up, startled. “Where are all the other kids?”

“Well, I’m not sure,” Lucy said, wondering if she’d promised there would be a large gathering of children awaiting her arrival. “Oh, there’s one,” she said. They looked down the beach at a young father playing catch with his spindly-legged son, while the mother sat on a beach towel reading a paperback.

“I thought there were more kids at the beach,” Anna said. She looked down, jabbing her foot at the sand, and Lucy saw her chin dimple and lower lip turn down.

The boy was anticipating a fly ball, walking slowly backwards with one hand shielding the sun from his face. It made a thick slap as it entered the pocket of his glove.

“You gotta cover it with your other hand,” the father called. “You don’t want it to bounce out, do you? You don’t want it to bonk you in the head, now do you?” The boy laughed.

“I bet they’d let you play, if you wanted to. He looks about your age. How old are you? Nine, ten?”

“Eight.”

“Oh, eight, that’s right. You want me to ask them? Come on,” Lucy said. She put her hand on Anna’s shoulder but the girl shook it off.

“I can ask,” Anna said.

“All right, well, I’ll be right over there with Harry, okay?” Lucy said, backing away, but wanting to grab her and hug her, tightly. And when Anna looked up at her with those pale, empty eyes, then walked quickly away, Lucy felt her cheeks fill with blood. How could she think a child wouldn’t sense the depth of her need and turn from it? Harry was no rocket scientist and he sensed it easily enough—when she needed him he was always distant; the edge of irritation was present in his voice no matter what she said or did. When his hands on her skin made her recoil, he wouldn’t leave her alone. It was then that he loved her; who knows of what he was dreaming. There was never an in-between, and her dreams of that space were of the afternoon trains, cutting through the cottonwoods and low, cool places of Iowa, where she’d spent a summer with her grandparents. Those trains were the balance that brought two separate pieces of land together, their eerie whistles, the squealing rails and the smoke inking black on the horizon.

Harry was still asleep and Lucy looked down at his wide, pale chest, and the shell still perched on his bellybutton. She looked up at the beach house and the weathered rocking chairs swaying on the porch—there was no reason for her to stay here and be punished—from the porch she'd be easily able to watch Anna. Plus she should be around if the Gordons called, though she so dreaded that conversation she wanted to pack up and take a bus home. Maybe this was one of these moments, where everything is forever divided into before and after: she could leave her life, move west and sell her dolls at arts and craft fairs. *Yes*, she thought, buoyed by her glass of bourbon, *that's a good plan*. What was keeping her here? She thought of Harry telling people, "She just snapped, I guess. She was always a little crazy." And who would care, really? Perhaps the Gordons would make it into a cautionary tale, the things that happen when little girls don't go to church.

In the house, the answering machine was blinking. Lucy stared at it, frozen, then pushed the button quickly. "Please call us immediately," Mr. Gordon commanded. "We want to talk to you."

Lucy erased the message, then poured herself a little more bourbon. "Just to take the edge off," she said, then surveyed the front room and the dust she was supposed to be taking care of. She got her bag of materials from the car and spread the felt and fabric and stuffing on the kitchen table, turned on the stereo, got a bucket of ice and set the Jack Daniels where she could reach it without getting up.

She considered the doll she'd been working on, ripped out its red mouth and cut the dark braids from its head. "So, who do you want to be? A go go dancer? A nun?" She

danced the doll across the table and made it bump the bottle and then bow, deeply.

“Come on,” she reprimanded. “You can be anyone. Who do you want to be?”

They both looked out at the sea beyond the hazy windows for a moment, then Lucy stitched rows of pale blond yarn on the doll’s head. She sat the doll so it faced her and poured more bourbon into her glass. “Let’s just see who you really are,” she said, and padded the doll’s hips with stuffing, sewed a simple plaid sundress and gently pulled it over the doll’s soft shoulders, and sewed an open mouth with violet thread. “God, you hate that color, don’t you? Me too. I don’t know what I was thinking.” She ripped out the mouth, leaving a blank space marred by needle pricks, then held the doll to her ear, her cheek. Gulls screamed over the crooning on the radio and Lucy pushed back her chair and stood up abruptly. The room swayed before her and she made her way into the darkened bedroom, where she looked at herself in the speckled mirror over the bureau. “You’re a freak,” she told herself, then sorry, came closer and looked at into her eyes, at her pale eyebrows and quivering mouth.

Lucy woke, suddenly, sprawled on the bed clenching the mouthless doll, a ball of yarn under her cheek. She heard Harry shuffling around in the kitchen, clinking glasses. Had she left the bourbon on the table? She didn’t remember, but her head throbbed and when she stood up, shakily, and looked at herself in the mirror she barely recognized herself—before her a blotchy, misshapen woman stared back, attempting a smile. Lucy tried to smooth the sleep wrinkles from her cheek and walked cautiously into the kitchen. Harry was sitting where she had been, amidst piles of fabric and her empty glass, staring at the phone. She cleared her throat. “Where’s Anna?”

Harry didn't look at her. "She got hit pretty hard, right in the noggin," he said. "Playing catch with some idiots. I put her down in the green room. What did her parents say?"

"They, um, I haven't talked to them."

"Did they call?"

"Yes, but when I called back they weren't home."

"Give me the phone," Harry said.

"What are you going to tell them?"

"Get me the number."

Lucy fished her address book from her bag and opened it to the G's. Harry grabbed it, and with his other hand grabbed her wrist; the skin puckered where he held it. His eyes were bright, glittering. "You think this is funny? It isn't, all right? It's very, very serious. Why did you even bring her here, so you could get drunk and see how well I managed?" He pushed her away. "*Christ,*" he said.

Lucy wet a washcloth in the bathroom and tiptoed down the hall to Anna's room. The little girl was snoring softly, both arms raised over her head, with the tail of Harry's old stuffed monkey held tightly in one fist. There was a welt the size of a walnut on her forehead and Lucy placed the cloth over it, then sat down on the edge of the bed. She wondered about the Gordons; what did they really believe? Did they sit together at the kitchen table and play board games? Did Mr. Gordon come home and kiss his wife tenderly, knowing his children were watching, pleased that they were witness to his trustworthy, substantial love?

Lucy lay carefully beside Anna, not wanting to disturb her. Anna's breath was moist on the back of her neck, and she was murmuring softly.

"What are you doing?" the girl said, more clearly.

Lucy sat up. "Oh, I was just checking on you," she said, embarrassed.

"I don't want to be here," Anna said. "Where's my mom?"

"I'm so sorry," Lucy whispered, and left the room without looking back, closed the door and stood with her forehead against it. Harry was still in the kitchen talking to the Gordons, and Lucy got on her hands and knees and crawled down the hall and through the kitchen. She pushed the screen open quietly and slipped out.

The wind was rustling through the marsh grass and the cicadas quieted as she crept down the wooden steps and onto the beach. Lucy took off her shoes, and started to run. When she was out of breath, she walked, hands on her hips, looking up at the sky. The reddening sun hung low in the sky and its light danced on the waves, and at her feet, small ripples of foam spread lazily over the sand and returned to the sea. Lucy had not been in the ocean for years; she had, in fact, thrown away her bathing suit, unwilling to be stared at, appraised. But now she looked down the shoreline, found it empty save for two preoccupied bodysurfers, and pulled her sundress over her head, stepped out of her underpants and unhooked her bra. The three by five fluttered to her feet and was quickly caught in the foamy tide. She watched it go.

The water was warmer than she'd expected, and she walked deeper into waves. Floating with her eyes closed Lucy tried to remember when she had ever felt so soothed. The gentle rise and fall lifted and pulled her, and she thought of the southern California beaches of her childhood, where she and her brothers would body-surf all day, standing

with their backs to the sea, braced against its power. She remembered how the rhythm pulled at her for hours, how lying in bed the night afterwards she could still feel the waves breaking on her skin.

From down the beach Lucy heard her name, and she opened her eyes. Harry was standing near the shore wearing a white cap, calling after her. She squinted, saw her clothes heaped on the sand, then heard his voice louder, closer. Turning toward the horizon she saw that two pelicans had landed less than twenty feet away and were bobbing in the water, their beaks opening like bellows. She spread her arms through the water that seemed impossibly soft, flagellates dotting the waters like bits of mica. Lucy cupped her hands and brought them up to see the tiny glitters against her skin.

She heard her name again. Harry would not come in after her, she knew this, though if he did it would be worse. She had gone too far and she knew it. On the shore she saw Anna standing beside him. She thought about waving to show them she was fine, but she wasn't really, and doubted they could see her anyway. Squatting so only her eyes and the top of her head were above the water Lucy watched them walking, calling for her. Harry's white cap was like the spot that stuck in her vision when she was getting a migraine; when she closed her eyes it was still visible, glowing. He would be happy if she were dead. It would save him the trouble of killing her, himself. Lucy shivered and wrapped her arms around herself, suddenly unable to remember how or why she entered the ocean in the first place. She looked toward the beach. Empty. They had given up on her. The lights of the beach house were far away, now, and Lucy lay back and floated with her eyes closed, letting the warm water push and pull her, gently, away. Her mother's voice came to her and said, *Go while you can, honey. Go while you can.*

“Lucy,” Harry said, yanking her up. His voice was terrible, low and frightened. He held her tightly, and she struggled like a cat in his arms. “I thought you were dead,” he said. “Oh God, oh God.” He rocked her, hard. “What’s wrong with you? Do you hate me?” he asked. “You want to kill yourself? To get away from me you want to die?”

“No, baby, no,” she whispered. She saw him clearly then, only a large man in her arms who was weak, and scared. She kissed his downturned mouth, whispering, “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.” His skin was smooth and salty and she rubbed her lips over his cheeks and forehead. The red clouds on the horizon had flattened to a dull orange and were sinking, breaking apart, and she suddenly felt as if something heavy in chest had opened, spilling light, glowing and gold. She smoothed Harry’s hair off his face and kissed him again, harder, wanting to kiss him until his lips were crushed and bloody beneath hers. He held her up in the water and she pulled his shorts down with her feet. She forgot about Anna waiting on the shore, and let him push into her, flooding her body with heat.

“I need you,” he said, his hands in her hair. “Christ, Lucy. Don’t you know I need you?”

When they waded back to shore they found it empty. “She was right here. We weren’t gone that long,” Harry said, but he was clearly worried. “I’ll check the house,” he said, then glanced at his wife. “For Christ’s sake,” he snapped, “cover yourself.”

Lucy watched him run toward the house, his shoulders tensed, bunching toward his neck. She squinted and found her soggy clothes twenty yards away and hurried toward them, though she knew the beach was empty. She knew it was. Anna was gone.

She shook the sand out of her sundress and pulled it over her head, the cotton scratching at her cold skin. She opened her mouth to weep, but no sound came out, just a whumping pain in her chest and the knowledge that everything that had happened today was her fault. No amount of explaining or tears would change that. Lucy made her way to the house, and threw open the door to the shower-house, hoping to see Anna huddled, hiding, among the old beach towels and spider webs. But it, too, was vacant but for the musty smell of disuse. She slowly climbed the stairs, dragging her hand deliberately against the splintery railing. Harry, wild-eyed, flung open the screen door as she reached the porch.

“She’s not here,” Harry said. “She’s not hiding. She wouldn’t be hiding. I know it.”

“I checked the shower house,” Lucy said, and flinched as he shoved past her roughly, taking the stairs two at a time. He screamed Anna’s name, his voice like a swinging hatchet. Lucy followed, calling in the spaces his voice didn’t fill, squinting at every shadowed shape before her—the wind-stunted trees, ancient boulders, and wooden furniture chained to porch railings. For a moment, everything looked as if it could be a little girl, and then changed back to its true form: a rusty spigot with bricks stacked around it, a dismembered rowboat, the bleached bones of a dog. The once gentle waves crashed violently on the sand and she imagined Anna struggling to stay afloat, crying out unheard.

Harry’s ragged voice cut through the wind again and Lucy heard a car, then saw headlights spreading over the sand. She screamed her husband’s name. A police sedan moved slowly up the uneven driveway and Lucy froze as Julie Gordon pulled herself from the car and loped clumsily toward her, through the drifted sand and sea oats. The

siren's anguished wail rose and nearly drowned out the sound of the waves and the wind smashing the screen door against the side of the house. Lucy felt her knees give and was sinking down, slowly, when Harry caught and steadied her. He was panting, and shook her a little. "Get up, Lucy," he said. "Now."

"Where's Anna?" Julie Gordon shouted, shrilly, her voice lost in the sound of the siren. "Where is she?"

Lucy watched Julie Gordon's mouth opening and closing and felt Harry's shoulder rising and falling against hers. She closed her eyes to block the sight of such pain, and tried to remember how to pray—to pray for Anna, for Julie Gordon and for herself, that she would know the anguish she saw in her neighbor's face. Harry grabbed Lucy's hand and squeezed, and she squeezed back, hard as she could, then made herself open her eyes.