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LAKE

ANN PATCHETT

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Tom Lake

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For Kate DiCamillo
who held the lantern high

TOM LAKE

ANN PATCHETT

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Tom Lake

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Author's Note

A Note on the Author

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That Veronica and I were given keys and told to come early on a frozen Saturday in April to open the school for the *Our Town* auditions was proof of our dull reliability. The play's director, Mr. Martin, was my grandmother's friend and State Farm agent. That's how I was wrangled in, through my grandmother, and Veronica was wrangled because we did pretty much everything together. Citizens of New Hampshire could not get enough of *Our Town*. We felt about the play the way other Americans felt about the Constitution or the "Star--Spangled Banner." It spoke to us, made us feel special and seen. Mr. Martin predicted a large turnout for the auditions, which explained why he needed use of the school gym for the day. The community theater production had nothing to do with our high school, but seeing as how Mr. Martin was also the principal's insurance agent and very likely his friend, the request was granted. Ours was that kind of town.

We arrived with our travel mugs of coffee and thick paperback novels, *Firestarter* for Veronica and *Doctor Zhivago* for me. I liked school fine but hated the gym and everything it stood for: team sports, pep rallies, vicious games of kickball, running in circles when it was too cold to go outside, formal dances, graduations. But on that Saturday morning the place was empty and strangely beautiful. The sunlight poured in through the narrow windows just below the roofline. I don't think I'd ever realized the gym had windows. The floors and the walls and the bleachers were all made of the same strips of pale wood. The stage was on one end behind the basketball hoop, its heavy red curtains pulled back to reveal matte-black nothingness. That's where the action was scheduled to take place. We had instructions to set up one banquet table and five folding chairs in front of the stage ("Close but not too close," Mr. Martin had told us) and then ninety-two feet away, under the opposing basketball hoop, we were to set up a second banquet table right in front of the doors to the lobby. That second table was for registration, which was our job. We wrestled the two folding tables from the storage closet. We brought out folding chairs. We were to spend our morning explaining how to fill out the form: *Name, Stage Name if Different, Height, Hair Color, Age (in categories of seven years—please check one), Phone Number*. The hopefuls had been asked to bring a headshot and a résumé, listing all the roles they'd played before. We had a cup full of pens. For people who arrived without résumés there was space to write things in, and Veronica was prepared to take a Polaroid of anyone who didn't have a headshot and then paper-clip it to the form. Mr. Martin told us we weren't to make anyone feel embarrassed for having less experience because, and this was what he actually said, "Sometimes that's where the diamonds are."

But Veronica and I were not theater girls. Theater girls had not been asked to do this job in case they wanted to try out for a part. We were regular girls who would've had no idea how to make adults feel judged based on their lack of theatrical experience. Once we had the person's paperwork, we were to hand over the pages they would be asked to read from, which Mr. Martin told us were called "sides," along with a number printed on a square of paper, and then we would direct them back out to the lobby to wait.

When the doors opened at eight o'clock, so many people flooded in that Veronica and I had to hustle back to our table to get ahead of the crowd. We were instantly, overwhelmingly at work.

"Yes," I assured one woman and then another, "if you read for Mrs. Gibbs, you'll still be considered for Mrs. Webb." What I didn't say, though it was rapidly becoming evident, was that if you read for Emily you would still be considered for Emily's mother. In a high school production it was not uncommon for someone fifteen to play the parent of someone seventeen, but community theater was a different cat. That morning the hopefuls were all ages, not just old men looking to be the Stage Manager, but college types who came to read for Emily and George. (The Emilys wore too much makeup and dressed like the Amish girls who sold cinnamon buns at the farmer's market. The Georges slyly checked out the other Georges.) Bona fide children approached our table announcing they were there to read for Wally or Rebecca. Parents must have been looking for childcare because what ten-year-old boy announces over breakfast that he wants to be Wally Webb?

"If all these people come back and buy a ticket, they'll have a smash on their hands," Veronica said. "The whole production can go straight to Broadway and we'll be rich."

"How does that make *us* rich?" I asked.

Veronica said she was extrapolating.

Mr. Martin had thought of everything except clipboards, which turned out to be a real oversight. People were using our table as a desk, creating a bottleneck in the flow of traffic. I tried to decide if it was more depressing to see the people I knew or the people I didn't know. Cheryl, who worked the register at Major Market and must have been my mother's age, was holding a résumé and headshot in her mittened hands. If Cheryl had always wanted to be an actress, I didn't think I could ever go to the grocery store again. Then there were the rafts of strangers, men and women bundled in their coats and scarves, looking around the gym in a way that made it clear they'd never seen it before. It struck me as equally sad to think of these people driving for who knew how long on this frozen morning because it meant they were willing to keep driving here for rehearsals and performances straight into summer.

"'All the world's a stage,'" Veronica said, because Veronica could read my mind, "and all the men and women merely want to be players."

I accepted a résumé and headshot from the father of my friend Marcia, which she pronounced *Mar-see-a*. I had sat at this man's dinner table, ridden in the back seat of his station wagon when he took his family for ice cream, slept in the second twin bed of his daughter's rose-pink bedroom. I pretended not to know him because I thought that was the kindest course of action.

"Laura," he said, smiling with all his teeth. "Good morning! Some sort of crowd."

I agreed that it was, then gave him his number and the sides and told him to go back out to the lobby to wait.

"Where's the restroom?" he asked.

It was mortifying. Even the men wanted to know where the restroom was. They wanted to fluff up their hair that had been flattened by sock hats. They wanted to read their part aloud to themselves in the mirror to see how they looked. I told him the one by the Language Arts Center would be less crowded.

"You girls look busy," my grandmother said. She came up from behind us just as Marcia's father walked away.

"Do you want a part?" Veronica asked her. "I know people. I can make you a star." Veronica loved my grandmother. Everyone did.

"I'm just here to take a look." My grandmother glanced back to the table in front of the stage to indicate that she would be sitting with Mr. Martin and the theater people. My grandmother, who owned *Stitch-It*, the alterations shop in town, had volunteered to make the

costumes, which meant that she'd volunteered me to make the costumes as well since I worked for her after school. She kissed the top of my head before crossing the long, empty stretch of the basketball court towards that faraway table.

Auditions were to have begun promptly at ten, but thanks to the clipboard situation it was past ten-thirty. Once everyone had been registered, Veronica said she would cull out small groups according to their numbers and the roles they had come for, then herd them down the hallway to wait. "I'll be the sheepdog," she said, getting up from our table. I would stay and silently register the stragglers. Mr. Martin and my grandmother took their seats with three other people at the table in front of the stage and just that fast the gym, which had been booming all morning, fell to silence. Veronica was to escort the would-be actors down the hall and up the stairs, through the backstage, and right to the edge of the stage when their names were called. The actors waiting to audition were not allowed to watch the other auditions, and the actors who had finished their auditions were instructed to leave unless specifically asked to stay. All the Stage Managers would go first (the Stage Manager being the biggest and most important part in the play) followed by all the Georges and Emilys, and then the other Webbs (Mister and Missus and Wally) and the other Gibbses (Doctor and Missus and Rebecca). The smaller roles would be awarded on a runner-up basis. No one leaves home hoping to land the part of Constable Warren, but if Constable Warren is what you are offered, you take it.

"Mr. Saxon," Mr. Martin called out. "You'll be reading the beginning of the second act." All the Stage Managers would be reading the beginning of the second act.

That I could hear the light shuffle of Mr. Saxon's footsteps crossing the stage surprised me. "I'm first?" Mr. Saxon had failed to consider that this would be the outcome of arriving at a high school gym half an hour before the doors opened.

"You, sir, are the first," Mr. Martin said. "Please begin when you're ready."

And so Mr. Saxon cleared his throat and, after waiting a full minute longer than what would have been merely awkward, he began. "Three years have gone by," he said. "Yes, the sun's come up over a thousand times."

I continued to face the lobby as I had all morning, though now those two sets of double doors were closed. Mr. Martin and my grandmother and the people sitting with them were far away, their backs to me, my back to them, and poor Mr. Saxon, who was dying a terrible death up there, was doubtlessly looking at the director and not the back of a high school girl. Still, as a courtesy, I did not turn around. He went all the way to the end of the page. "There! You can hear the 5:45 for Boston," he said finally, his voice flooded with relief. The reading lasted two minutes and I wondered how anyone could have thought it wise to have picked such a long passage.

"Thank you very much," Mr. Martin said, his voice devoid of encouragement.

Such a sadness welled in me. If Veronica had been there we would have played a silent game of hangman, adding a limb for every word Mr. Saxon hit too plaintively. We would have refused to look at each other for fear of laughing. But Veronica was in the hallway, and no one had come in late the way we'd been so sure they would. As it turned out, the auditioners had all had the same idea: arrive promptly, register, and stand in line as directed—thus proving themselves to be good at taking direction. Mr. Martin called out for the second hopeful, Mr. Parks.

"Should I start at the top of the page where it's marked?" Mr. Parks asked.

"That would be just fine," Mr. Martin said.

"Three years have gone by," Mr. Parks said, and then waited three years in order to underscore the point. "Yes." He paused again. "The sun's come up over a thousand times."

Mr. Parks was playing to Maine, not New Hampshire. Were I to turn around I no doubt would have seen a man in a yellow slicker, a lobster tucked beneath his arm. Silently, I

reached into the backpack hanging from my chair and felt for my copy of *Doctor Zhivago*. This had always been the plan: they would audition and I would read, and when we got bored Veronica and I would swap our posts so she could read. Mr. Parks was nowhere near the end of the page. The good thing about *Doctor Zhivago* was that the plot was sufficiently convoluted so as to require all of my brain. I didn't much like the novel but I wanted to see what would happen to Lara. Still, by the sixth time some aspiring Stage Manager announced that the sun had come up, I realized Pasternak was no match for my circumstances and I turned my chair around.

One after the other, the Stage Managers walked out onto the proscenium and began. The awkward ways these men held their bodies, and how the paper trembled in their hands, were things no high school girl should ever see. Some of them had decent voices, but tip them off the side of a boat and they would go down like anchors. Zero buoyancy. Others were okay in their bodies, pacing around with one hand stuffed in a pocket, but they sounded out each word phonetically. The dichotomy was neck-up neck-down: Some had one and some had the other, but no one managed both and several managed neither. Put together, the Stage Managers were a car crash, a multiple-vehicle pileup, and I could not look away.

Despite all evidence, it was nearly springtime in New Hampshire. My junior year was seven weeks from its completion but I kept thinking that this was the first day of my true education. None of the books I'd read were as important as this, none of the math tests or history papers had taught me how to act, and by "act" I don't mean on a stage, I mean in life. What I was seeing was nothing less than how to present myself in the world. Watching actors who had memorized their lines and been coached along for months was one thing, but seeing adults stumble and fail was something else entirely. The magic was in identifying where each one went wrong. Mr. Anderson, a loan officer from Liberty Bank, had brought a pipe, a prop that may have been all right to hold, but which he kept clenched between his teeth. A person didn't have to act to know that the ability to separate one's jaws was helpful in speaking, and yet I knew it and he didn't. Then, in the middle of the two-minute speech, he folded the sheet of paper he was reading from, slipped it into the inside pocket of his suit jacket, pulled a box of wooden matches from the patch pocket of that jacket and lit the pipe. The puffing it took to pull the fire into the tobacco, the little flame flashing up from the bowl, it was all part of his audition. Then he put the box of matches and the spent match back in his pocket, removed the page of script, unfolded it and resumed his performance while the sweet pipe smoke drifted towards the rafters and worked its way back to me.

That Mr. Martin didn't just stand up and say forget it, I have no interest in directing *Our Town*, was a testament to his fortitude. Instead, he coughed and thanked Mr. Anderson for his time. Mr. Anderson, nodding gravely, departed.

Every Stage Manager came with an unintended lesson: clarity, intention, simplicity. They were teaching me. Like all my friends, I was wondering what I should do with my life. Plenty of days I thought I would be an English teacher because English was my best class and the idea of a life spent reading and making other people read appealed to me. I was forever jotting down ideas for my syllabus in the back of a spiral notebook, thinking how we'd start with *David Copperfield*, but no sooner had I committed myself to teaching, I wrote off to request an application for the Peace Corps. I loved books, of course I did, but how could I spend my life in a classroom knowing that wells needed to be dug and mosquito nets needed to be distributed?

The Peace Corps would be the most direct route to doing something truly decent with my life. Decency, a word I used to cover any aspect of being a good person, factored heavily into my thinking about the future. Being a veterinarian was decent—we all wanted to be veterinarians at some point—but it meant taking chemistry, and chemistry made me nervous.

But why was I always reaching for six-hundred-page British novels and hard sciences and

jobs that would require malaria vaccinations? Why not do something I was already good at? My friends all thought I should take over my grandmother's alterations shop because I knew how to sew and they didn't. Their mothers didn't. When I turned a hem or took in a waistband, they looked at me like I was Prometheus coming down from Olympus with fire.

If you wonder where the decency is in alterations, I can tell you: my grandmother. She was both a seamstress and a fountain of human decency. When Veronica spoke about the jeans I diverted from the Goodwill bag by tapering the legs, she said, "You saved my life!" People liked their clothes to fit, so making them fit was helpful, decent. My grandmother—who always had a yellow tape measure hanging around her neck and a pin cushion held to her wrist with a strip of elastic (the pincushion corsage I called it) taught me that.

Watching these men recite the same lines so badly while polishing their glasses with giant white handkerchiefs really made me think about my life.

"Wait, wait, wait, you wanted to be a vet?" Maisie shakes her head. "You never wanted to be a vet. You never said that before." Maisie will begin her third year of veterinary school in the fall, if in fact there is school in the fall.

"I did for a while. You know how it is in high school."

"You wanted to be a pediatrician in high school," Nell says to her sister in my defense.

"Could someone explain to me what any of this has to do with Peter Duke?" Emily asks. "What does sewing have to do with Duke?"

My girls have directed me to start the story at the beginning when they have no interest in the beginning. They want to hear the parts they want to hear with the rest cut out to save time. "If you think you can do a better job then tell the story yourself," I say, standing, though not in a punitive way. I stretch my hands up over my head. "The three of you can tell it to one another." God knows there's work to be done around here.

"Shush," Nell says to her sisters. She pats the sofa. "Come here," she says to me. "Come back. We're listening." Nell knows how to move people around.

Emily, the eldest, sweeps her magnitude of silky dark hair over one shoulder. "I just thought this was going to be about Duke. That's all I'm saying."

"Stop flipping your hair," Maisie says, irritated. Maisie had her father cut her hair short in the spring and she misses it. Her little dog Hazel stands up, turns three awkward circles on the couch then falls over into a comfortable ball. They tell me they're ready.

All three girls are in their twenties now, and for all their evolution and ostensible liberation, they have no interest in a story that is not about a handsome, famous man. Still, I am their mother, and they understand that they will have to endure me in order to get to him. I take back my place on the sofa and begin again, knowing full well that the parts they're waiting to hear are the parts I'm never going to tell them.

"Duke," Emily says. "We're ready."

"I promise you, he doesn't get here for a while."

"Is that all the Stage Managers?" Mr. Martin said finally, his voice tired.

Veronica's dear head popped out from the edge of the curtain. "That's all of them," she called, and then her eyes caught mine. She jerked her head back a split second before starting to laugh.

Mr. Martin picked his thermos off the floor and unscrewed the cap while his cohorts whispered among themselves. "Onward," he said.

While the Stage Manager is a solitary character, George and Emily exist in relation to each other and to their families, so the Georges and the Emilys auditioned in pairs. Again,

Mr. Martin had chosen readings from the second act, which, in my opinion (and the high school girl at the back of the gym was newly loaded with opinions) was the practical choice. The first short exchange showed off more of Emily and the second one showed more of George, unless you were taking into account a person's ability to listen, in which case the primacy was reversed.

I wondered if the pairs had been put together based on any two people standing next to each other in line, or if Veronica was back there doing something funny, because the first George looked to be about sixteen, and the first Emily, not that I knew, looked every hard day of thirty-five. Rumor had it certain women wanted to play Emily forever. They criss-crossed New Hampshire town to town, year after year, trying to land the part. This one wore her hair in pigtails.

Mr. Martin asked if they were ready, and straightaway George began.

"Emily, why are you mad at me?" he said. I had the page from the script in my lap.

Emily blinked. Clearly, she was mad at George, but she struggled to decide whether or not to tell him. Then she turned and looked at Mr. Martin. She shielded her eyes with her hand the way you see people do in the movies when they're talking to directors out in the audience, but since there were no stage lights to squint into, the gesture failed. "I wasn't ready," she said.

"Not to worry," Mr. Martin said. "Just start again."

I imagined him talking to people about car insurance, life insurance, how State Farm would be there if their home burned to the ground. I bet he made it easy for them.

"Emily, why are you mad at me?" George said again.

She looked at George like she might kill him, then turned back to Mr. Martin. "He can't just *start* like that," Emily said. "I have to be ready."

I didn't understand what was happening, and then I did: She had lost. Like a horse that stumbles straight out of the gate. She hadn't even started and it was over.

"We can do it again," Mr. Martin said. "No matter."

"But it *does* matter." Would she cry? That's what we were waiting to see.

The boy was tall with a crazy thatch of light-brown hair that looked for all the world like he'd cut it himself in the dark. The expression on his face made me think he'd been working over some aspect of baseball in his head and just now realized he was in trouble. "I'm awfully sorry," George said, exactly the way George would say it—sorry and concerned and slightly buffaloed by the whole thing. In short, this guy was going ahead with his audition, and Emily knew that, too.

"I want to get back in line," she said, teetering. "I want to read with someone else."

"That's fine," Mr. Martin said, and before she had so much as turned, he called out in a louder voice, "We need another Emily."

We were rich in Emilys. So many more Emilys than Georges. I knew that from registration. The Emily going out passed the Emily coming in, a girl some fifteen years younger whose yellow hair was loose and shining. She put a little swish in her hips so that her pretty skirt swayed. It was scary to see how fast time goes. I knew the first one would not be getting back in the line.

That George though, I liked him. The Stage Managers had set a very low bar. That George stayed through three more rounds and each time he did something different, something particular that was in response to the Emily he was reading with. When the Emily was shrill, he was matter-of-fact. When the Emily was timid, he was quietly protective. The third one—who knew how she managed it so quickly—started to cry. Just a few tears at first, impressive really, but then she lost control of herself and was bawling. "George, *please* don't think of that. I don't know why I said it—"

George pulled out his handkerchief. Did they all carry one? He dabbed at her face,

making a single shushing sound that somehow, miraculously, shushed her. At the back of the gym I shivered.

Many of the Georges who followed read their lines as if they were trying out for Peter Pan. The older they were, the more they leapt in a scene that did not call for leaping. The Emilys were tremulous, emotive, cramming the breadth of human experience into every line. They were *Angry* and *Sorry* and *Very Moved*. I started to wonder if the part was more difficult than I'd imagined.

Listen to yourself, I wanted to call out from the back of the gym. Listen to what you're saying.

A mediocre George could stay through three or four Emilys simply because he was needed, though if he was hopeless he stayed for only one. The Stage Managers had embarrassed me, and the Georges, at least after the first one, bored me, but the Emilys irritated me deeply. They were playing the smartest student in her high school class as if she were a half-wit. Emily Webb asked questions, told the truth, and knew her mind, while these Emilys bunched up their prairie skirts in their hands and mewled like kittens. Didn't any of them remember what it was like to be the smart girl? No high school girls had come to try out for the part, at least no girls from my high school, probably because there would be too many rehearsals on nights better spent doing homework or waiting tables for tips or hanging out with friends. No one had come to speak for our kind.

And so when Emily and George left the stage, in the moment before the next Emily and George arrived, I turned my chair around. For a minute I told myself I would go back to *Doctor Zhivago*, but reached for a registration form instead. It wasn't that I wanted to be an actress, it was that I knew that I could do a better job. *Name* the form said. *Stage Name if Different*. I printed my name: *Laura Kenison*. Other than my address, phone number, date of birth, I had nothing to offer, no way to turn my after-school job at Stitch-It into theatrical experience. I listened to the audition behind me. "Well, UP unTIL a YEAR ago I USED to like YOU a LOT," Emily sang. I folded up the registration form and put it in my copy of Pasternak, then took a fresh sheet and started again. This time I spelled my name L-A-R-A, tossing out the "u" my parents had given me at birth because I believed this new spelling to be Russian and worldly. I decided Mr. Martin had been right. I decided that I would be the diamond.

“You had a ‘u’ in your name?” Emily looks at me skeptically.

“For sixteen years.”

“Did you know she had a ‘u’?” she asks her sisters, and they shake their heads, mystified by what I’ve withheld from them.

“There’s a lot you don’t know,” I say.

Hazel the dog looks at me.

“I didn’t know it was going to be funny,” Maisie says.

“No idea,” Nell says.

“It isn’t funny,” I tell them. “You know that. It isn’t a funny story except for the parts that are.”

“Life,” Nell says, dropping her head against my shoulder in a way that touches me. “Keep going. I’m thinking the hot George is still going to be there.”

I waited for the George and Emily on the stage to finish before going out to the lobby, the application in my hand, the Polaroid camera around my neck. Somehow I’d forgotten there would still be so many people waiting to try out for the other parts: the Gibbises and the Webbs. Men and women and children were pacing, silently mouthing the words on the pages they held. I was one of them now. I was about to tell George I was disappointed in him because all he ever thought about was baseball and was no longer the boy I considered to be my friend.

A scant handful of Georges and Emilys sat in the hallway that went back to the stage. Everyone had a chair except for Veronica and the first George, the good one. They were sitting together on the stairs and he was making her laugh, which, I can tell you, was not the hardest thing in the world to do. Her black hair swung down across one flushed cheek, and I realized that we should have swapped our posts two hours ago. I had forgotten because I’d been studying at the school of theatrical auditions, and she had forgotten because she’d been talking to George. You really couldn’t hear the stage from the hallway, which was why she stayed close to the door, propping it open just a little bit with her fat Stephen King novel. Whatever else was going on, Veronica never stopped paying attention to the stage.

When she looked up and saw me there with the camera she raised one magnificent eyebrow. Veronica’s eyebrows were thick and black and she tweezed them into delicate submission. She could get more information across with an eyebrow than other people could with a microphone. She knew I was going to read for Emily, and that I would get the part. I used to say Veronica could never play poker because her thoughts passed across her forehead like a tickertape. She realized that she could have read for Emily, and then she could have been the one to come to rehearsals with this guy. They could have practiced their lines in his car, and raised their clasped hands above their heads at the end of every performance, bowing one more time before the curtain came down. But Veronica almost never got to go out at

night because her mother was a nurse who worked the second shift and her stepfather was long gone and she had to look after her brothers. We both had two brothers, yet another bond between us, though mine were much older and hers, technically half brothers, were little kids. If it hadn't been for those brothers, Veronica would have made a truly great Emily.

"Really?" she asked me.

I nodded, handing her the camera. She stood to take the clip out of my hair.

"You have to go last," she said. "No jumping line. If Jimmy's still around he can read with you."

Jimmy looked me dead in the eye and reached out his hand. We shook on it. "No place I'd rather be," he said.

I went back down the hall and took my seat. I didn't want anyone to think I was getting preferential treatment, which, of course, I was. I didn't have to run to the bathroom with Veronica to know what she was doing. Mr. Martin needed to find an Emily in a field with no contenders. All his hopes would be pinned on whatever girl came last. I had audited over four hours of AP acting classes, which didn't mean I knew how to act, but I sure as hell knew how not to. All I had to do was say the words and not get in the way.

When the last pair had gone and it was just me and Veronica and Jimmy-George in the hall, I asked Veronica to braid my hair.

Jimmy-George shook his head and Veronica agreed with him. "It's prettier down," she said.

I was wearing jeans and duck boots and my brother Hardy's old U. New Hampshire sweatshirt. Go Wildcats.

"You would have told me, right?" Veronica said. "If this was always the master plan?"

"You know I never have a plan." Why did it feel like I was leaving her?

She cocked her head like you do when you hear the sound of a door opening somewhere in the house, then she put her arms around me and squeezed. "Kill it," she whispered.

The gym was the gym again, site of all humiliations: the running, the kickball, the dancing, the play. I wanted to teach English, join the Peace Corps, save a dog's life, sew a dress. Acting had not been on the list. When I handed my form to one of the men who stood to take it, I very nearly cried out from the fear. Was this how the Stage Managers felt? Was this the reason they lit their pipes and fiddled with their hats? The Georges leapt, the Emilys twirled their fingers through their hair like they were practicing the baton, all because they knew they were going to die up there. My grandmother was watching, and I knew she must be so afraid for me. I closed my eyes for one second, telling myself it would all go so fast. Jimmy was George and I was Emily and we knew our parts by heart.

"Emily, why are you mad at me?" George said.

"I'm not mad at you," I said.

It was a simple conversation between two childhood friends who were about to fall in love. I said the lines the way I'd heard them in my head all morning, and when we were finished, Mr. Martin and my grandmother and the three men who were with them stood and clapped their hands.

I look at my watch. It's easy to forget how late it is because the sun stays up forever in the summer. "We're switching to montage now," I tell the girls. "I won't put you through any more of high school."

"But what about the play?" Emily asks, her impossible legs over the back of the couch. Emily has never been able to sit on furniture like a normal person. I lost that fight when she was still a child. Whoever installed her interior compass put the magnet in upside down.

"You know all about the play, and anyway, it comes up a lot. We have to pace ourselves."

“What happened to Veronica and Jimmy-George?” Maisie asks. “I’ve never heard a word about either of them.”

“We lost touch.”

Maisie snorts. “There is no such thing as losing touch.” She pulls her phone from the pocket of her shorts and wags it at me like some wonderful new invention. “What are their last names?”

I look at her and smile.

“You can at least tell us which one of you ended up with him,” Nell says.

“We all ended up with ourselves.”

The girls groan in harmony. It’s their best trick.

Emily reaches over and tugs on my shirt. “Give us something.”

We will be back in the orchard hours from now. If they don’t go to bed soon they’ll be worthless tomorrow, though I don’t tell them that. I labor to tell them as little as possible. “The play was a big success. We were scheduled for six performances and we got extended to ten. A reporter came from Concord and wrote us up in the *Monitor*.”

My picture was on the front page of the weekend section. My grandmother bought five copies. I found them stacked in the bottom of her blanket chest after she died.

Nell asks who played the Stage Manager. Nell is an actress. She has to see the whole thing in her head.

The Stage Manager. There had been so many Stage Managers. I have to think about it. The bad ones are all so clear in my mind, but who got the part? He was good, I know that. I try to picture him walking me to the cemetery. “Marcia’s father!” I cry, because even if I don’t remember his name, I see his face as clear as day. The brain is a remarkable thing, what’s lost snaps right into focus and you’ve done nothing at all. “He was trying out for Doc Gibbs but he was better than the other men so Mr. Martin made him the Stage Manager.” He lacked the hubris to believe that he should have the lead, that’s what made him good. Marcia was humiliated by the thought of me spending time with her father. She avoided me through all the rehearsals and then the play, wouldn’t sit with me at lunch, wouldn’t look at me, but when we came back in the fall for our senior year we were fine again.

“And Jimmy was George?” Emily asks.

“Clearly, Jimmy was George,” Maisie says.

“Jimmy was George,” I say.

“Was he as good a George as Duke?” Emily asks. Oh, the look that comes over her when she says Duke’s name. I wish I’d had the wherewithal to lie about everything, continuously, right from the start.

“Duke never played George.”

Maisie raises a hand to object. “Who was he then?”

“He was Mr. Webb.”

“No,” Nell says. “No. At Tom Lake? Duke was George.”

“I was there. None of you were born.”

“But all three of us can’t have it wrong,” Emily says, as if their math outweighs my life.

“You remember it that way because it makes a better story if Duke was George and I was Emily. That doesn’t mean it’s true.”

They mull on this for a minute.

“But that means he played your father,” Maisie says.

As if on cue, their own father walks in the back door, his pants bristling with chaff. Hazel raises her head and barks until Maisie shushes her. Hazel barks at the entrance of any man.

“Workers,” he says to us, clapping his hands. “Go to bed.”

“Daddy, we’re old,” says Nell, the youngest. “You can’t send us to bed.”

Emily, our farmer, Emily, who plans to take all of this over when we are old, looks at her

watch. “Mom was just about to switch to montage.”

“What’s the story?” he asks, pulling off his boots by the door the way I’ve asked him to for years.

The girls look at one another and then at me.

“The past,” I say.

“Ah,” he says, and takes off his glasses. “I’ll be in the shower. No excuses in the morning though.”

“Promise,” we all say.

And so I endeavor to take us through the boring parts as quickly as possible.

My senior year I signed up for drama club. I played Annie Sullivan in *The Miracle Worker* with a very small seventh grader named Sissy who had to be reminded not to break the skin when she bit me. We slung each other all over the stage. The big spring musical was *Bye Bye Birdie*, and I played Rosie DeLeon. No one would call me a singer but I didn’t embarrass myself. I got into Dartmouth and Penn without financial aid. I went to the University of New Hampshire, where the yearly bill, including tuition, room, board, books, and fees, came to just over \$2,500 after my merit scholarship. In college, I was no closer to knowing what I was going to do with my life than I’d been in high school. The University of New Hampshire didn’t offer fashion design and I still hadn’t signed up for chemistry. I kept the application for the Peace Corps in my desk. My grandmother had given me her beloved black Singer for graduation, a war horse, and I made pocket money shortening the corduroy skirts of sorority girls. The days filled up with British Literature and Introduction to Biology and piles of sewing. I fell asleep in the library, my head turned sideways on an open book. Acting never crossed my mind.

Or it didn’t until my junior year, when I saw an audition notice for *Our Town* tacked to a cork board in the student center. I was there to tack up my own notice: *Stitch-It, Speedy Alterations*. My first thought was that it would be fun to register people for the play, and my second thought was that I could try for Emily. There would be so much pleasure in saying those words again, and I understood the metrics by which one’s social sphere was enlarged by theater. Even as a junior, most of the kids I knew in college were the kids I’d gone to high school with.

In any given year more girls who had once played Emily attended the University of New Hampshire than any other university in the country, all of us thinking that we had nailed the part. What I wouldn’t have given to be in the room for their auditions, but this time I lacked a plausible excuse. I waited in the hallway with my number, wearing my brother’s Wildcats sweatshirt for luck.

Luck was everything.

Bill Ripley was in the audience on the night of the third performance. He was a tall man with perpetually flushed cheeks and a premature edge of gray in his dark hair that gave him an air of gravitas. He sat in the fifth row with his sister, his voluminous wool dress coat draped over his lap because he hadn’t wanted to wait in line for the coat check.

I called him The Talented Mr. Ripley because I’d seen the paperback once in a bookstore and liked the title. I thought of it as a compliment. Everyone in my family referred to him as Ripley-Believe-It-Or-Not. Both sobriquets contained an element of truth, which is not to suggest that Ripley was a sociopath, but rather that he had an ability to insert himself in other people’s lives and make them feel like he belonged there. The believe-it-or-not part was self-evident.

People don’t get scouted in Durham, New Hampshire, and Ripley was no scout. His sister lived in Boston, and he’d come to visit for her birthday. What she wanted, what she’d

specifically asked him for as a present, was that they drive up to Durham so that he could see his niece, her daughter Rae Ann, in the role of Mrs. Gibbs. Ripley's sister believed her daughter had talent, and she believed her brother owed her the consideration of a look.

I hadn't known Ripley's niece before the play, and even after a slew of rehearsals and three performances I still wouldn't say I knew her. She played my mother-in-law, and like every other girl in that production, Rae Ann had wanted to be Emily and so held my success quietly against me. That she won the role of Mrs. Gibbs spoke in her favor, and that she was completely flat in the part was hardly her fault. It's tough for a nineteen-year-old to be successful as a middle-aged mother pantomiming the feeding of chickens. Ripley cut her plenty of slack and still, he never turned his eyes to her. He hugged her after the curtain call and told her she was magnificent, then sent her off to the cast party with her mother, saying he would be along shortly. He loitered in the hallway with his coat, and when a girl came along he asked her where he could find Emily.

Nineteen eighty-four was nothing like what Orwell had envisioned and still it was a world nearly impossible to explain. A strange man in a suit knocked on the door to the dressing room before I'd had the chance to change back into my own clothes, and when I stuck out my head he said he wanted to talk to me and could we go somewhere quiet for a minute? I said sure, like a child taking instructions from an adult, which was the case. A small rehearsal room down the hall had a piano in it and a couch and a couple of folding chairs. I knew no one would be in there so late. I opened the door and ran my hand over the cold cinder block wall, feeling for the light switch. What was I thinking? That's the part I can't retrieve.

But this is a story about luck, at least in the early years, and so my luck continued to hold. Bill Ripley had not come to rape or dismember. He sat down on one of the folding chairs, leaving the couch for me. He told me he was a director. They were casting a new movie and this movie had a part for a girl, a critical part, really, but they hadn't found the right person yet. They'd been looking for quite some time but they hadn't found her.

I nodded, wishing I'd thought to leave the door open.

"You might be the girl." He was looking at me hard, and because I'd just come offstage and was not feeling particularly shy, I stared back at him. "What I mean is, I'm pretty sure you are her. I need you to come out to L.A. and take a screen test. Can you do that?"

"I've never been to Los Angeles," I said, when what I meant was, my family went to Florida once for spring break when I was ten and that was the only time I'd been on a plane.

He wrote a number down on the back of a business card and told me he was staying with his sister in Boston, and that I should call him the next morning at nine.

"I'm in class at nine." I could feel myself starting to sweat in Emily's long white dress.

He looked at his watch. "They're going to wonder where I am." He stood up and held out his hand so I shook it. "Let's keep this between us for now," he said.

"Sure," I said, wondering who I shouldn't tell.

"Rae Ann is my niece." He answered my question as if I'd asked it.

"Oh." Rae Ann. That made me feel better somehow.

"Tomorrow," he said, and I said, "Tomorrow" like I was a myna bird.

I did not lie awake in my dorm room that night wondering if I'd get the part. I wondered how many quarters I'd need to call someone in Boston during peak rates. Where could I get enough quarters? I wondered how much a plane ticket to Los Angeles would cost in terms of pairs of pants hemmed, and then on top of that the cost of the taxi from the airport and the hotel. Of course all of that was taken care of, though not as quickly as one might think. Bill Ripley straightened everything out, for a while at least. I had dithered around trying to decide what to do with my life for such a long time that he stepped in and made the decision for me. I was going to be an actress.

“Show me where the decency is in that!” Nell shouts, and we all break up laughing.

All three of our girls are home now. Emily came back to the farm after she graduated from college, while Maisie and Nell, still in school, returned in March. It was an anxious spring for the world, though from our kitchen window it played out just like every other spring in northern Michigan: wet and rainy and cold, followed by a late heavy snow, a sudden warm spell, and then the spectacle of trees in bloom. Emily and Maisie and Nell ignored the trees and chose to chip away at their sanity with news feeds instead. I finally put an end to the television being on in the evening because after we watched it, none of us slept. “Turn your head in one direction and it’s hopeless despair,” I told them. “Turn your head in the other direction—” I pointed to the explosion of white petals out the window.

“You can’t pretend this isn’t happening,” Maisie said.

I couldn’t, and I don’t. Nor do I pretend that all of us being together doesn’t fill me with joy. I understand that joy is inappropriate these days and still, we feel what we feel.

As we moved into summer and blossoms gave way to fruit, our circumstances shifted from *Here are our daughters and we are so glad to have them home*, to *Here are our daughters, who spent their childhood picking cherries and know how to do the job when only a fraction of our regular workers have come this year for seasonal employment*. Their father identified the girls sprawled across the furniture pecking at their phones as the hand-pick crew he needed.

“I went to college so I wouldn’t have to pick cherries,” Nell said.

“College is closed,” Joe said. “College can’t protect you now.”