

THUNDERSTRUCK

Wes and Laura had not even known Helen was missing when the police brought her home at midnight. Her long bare legs were marbled red with cold, and she had tear tracks on her face, but otherwise she looked like her ordinary placid awkward middle-school self: snarled hair, chapped lips, pink cheeks. She'd lost her pants somewhere, and she held in one fist a seemingly empty plastic garbage bag, brown, the yellow drawstring pulled tight at its neck. Laura thought the policemen should have given her something to cover up. Though what did cops know about clothing: maybe they thought that long black T-shirt was a dress. It had a picture of a pasty overweight man in swashbuckler's clothes captioned, in movie marquee letters, LINDA.

"She's twelve!" Wes told the police, as though they were the ones who'd lured his daughter from her bed. "She's only *twelve*."

"Sorry, Daddy," Helen said.

Laura grabbed her daughter by the wrist and pulled her in before the police could change their minds and arrest her, or them. She took the garbage bag from Helen, uncinched the aperture and stared in, looking for evidence, missing clothing, wrong-doers.

"Nitrous oxide party," said the taller officer, who looked like all the Irish boys Laura had grown up with. Maybe he was one. "They inhale from those bags. The owner of the house is in custody. Some kid had a bad reaction, she threw them all onto the lawn. The others scattered but your daughter stayed with the boy in distress. So there's that."

"There's that," said Wes.

Helen gave her mother a sweet, sinuous, beneath-the-arm hug. She'd gotten so tall she had to stoop to do it; she was Laura's height now. "Mommy, I love you," she said. She was a theatrical child. She always had been.

"You could have suffocated!" Laura said, throttling the bag.

"I didn't put it over my head," said Helen.

Laura ripped a hole in the bottom of the bag, as though that were still a danger.

This was her flaw as a parent, she thought later: she had never truly

gotten rid of a single maternal worry. They were all in the closet, with the minuscule footed pajamas and hand-knit baby hats, and every day Laura took them out, unfolded them, tried to put them to use. Kit was seven, Helen nearly a teenager, and a small, choke-worthy item on the floor still dropped Laura, scrambling, to her knees. She could not bear to see her girls on their bicycles, both the cycling and the cycling *away*. Would they even remember her cell phone number, if they and their phones were lost separately? Did anyone memorize numbers anymore? The electrical outlets were still dammed with plastic, in case someone got a notion to jab at one with a fork.

She had never worried about breathing intoxicating gas from Hefty bags. Another worry. Put it on the pile. Soon it might seem quaint, too.

She blamed her fretting on Helen's first pediatrician, who had told her there was no reason to obsess about Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. "It'll happen or it won't," said Dr. Moody. Laura had found this an unacceptable philosophy. Her worry for the baby had heat and energy: how could it be useless? Nobody had warned her how deeply babies slept, how you couldn't always see them breathing. You watched, and watched, you touched their dozy stomachs to feel their clockwork. Even once the infant Helen started sleeping through the night, Laura checked on her every two hours. Sometimes at two A.M. she was so certain that Helen had died she felt an electric shock to the heart, and this (she believed) started Helen's heart, too: her worry was the current that kept them both alive. Kit, too, when Kit, a surprise, crashed sweetly into their lives.

Maybe that was what happened to Helen. She was supposed to be an only child. She'd been promised. Kit was a flirtatious baby, a funny self-assured toddler. She made people laugh. Poor awkward honking Helen: it would be hard to be Kit's older sister. Growing up, Laura had hated the way her parents had compared her to her brother—Ben was good at math, so there was no point in her trying; Laura was more outgoing, so she had to introduce her brother to friends—but once she had her own children she understood comparison was necessary. It was how you discovered their personalities: the light of one child threw the other child into relief, no different from how she, at thirteen, had known what she looked like only by comparing the length of her legs and the color of her hair to her friends and their legs and their hair.

Helen hit her sister; Helen was shut in her room; afterwards all four of

them would go to the old-fashioned ice cream parlor with the twisted wire chairs. She and Wes couldn't decide when to punish and when to indulge, when a child was testing the boundaries and needed discipline, and when she was demanding, in the brutish way of children, more love. In this way, their life had been pasted together with marshmallow topping and hot fudge. Shut her in her room. Buy her a banana split. Do both: see where it gets you.

Helen sneaking out at night. Helen doing drugs.

Children were unfathomable. The same thing that could stop them from breathing in the night could stop them from loving you during the day. Could cause them to be brought home by the police without their pants or a good explanation.

That long night Laura and Wes interrogated her. Laura, mostly, while Wes examined the corners of Helen's bedroom and looked griefstruck. Whose house? Laura asked. What had she been doing there? What about Addie, her best friend, Addie of the braces and the clarinet? Was she there? Laura wanted to know everything. No, that wasn't true. She wanted to know nothing, she wanted to be told there was nothing to worry about: she wanted from Helen only consolation. She knew she couldn't yell comfort out of her but she didn't know what else to do. "What were you *thinking*?" she asked Helen, too loudly, as though it were thinking that was dangerous.

Helen shrugged. Then she pulled aside the neck of the T-shirt to examine her own shoulder and shrugged again. Over the bed was a poster that matched her T-shirt: the same guy, light caught in the creases of his leather pants, pale lipstick, dark eyeliner.

"What happened to your nose?" Laura asked.

Helen covered it with her hand. "Someone tried to pierce it."

"Helen! You do not have permission."

Wes said, looking at the poster, "Linda sure is pretty."

"He's not Linda," said Helen. "Linda's the *band*."

Laura sat down next to her. Helen's nose was red, nicked, but whoever had wielded the needle had given up. "Beautiful Helen, why would you?" Laura said. Helen bit her lip to avoid smiling straight out. Then she looked up at the poster.

"He must be hot in those pants," Wes said.

"Probably," said Helen. She slid under her bedclothes and touched her nose again. "I'm tired, I think."

"Poor Linda," said Wes. He rubbed his face in what looked like disbelief. "To suffer so for his art."

"We'll go to Paris," Wes told Laura. It was four A.M.

"Yes." They were exhausted, unslept. Helen seemed like an intelligence test they were failing, had been failing for years. Better to flee. Paris. "Why?" she said.

"Helen's always wanted to go."

"She has?"

"All those children's books. *Madeline*. Some Richard Scarry mouse, I think. Babar. Kit's old enough to enjoy it now. We'll—we'll get Helen painting lessons. Kit, too, if she's interested. Or I'll take them to museums and we'll draw. Eat pastries. Get *out* of here. Your brother's always offering us booty from his frequent flier millions. Let's say yes. Let's go."

The biggest ice cream sundae in the world. Wes taught printmaking at a community college and had the summer off. Laura worked for a caterer and was paid only by the job. They'd have to do it frugally but they could swing it.

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"All right," said Laura. They stayed up till morning, looking at apartments on the Internet. By seven A.M. Ben had e-mailed back that he was happy to give them the miles; by eight they had booked the flights. They arranged for one of Wes's students to look after the house and the dog for the five weeks they'd be gone. It was astonishing how quickly the trip came together.

The plan was to disrupt their lives, a jolt to Helen's system before school started again in the fall. The city would be strange and beautiful, as Helen herself was strange and beautiful. Perhaps they'd understand her there. Perhaps the problem all this time was that her soul had been written in French.

They flew overnight from Boston; they hadn't been on a plane since before Kit was born. Inside the terminal they tried to lead the family suitcases, old plaid things with insufficient silver wheels along the keels, prone to tipping. Honeymoon luggage from the last century: that was how long it had been since they'd traveled. At Charles de Gaulle, all of the Europeans pulled behind them like obedient dogs their long-handled perfectly balanced bags. They murmured into their cell phones. Laura patted her pocket, felt the switched-off phone that she'd been assured would cost too much to use

here, and felt sorry for it. Her suitcase fell over like a shot dog. Only Helen seemed to understand how to walk through the airport, as though it were a sport suited to the pubescent female body, a long-legged stride that made the suitcase heel.

Outside the morning was hot, and French, and blinding, and Wes was already loading the cases into the trunk of a taxi with the grim care of a man disposing of corpses. Laura thought: *What a bad idea this was*. She squeezed into the back of the cab between the girls, another old caution: proximity sometimes made them pinch each other. She had to fold her torso like the covers of a book. Wes got into the passenger seat and unraveled the piece of paper with the address of the apartment they'd rented over the Internet.

"*Excusez-moi*," Wes said to the driver. "*Je parle français très mal*." The cab driver nodded impatiently. Yes, very badly, it was the most self-evident sentence ever spoken: anything Wes might have said in French would have conveyed the same information. The driver took the scrap from Wes's hand.

"*L'appartement*," said Helen, "*se trouve dans le troisième arrondissement, je crois, monsieur. Cent-vingt-deux Rue du Temple*."

At this the driver smiled. "*Ah! Bon! Merci, mademoiselle. Le troisième, exactement*."

They were so smashed into the back Laura couldn't turn to look at Helen. "You speak French!" she said, astounded.

"I take French, Mommy. You know that. I don't *speak* it."

"You're fluent!" said Laura.

The street was crooked, and the taxi driver bumped onto the sidewalk to let them get out. In English he said, "Welcome here." Across the street were a few wholesale jewelry and pocketbook stores, and Laura was stunned by how cheap the merchandise hanging in the window looked, and she wondered whether they'd managed to book an apartment in the only tacky quarter of Paris. The door to their building was propped open. The girls moaned as they walked up the stairs, dragging their bags. "I thought it was on the *fourth* floor," said Helen, and Wes said, "They count floors differently here."

"Like a different alphabet?" said Kit.

The staircase narrowed the further up they went, as though a trick of perspective. At the top were two doors. One had an old-fashioned business card taped to it. *M. Petit*. That was their contact. Wes knocked, and a small elderly man in an immaculate white shirt and blue tie answered.

"*Bonjour!*" he said. He came out and led them to the other door. He held on to the tie, as though he wanted to make sure they saw it. "*Bienvenu, venez ici. Ici, ici, madame, monsieur, mademoiselles.*"

"*Je parle français très mal,*" said Wes, and there was that look again. M. Petit dropped his tie.

"You do it, Helen," said Laura.

"*Bonjour, monsieur,*" said Helen, and he brought them around the apartment and described everything, pantomiming and saying, "*Comprenez?*" and Helen answered in a nasal, casual, quacking way, "*Ouah. Ouah. Ouah.*"

"What did he say?" Wes asked when M. Petit had gone.

"Something about hot water," she said. "Something about garbage. We need to get calling cards for the phone. He lives next door if we need anything."

"Something about garbage," said Kit. "Real helpful."

The apartment was tiny but high-ceilinged, delightful, seemingly carved from gingerbread: a happy omen for their trip, Laura decided. The girls would sleep in twin beds in one room, Wes and Laura across the hall in a bed that was nearly double but not quite. A three-quarters double bed, like the three-quarters cello that Helen played. The windows looked out on next-door chimney pots. The living room was the size of its oriental rug. The kitchen included a sink, a two-burner hot plate, a waist-high fridge, and a tabletop oven. It was the oldest building any of them had ever stood in.

"Why are the pillows square?" Kit asked.

"They just *are*," said Helen knowingly. She leaned her head out the little window. *Five stories up and no way to shimmy down*, thought Laura. Helen said, "I want to stay here forever."

"We'll see," said Wes. "Come on. Let's go. Let's see Paris."

Jet lag and sunshine turned the city hallucinogenically beautiful. "We'll keep going," said Wes. "Till bedtime. Best way to deal with jet lag." Down the Rue des Francs Bourgeois, through the Place des Vosges over to the Bastille, along the river, across one bridge, and another: then they stood staring at Notre Dame's back end, all its flying buttresses kicking at Laura's sternum.

"Notre Dame is *here*?" said Helen. An insinuating wind tugged at the bottom of her shirt; she held it down.

"In Paris, yes," said Wes.

"But we just *walked* to it?"

Wes laughed. "We can walk everywhere."

They kept walking, looking for the right café, feeling the heat like optimism on their limbs. Laura swore Helen's French got even better as the day went on: she translated the menu at the café, she asked for directions, she found the right amount of money to pay for mid-afternoon crepes. She negotiated the purchase of two primitive prepaid cell phones, one for Wes and one for Laura. At home the girls had phones, but in Paris they would always be with one of their parents.

What was that odd blooming in Laura's torso? A sense that this was how it happened: you became dependent on your children, and it was all right.

They kept moving in order to stay awake until it was sort of bedtime. At six Laura thought she could feel the sidewalk tilting up like a Murphy bed, and they went to the tiny grocery store behind their building, got bread and meat and wine, and held up the line first when they didn't understand they needed to pack their own groceries, and again when they couldn't open the slippery plastic bags. Once they were out, they felt triumphant anyhow. Wes raised the baguette like a sword.

They turned down their little street. Up ahead of them a heavysset woman hurried in the middle of the road with a funny hitch, then suddenly turned, worked a shiny black girdle to mid thigh, and peed in the gutter, an astounding flood that stopped the Langfords.

Helen said, "Awesome."

"That," said Kit, "was impressive."

"City of lights," said Wes.

In their medieval apartment, they ate like medieval people, tearing bread with their teeth, spreading butter with their fingers. They all went to bed at the same time, the girls in their nightgowns—Kit's patterned with roses, Helen's another Linda XXL T-shirt. "Good night, good night," said Laura, standing between their beds. They had never shared a room, her girls. Then she and Wes went across the hall to the other room.

The necessary closeness of the three-quarters bed amplified everything. Her tenderness for Wes, who had been so sure this was the right thing; her worries about how much money this trip would cost; her anxiety at having to use her threadbare high school French. She understood this was the reason she was thirty-six and had never been to Europe. It was a kind of stage fright.

In the morning they discovered that the interior walls were so thin they could hear, just behind the headboard, the noise of M. Petit emptying his

bladder as clearly as if he'd been in the same room. It was a long story, the emptying of M. Petit's bladder, with many digressions and false endings.

"We're in Paris," whispered Wes.

"I thought there would be more foie gras and less pee," Laura whispered back.

"Both," said Wes. "There will be plenty of both."

In Paris Helen became a child again. She was skinny, pubescent, not the lean dangerous blade of a near-teen she'd seemed at home, in skin-tight blue jeans and oversized T-shirts. In Paris you could buy children's shoes and children's clothes for a person who was five-two. The sales were on, clothing so cheap they kept buying. Helen chose candy-colored skirts, and T-shirts with cartoon characters.

At le boulevard Richard-Lenoir, near the Bastille, Helen bought a vinyl purse with a long strap, in which she kept a few euros, a ChapStick, her name and address, a notebook for writing down her favorite sights. She walked hand-in-hand with Kit: they were suddenly friends, as though their fighting had been an allergic reaction to American air. Both girls picked up French as though by static electricity, and they spoke it to each other, tossing their hair over their shoulders. "*Ouais*," they said, in the way that even Laura, whose brain seemed utterly French-resistant, now recognized as how Parisians quackingly agreed.

There were so many *pâtisseries* and *boulangeries* and *fromageries* that they rated the pain au chocolat of one block against the pain au chocolat of the next. The candy shops were like jewelry stores, the windows filled with twenty-four-carat bonbons. The caterer Laura worked for had given her money to smuggle back some young raw milk cheeses that were illegal in the United States, and Laura decided to taste every *Reblochon* in the city, every *Sainte-Maure de Touraine*, so that on the last day she could buy the best and have them vacuum-packed against the noses of what she liked to imagine were the U.S. Customs Cheese Beagles.

Paris was exactly what she had expected and nothing like it. The mullioned passages full of stamp shops and dollhouse-furniture stores, the expensive wax museum the girls wanted to go back and back to despite not recognizing most of the counterfeit celebrities, the hot chocolate emporia and the bare-breasted bus-stop ads. These were things she had not known

were in Paris but felt she should have. The fast food joint called Flunch, the Jewish district with its falafel ("Shall we have f'laffel for flunch," Wes said nearly every day). She never really got her bearings in the city, no matter how she studied the map. Paris on paper always looked like a box of peanut brittle that had been dropped onto the ground, the Seine the unraveled ribbon that had held it together.

"What's your favorite thing in Paris?" Wes asked.

"My family," she answered. That was the truth.

After a while they bought a third pay-as-you-go phone for Helen and Kit to share, so the girls could go out in the city together after lunch. Then Wes and Laura would go back to the apartment. She thought every languishing marriage should be prescribed a three-quarter bed. They didn't even think to worry about M. Petit on the other side of the wall until later, when news of his careful, decorous life floated back to them: a ringing phone, a whistling teakettle, a dainty plastic clatter that could only be a dropped button. This was why it was good to be temporary, and for the neighbors to be French.

"How did you know?" Laura asked Wes.

"What do you mean?" he said.

"Helen. How *good* she'd be here."

"I don't know. I just—I felt it. She is, though, isn't she? Good. Sweet. Back to her old self."

Her old self? Laura thought. Helen had never been like this a day in her life.

Still it was a miracle: take the clumsy, eager-to-please girl to Paris. Watch her develop *panache*.

Then it was August. It was hot in Paris. Somehow they hadn't realized how hot it would be, and how—Laura thought sometimes—how dirty. The heat conjured up dirt, centuries of cobblestone-caught filth. It was as though Paris had never actually been clean, as though you could smell every drop of blood and piss and shit spilled in the streets since before the days of the revolution. Half the stores and restaurants shut for the month, as the sensible Parisians fled for the coast. French food felt tyrannical. When they chose the wrong place to eat, a café that looked good but where the skin of the confit de canard was flabby and soft, the bread damp, it didn't feel like bad luck: it felt as though they'd fallen for a con. As though the place had hidden the better food in the back, for the actually French.

Laura was ready to go home. August was like a page turning. July had felt lucky: August, cursed. From the first day, Laura would think later, no mistake.

The day of Helen's accident—or perhaps the day before; they would never know exactly when the accident happened—she was as lovely and childish as ever. In the makeup section of the Monoprix, she lipsticked a mouth on the edge of her hand, the lower lip on her thumb and the upper on her index finger.

“*Bonjour*,” she said to her mother, through her hand.

“*Bonjour, madame*,” said Laura, who did not like speaking French even under these circumstances. The Monoprix was air-conditioned. They spent a lot of time there.

France had refined the features of Helen's face—Laura had always thought of them as slightly coarse, the thick chap-prone lips, the too-bright eyes—the face, Laura thought now, of a girl who would do anything for a boy, even a boy who didn't care. Her own face, once upon a time. But in Paris Helen had changed. She had lost the eagerness, the oddness, the blunt difficulty of her features. She had become a Parisienne. Laura tucked the label of Helen's shirt in, felt the warmth of her back, and with the force of previously unseen heartache she knew: they would fly back in three days and nothing, nothing would have changed. They would step back into the aftermath of all they hadn't dealt with.

“Are you looking forward to going home?” Laura asked.

Helen pouted. Then she jutted her thumb out, made her bee-stung hand pout, too. “*Non*,” she said. “*J'adore Paris*. I'd like to stay here forever.”

“Not me,” said Kit. “I miss Frogbert.”

“Who?” said Helen.

“Our *dog*,” said Kit. “Oh, very funny.”

“Forever,” Helen said again. “Daddy!” she called across to her father, who was just walking into the store with an antique lampshade. He wanted to stay in France forever, too. Laura could imagine him using the lampshade as an excuse: *How can we get this on the plane? We'd better just stay here.*

“Look!” he said. “Hand-painted. Sea serpents.”

And they were, a chain of lumpy, dimwitted sea serpents linked mouth to tail around the hem of the shade. It was a grimy, preposterous thing in the gleaming cosmetic aisle of Monoprix.

Helen took it with the flats of her palms. "It's awesome," she said. "Daddy, it's perfect."

Laura did not think she had ever seen that look on Helen's face—not just happiness, but the wish to convey that happiness to someone else, a generosity. That was the expression Laura tried to remember later, to paste down in her head, because soon it was gone forever, replaced with a parody of a smile, a look that was not dreamy but dumbstruck, recognizable, not Cinderella asked to the ball, but a stepsister, years later, finally invited back to the palace, forgiven. Because twelve hours later, Wes and Laura, asleep in their antique bed, heard a familiar, forgotten noise: Wes's American cell phone, ringing in the dresser drawer. Why was it on? Laura answered it.

"Have you a daughter?" said the voice on the other end.

The voice belonged to a nurse from the American Hospital of Paris, who said that a young girl had been brought in with a head injury.

"She have a shirt that say *Linda*," said the nurse. "She fell and struck her head."

Laura went to the girls' room, the phone pressed to her ear. Kit was asleep among the square pillows and the overstuffed duvet. Her hair was sweat damp. Helen's bed was empty. Laura looked to the window, as though it was from there she'd fallen, the pavement below upon which she'd struck her head. But it was locked into place, ajar to let the air in but fixed. If Helen had left the apartment it would have been the ordinary way.

"*Je ne comprends pas*," Laura said, though the nurse was speaking English.

"She need someone here," said the nurse. "It's bad."

2.

This was why you had two children. This is why you didn't. Wes stood outside their old, old, unfathomably old building. There were no taxis out and he couldn't imagine how to call one. He wondered whether he'd wanted to come to Paris because of the language: the way he'd felt coddled by lack of understanding, delighted to be capable of so little. By now he could get along pretty well but this question, how Paris worked in the middle of the night, seemed beyond his abilities. Who he needed: Helen, to help him make his way to Helen. The Metro didn't run this late, he knew that much. Upstairs Kit slept on, Laura watching over her, which was why he was alone on the

street. She was the spare child. The one who wasn't supposed to be here. The one who was all right. In his panic he had not wanted to go away from her: he'd wanted to crawl into Helen's empty bed, not even caring how warm or cold the sheets were, how long she'd been gone, as though that child were already lost and the only thing to do was watch over the girl who was left.

He GPSed directions on his smartphone, the American one. Four and a half miles, in a wealthy suburb called Neuilly-sur-Seine. He would walk: he couldn't think of an alternative. If he saw a taxi he would flag it down but the main thing was movement. Westward, as fast as he could, and then he felt he was in a dull, extravagant, incredible movie. He had a quest, and every person he passed seemed hugely important: the man carrying the dozing child, who asked for directions Wes couldn't provide (he hid the phone, he didn't want to stop); the two police carrying riot shields though Wes could not hear any kind of altercation that might require them; the old woman in elegant, filthy clothing who was sweeping out the rhomboid front of a café. All summer he and his women had walked. "It's the only way to understand a city," Wes had said more than once, "we are *flâneurs*." Now he understood that wandering taught you nothing. Only when you moved with purpose could you know a place. Towards someone, away from someone. "Helen," he said aloud, as he walked beneath the Périphérique's looping traffic. He had not driven a car in over a month. They looked like wild animals to him. Everything looked feral, in fact. He wanted a weapon.

It took him more than an hour to get to the upscale western suburb of the American Hospital. By then the sun was rising. He stumbled in, shocked by the lights, the people. He didn't want to talk to anyone but Helen, he just wanted to find her, but he knew that was impossible so he stopped at the lit-up desk by the door. The sign above it said INFORMATION. Was that INFORMATION in English, or informaCEEohn in French?

"*J'arrive*," he said, as the waiters did in busy restaurants, though they meant, *I will* and not *I have*. He added, "I walked here."

The man behind the desk had short greasy bangs combed down in points, like a knife edge. "Patient name?"

Wes hesitated. What sort of shape was she in? What information had Laura given the hospital? "Helen Langford." He found some hope inside him: of course Helen was conscious. How else would they have got Wes's American phone number? She wouldn't have remembered the French one.

"ICU," said the man with the serrated hair.

But it turned out that Helen had taken her mother's American phone, had been using it all summer to call first the U.S. and then Paris, to text, to take pictures of herself. When the battery drained, she swapped it for Wes's, recharged, swapped them back. The hospital had found the phone in her pocket, had gone through the contact list and eventually found him.

The ICU doctor was a tall man with heavy black eyebrows and silver sideburns. Wes felt dizzy by his perfect English, his unidentifiable accent, the rush of details. Helen had been dropped off at the front door by some boys. She probably had not been injured in this neighborhood: the boys brought her here, as though *American* were a medical condition that needed to be treated at a specialist hospital. They had done a CAT scan and an MRI. The only injury was to her head. She had fallen upon it. Her blood screened clean for drugs but she'd had a few drinks. "Some sweet wine, maybe, made her clumsy. Hijinks," said the doctor, dropping the initial h. *Ijinks*. Not an Anglophone then. "Children. Stupid."

"Is she dead?" he asked the doctor.

"What? No. She's had a tumble, that's true. She struck her head. Right now, we're keeping her unconscious, we put in a tube." The doctor tapped his graying temple. "To relieve the pressure."

What was causing pressure? "Air?" Wes said.

"Air? Ah, no. Fluid. Building up. So the tube—" The doctor made a sucking noise. "So far it's working. Later today, tomorrow, we will know more."

Wes had expected his daughter to be tiny in the bed, but she looked substantial, womanly. Her eyes were closed. The side of her head was obscured by an enormous bandage, with the little slurping tube running from it. No, not slurping. It didn't make a sound. Wes had imagined that, thanks to the doctor.

Her little room was made of glass walls, blindered by old-fashioned wheeled screens. There was nothing to sit on. For half an hour he crouched by the bed and spoke to her, though her eyes were closed. She was slack. Every part of her.

"Helen," he said, "Helen. You can tell us anything. You should, you know." They'd been the kind of parents who'd wanted to know nothing, or the wrong things. It hit him with the force of a conversion: all along

they'd believed what they didn't acknowledge didn't exist. Here, proof: the unsayable existed. "Helen," he said to his sleeping daughter. "I will never be mad at you again. We're starting over. Tell me *anything*."

A fresh start. He erased the photos and texts from the phone: he wanted to know everything in the future, not the past. Later he'd regret it, he'd want names, numbers, the indecipherable slang-ridden texts of French teenagers, but as he scrolled down, deleting, affirming each deletion, it felt like a kind of meditative prayer: *I will change. Life will broaden and better.*

Half an hour later he stepped out to the men's room and found Kit and Laura wandering near the vending machines. Kit had been weeping. *Oh, the darling!* he thought. Then he realized that Laura had been grilling her. She was not a sorrowful little sister. She was a confederate.

"We took a taxi," said Laura miserably.

"Good," said Wes.

"Nobody will tell me anything," said Laura. "The goddamn desk."

"All right," said Wes. "She's—"

"How did she get here?" said Laura. "Who dropped her off?"

"Nobody knows," said Wes, which was what he'd understood.

"Somebody does!"

"Look," said Wes. Before they went to see Helen, he wanted to explain it to her. What he knew now: they needed to talk about everything. They needed to be interested in their daughters' secrets, not terrified. He sat them down on the molded bolted-together plastic chairs along the walls. He was glad for the rest. "We're lucky. They dropped her off, they did that for us."

"Cowards," said Laura.

Wes sat back and the whole line of chairs shifted. Cowards would have left her where she was. Bravery got her here. He knew what kind of kid he'd been, a scattering boy, who would not have stopped to think till half a mile away. Adrenaline flooded your conscience like an engine you then couldn't start. But Helen hadn't been that kind of kid. She had stayed with the boy in distress, the officers of a month ago had said, and the universe had repaid her.

"I'm sorry," said Kit. "I'm so, so sorry." She was still wearing her rose-patterned nightgown, with a pair of silver sandals. She looked like a mythical sleep-related figure: Narcolepta, Somnifaria. As soon as he thought that, Wes felt the need to sleep fall over his head like a tossed sheet.

"Who are they?" Laura suddenly asked Kit. "You must have met them."

"She'd leave me somewhere and make me promise not to budge."

"French boys?"

"I don't know!" said Kit.

Every night for a week, Helen had snuck out to see some boys. She had met them on one of the sisters' walks together; the next walk, she sat Kit down on a park bench with a book and told her to stay put. At night, she took either her mother or her father's American cell phone; Kit slept with their shared phone set to vibrate under her pillow. When Helen wanted to be let back in, she called till the buzzing phone woke up Kit, who snuck down the stairs to open the front door.

Kit was going to be the wild child. That's what they had said, back when she was a two-year-old batting her eyes at waiters, giggling when strangers paid attention. It was going to be Kit sneaking out of the house in the middle of the night, Helen lying to protect her.

You worked to get your kids to like each other and this was what happened.

They went to the ICU. When Kit saw her sister, she began to cry again. "I don't know anything else," she said, though nobody was asking. "I just—I don't know."

Laura stayed by the door. She put her arm around Kit. She could not look at anyone. Wes thought she was about to pull the wheeled screens around her, as though in this country that was how you attended your damaged child. A mother's rage was too incandescent to blaze unshaded. "How do they even know she fell?" she whispered. "Maybe she was hit with something, maybe—was she raped?"

Wes shook his head uneasily. There was Helen in the bed. They needed to go to her.

"How do you *know*?" said Laura.

"They checked."

"I will kill them," she said. "I will track down those boys. I hate this city. I want to go home." At last she looked at Wes.

"We can't move her yet."

"I know," said Laura, and then, more quietly, "I want to go home *now*."

Well, after all: he'd had the width of three *arrondissements* to walk, getting ready to see Helen. As a child he'd been fascinated by the bends—what scuba divers got when they came to the surface of the ocean too fast to acclimate their lungs to ordinary pressure. You had to be taken from place to place with

care. Laura had gone from apartment to taxicab to hospital too quickly. Of course she couldn't breathe.

But it didn't get any easier as the day went on. She looked at Helen, yes, and arranged her hair with the pink rattail comb a nurse had left behind. All the while, she delivered a muttering speech, woven of curses: she cursed their decision to come to Paris; she cursed the midmorning's comically elegant doctor who inflated her cheeks and puffed when asked about Helen's prognosis; she damned to hell the missing boys.

"They say boys," said Laura, "but if they didn't see them, how do they know?"

"We need to solve the problems we can, honey," said Wes.

That afternoon Kit and Laura took the Metro back to the city. Kit was seven, after all.

He didn't get back to the apartment until ten. Laura was already in bed but awake. They talked logistics. In two days they were scheduled to fly home. It made more sense for Laura to stay with Helen—she was a freelancer, Wes's classes started in a week—but there was the question of language. The question of Paris.

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"I'll stay," Wes said. They were in bed. Beyond, M. Petit's apartment was silent. Kit was asleep in the twin bedroom on the other side of the hall.

Laura nodded. "Shouldn't we all?" Then she answered herself. "Third grade."

"Third grade," said Wes. School started for Kit in a week, too. She shouldn't miss it. "We've got the phones. Imagine what this used to be like." They'd talked about that, how appallingly easy technology made it to be an expat these days. "Listen, I'm sure, I'm sure in a week, or two—we can bring her home."

Neither of them could wonder aloud what change in Helen's condition would allow that.

"Where will you stay?" Laura asked.

"Oh, God. I hadn't thought."

He knocked the next morning on M. Petit's door. Two young men answered. One of them was holding some dark artwork in a large frame. The other held an unfurled newspaper, and was folding a cup into one of its panes.

"*Bonjour*," said Wes, and then he couldn't think of what to say.

"English?" said one of the men, a balding redhead.

"Yes. American." Wes pointed at the door behind him.

"Ah!" said the redhead, and Wes could see M. Petit in his expression. In both of their faces, actually. His sons. The redheaded man explained: their father had died suddenly, unexpectedly.

"Oh, no," said Wes. "I am sorry." He felt a tender culpability, as though his own disaster had seeped through the walls and killed the old man. He tried to remember the last time he'd heard M. Petit's morning routine.

"So you see," said the redhead. "We must pack."

"We've had an accident," said Wes. "My family. An emergency. I was wondering if I could extend the lease."

"Ah, no. No. Actually my daughter is moving in, next week, with her husband. Newlyweds."

Wes nodded. He felt a tweak in his chest, disappointment or despair. He needed to stay, as cheaply as possible, and he couldn't imagine where he might start looking for shelter, or how long it would take.

"But," said the son. "Would you like—you could perhaps rent this?" He pointed at the floor of M. Petit's apartment, the same warm burnt orange tiles as next door. Wes peered down the hallway into the murk. "Very sudden, you see."

"Yes," Wes said. "Thank you. *Merci. Merci mille fois.*"

He took the semester off from school. His department head said they'd figure things out so he could still draw a salary—a course reduction, a heavier load in the spring. Better to solve it now for everyone involved than to wonder every day whether Wes might be coming back.

On the day of the flight he and Laura and Kit went to the hospital. Kit said goodbye to her sister tearfully, tenderly, crawled into the bed and stroked Helen's hair and said, "I promise, I promise, I promise." What promise? Wes thought she would tell him when they said goodbye at the airport, though when they got there Kit was awkward, unhappy, her hands bunched under her chin as though, if he tried to draw her close, she would fight him off with her elbows. "Goodbye, Kitty," he said. She nodded.

He thought then that he should find a place to lie down, like Helen. You said goodbye to someone differently if they were supine. But he didn't see any benches, and if he lay on the ground, he'd be pummeled by European feet and suitcases. Security, perhaps. Send ahead his belt and shoes (only in

prisons and airports did a stranger tell you to take them off). Put his sad sorry body down. Kit might not fall for it at first. "Dad," she would say, humiliated, because now she had to bear the humiliation for her sister as well. But then, surely, as he disappeared, his head, shoulders, beltless waist, as the agents saw the truth of his kidneys, his empty pockets, she would run to him, grab at his feet—no. Feet first, so that she had enough time to whisper that promise in his ear.

In the end he picked her up. He couldn't remember the last time he'd done that. Her toes knocked against his shins. "We'll talk every day," he said.

"I know," she answered.

Then he kissed Laura. "Call me when you get in."

"It will be too late."

"No," he said. "Not possible."

He watched them go through the checkpoint. Laura kept waving, *go, go*, but he couldn't, not until they disappeared from sight.

He took the train back into the city, to move his suitcase into M. Petit's apartment. The furniture was ancient, fringed, balding. The windows looked onto the courtyard, not the street. It felt like the depressed cousin of the apartment where they'd been so happy. The right place to be, in other words. The bathroom had a slipper tub, deep and short, with a step to sit on. How had M. Petit climbed into it? The bed was in a loft. No octogenarian should have to use a ladder to go to sleep. Everything in the world now looked like something to fall from. He decided he would sleep on the little L-shaped couch, in case M. Petit had died in the bed. He put the sea-serpent lampshade in the middle of the coffee table and fell asleep. He surprised himself by sleeping through the night. He checked the phone: a text from Laura, *Arrived will call in my morning/your afternoon*. He went, for the third day, to the hospital.

The border between consciousness and coma was not as defined as Wes had been taught by television to expect. They'd stopped sedating her. Helen did not come bursting to the surface, as though from a lake. She rose out of unconsciousness by millimeters over the next few days. Her nose woke up. Her forehead. Her cheeks. Her eyes. The pressure in her skull abated; the ventric tube came out.

She had the daft look of a saint. Even her hands were knotted together at her chest, as though in prayer. Her mouth was open. The nurses combed her hair, what was left of it, and then called in the hospital's hairdresser, who cropped it like Jeanne d'Arc's.

In the hospital Wes studied Helen as he had when she was an infant. Around and around her face, the knotted fingers, the angles of her shoulders. She wasn't a baby, of course. She was a girl, thirteen in a month, with breasts, whose body would keep going further into adulthood no matter whether her brain could catch up. The doctors said it was still too early to tell.

He tried to find his daughter in the face, but she'd been so completely revised, and then he tried to comfort himself: Helen was past worry. The worst would not happen to her because it already had. There were no decisions to be made right now. She wouldn't die. She was, for the moment, beyond any psychological complexities. He had to be here. That he could manage.

At the end of every day, he walked back to Paris, all four and a half miles: beneath the Périphérique, through the seventeenth arrondissement, down le boulevard Malherbes, and he spoke to Laura, his ear throbbing against the plastic of the phone. She sounded far away, relieved. He related the latest diagnosis: they were still assessing whether Helen's brain injury was focal or diffuse. Her brain was still swollen in her skull. It might take her years to recover. Laura told him the news of America: the insurance company was being extraordinarily good at working with the hospital; the cell phone company would not forgive the nearly thousand-dollar bill for Helen's purloined Parisian phone calls and text messages. Sometimes Kit was there, though there were swimming lessons and play dates and flute lessons or just the sound of the slamming door as she went outside.

"We miss you," Laura would say.

"We miss you, too," he answered.

"You miss us. Helen doesn't miss anything."

"We don't know."

"I feel it."

"OK," he said, because she might have been right.

By the time they'd talked themselves out he was back in the third arrondissement, and then he would zag towards the river. He walked as they had their first jet-lagged day, to exhaust himself before climbing the stairs to M. Petit's apartment, so he could fall asleep without hearing the noises of the granddaughter and her husband in that three-quarter bed on the other side of the wall. Or on the sofa, or any corner of his old home. Sometimes he thought, *That's us still, and I am M. Petit*, and he tried to find the part of

the wall that bordered on what had been the girls' bedroom. Maybe he would hear them scheme. Maybe this time he could stop it.

Or maybe he'd just hear the neighbors fucking.

One night on the way home he found a little store that catered to Americans, big boxes of sugary cereal, candy bars, and he wanted to buy them for Helen, whose nasogastric tube had just been taken out, though she was fed only purees. The store carried every strain of American crap. French's mustard, Skippy peanut butter, Stove Top stuffing, even Cheez Whiz. He'd been gone long enough from the U.S. that he felt sentimental about the food, and he'd been in Paris long enough to feel superior to it.

Then he saw the red-topped jar of Marshmallow Fluff.

"Something sweet for you," he said to Helen the next morning. He hunted around for a spoon and found only a tongue depressor. That would do.

Helen closed her eyes as the Fluff went in, as her round mouth irised in around the stick. Wes felt electrified. Before this moment Helen had been a blank, as mysterious to him as she must have been to the emergency room when she'd first arrived: a girl who'd dropped from the sky. Unidentified. Cut off from her history.

Now she opened her eyes, and he could see, for the first time, Helen looking out of them, though (he thought) she couldn't see anything. She was sunk in the bottom of a well. Everything above her was hidden in shadows. He could see her trying to make something out. Her mouth, agape, opened further, with muscle, intent, greed: *more*.

He dug out a larger dollop. Closed eyes, closed mouth, but when the tongue depressor went in Helen began to cough. It was a terrible wet sound.

"Are you all right?" he said. He wondered whether he should put his finger in her mouth, scoop it out, and then he did, and Helen bit down. First just pressure, the peaks of her molars, then pain. He tried to pull out his finger. "Wow. Helen," he said. "Helen, please, Helen, help! Help!" and then her jaw relaxed, and he stood with his wet, indented finger, panting.

The doctor on the floor was Dr. Delarche, the tall woman who'd so infuriated Laura. By the time she peered in Helen's mouth all the Fluff had melted away except a wisp on her upper lip.

"What is this?" she asked Helen. She touched her chin, looking over her face. "Hein? This sticky thing."

Wes still held his sore finger. "Fluff."

"Floff?" The doctor turned to him. "What is this floff?"

The lidless jar had fallen to the bed—he pulled it out from under the blanket, and inclined the mouth towards the doctor. "Marshmallow, um, *crème*," he said, pronouncing it the French way. "You put it on bread, with peanut butter."

Dr. Delarche looked incredulous. "No," she said. "This is not good for the body. Even without traumatic brain injury but certainly with. No more floff."

"OK," he said, exhilarated.

His mistake had been to believe that the girl in the bed wanted nothing. But that *was* Helen, and Helen was built of want. She longed, she burned, even if she couldn't move or swallow Marshmallow Fluff. He wished he could find her boys so they could sit on the edge of the bed and read to her; he wished he could to take her into the city, let her drink wine.

Well, then. He needed to find what she wanted, and bring it to her.

That evening, after the walk, he found himself on a street that seemed lined with art supplies: a pen shop, a painting shop, a paper store. In the paint shop he bought a pad that you could prop up like an easel, and watercolors in a little metal case with a loop on the back for your thumb, for when you painted *plein-air*. It was the sort of thing he'd have bought for the girls in an ordinary time. He hadn't painted himself since graduate school—he'd been a printmaker, and that's what he taught—and it had been even longer since he'd used watercolors. But Helen had. She'd taken lessons at home. Perhaps she could teach him. That's what he would tell her.

"Ah!" said the doctor, when she saw him set up the pad. "Yes. Therapy. Very good. This will help."

They began to paint.

Yes, Helen was there, she was in there. She could not form words. She smiled more widely when people spoke to her but it didn't seem to matter what they said. But with the brush in her hand—Wes just steadying—she painted. At first the paintings were abstracts, fields of yellow and orange and watery pink (she

never went near blue) overlaid with circles and squares. She knew, as he did not, how to thin the paint with water to get the color she wanted.

Helen was moved to a private room on another floor. The hospital manicurist ("How very Parisian!" said Laura, when he told her) gave her vamp red toes and fingernails. Wes's favorite nurse, a small man who reminded him of a champion wrestler from his high school, devised a brace from a splint and a crepe bandage to help with the painting, so that Helen could hold her wrist out for longer, though she still needed help from the shoulder.

"She's painting," said Wes on the phone. He'd blurted it out at the end of a conversation, standing in front of the front door of the building: until then he hadn't realized he'd been keeping it a secret.

"What do you mean?" asked Laura.

He explained it to her: the brace, the watercolors.

"What is she painting?"

"Abstracts. I'll take a picture, you can see."

There was a silence.

"What?"

"Nothing. I sighed. You mean she's painting like an elephant paints."

"What do you mean?"

"There's an elephant who paints. Maybe more than one. They stick a brush in its trunk and give it a canvas. The results are better than you'd think. But it's not really painting, is it? It's moving with paint. She doesn't know what she's doing."

"She does," said Wes. "She's getting better."

"By millimeters."

"Yes! Forward."

"What good is forward, if it's by millimeters?" said Laura. "How far can she possibly go?"

"We don't know!"

"I wish she had—" Laura began. "I just don't know what her life is going to be like." Another silence.

Wes knew it wasn't sighing this time. He said, "Listen. I gotta go."

He had not had a drink since the early morning call from the hospital; he'd had the horrible thought he might have woken up and caught Helen sneaking out that night, had he been entirely sober. Now he thought about picking up a bottle of wine to take to M. Petit's. He passed by the gym he'd

seen before, which was still open though it was ten at night. A woman sat at street level in a glass box, ready to sign him up. She wore ordinary street clothes, not exercise togs.

"Bonjour, madame," he said. "*Je parle français très mal.*"

"Ah, no!" said the woman. "*Très bien.*"

She seemed to be condescending to him, but in a cheerful, nearly American way.

The actual gym was in the basement. By American standards it was small, primitive, but there were free weights—he'd lifted pretty seriously in college—and a couple of treadmills. From then on he came here after his long walk, his phone conversation with Laura, because only exertion blunted the knowledge that Laura wished that Helen had died. He hoped Laura had something to do, to blunt her own knowledge that he knew she felt this way and disagreed.

For some reason one of the personal trainers took a dislike to him, and was always bawling him out in French, for bringing a duffle bag onto the gym floor, for letting his knees travel over his toes when he squatted, for getting in the way of the French people who seemed always to be swinging around broom handles as a form of exercise. The trainer's name was Didier, according to the fliers by the front desk; his hair was shaved around the base of his skull, long on top. Like an *oignon*, Wes thought. Didier drank ostentatiously from a big Nalgene bottle filled with a pale yellow liquid, and it pleased Wes to pretend he was consuming his own urine. It was good to hate someone, to have a new relationship of any kind with no medical undertones.

When I've been here a year, he thought one night, as he performed deadlifts in the power rack, *when we find the right place to live, me and Helen—then I'll get a girlfriend*. The thought seemed to have flown into his head like a bird—impossible, out-of-place, smashing around. It didn't belong there. It couldn't get out.

After three weeks, Helen was not just better, but measurably better: she held her head up, she turned to whoever was speaking, she squeezed hands when people said her name.

And she painted. The abstracts had hardened, angled, until Wes could see what she meant. She was painting Paris. Back in the U.S. they had thought Helen had talent and they'd seized on it, bought her supplies, sent her to

classes, not just painting but sculpture, pastel, photography. The problem was content, no better than any suburban American girl's: Floating princesses. Pretty ladies. Ball gowns.

Now she painted stained glass and broken buildings in sunshine, monuments, gardens. He could feel her hand struggling to get things right. She drew faces with strange curves and bent smiles. The first time she signed her name in the corner in fat bright letters Wes burst into tears.

Staff and visitors took her paintings away, without asking, and Wes had to hide the ones he particularly wanted. He was waiting for the right one to mail to Laura, he told himself, but every day's paintings were better than the last. He wanted to send the best one.

One morning he ran into Dr. Delarche on his way to Helen. "*Monsieur*," she said, and beckoned him. Wes was alarmed. There was never any news from doctors about Helen. He either had to ask or see for himself. And besides, Dr. Delarche worked in the ICU.

"I must ask you something," she said.

He nodded.

"My husband is a documentarist. I wonder—I told him about Helen and her painting. He wishes to do a little film."

"Oh!" said Wes. "Yes!"

The *documentariste* was a shaggy handsome Algerian named Walid who made Wes like Dr. Delarche better: he had an air of joy and incaution. "You don't mind?" he said. His camera was one of those cheap handheld things, a Flip—Laura's mother had given them one the year before. Wes had better video capabilities on his Nikon, back at the flat. He imagined most of the footage would feature the profile of Walid's wide calloused thumb.

He didn't tell Laura about the filming. She would tell him to throw the doctor's husband out of the room. *Do not turn our child into a freak show*, she would have said—

—but Wes knew that was all that Helen had ever really wanted.

Not love, and not quotidian attention: since she was a child she liked to scare and alarm her parents and strangers and he did not believe anymore that it was some sort of coded message—a cry for love! She just wants you to talk to her! Helen wanted love but no ordinary sort. She wanted people to gape. Left alone in the U.S., she would have not just had her nose pierced, nor her ears, she would have got not just black forked tattoos across the small

of her back: she would have obliterated herself with metal and ink, put plugs in her earlobes, in her lips. People would have stared at her. They would have winced and looked away. She wanted both.

Now she had both.

He was not stupid enough, not optimistic enough, to think that she would have made this bargain herself. She wouldn't have given up the boys in some strange part of Paris, offering her wine, watching her do something stupid before she fell. But if she were in bed in a hospital, she would—not *would*, but *did*—want to be the most interesting girl in the bed who ever was. Filmed and fussed over. Called, by the more dramatic of the nurses, miraculous. Visited by the sick children of the hospital, who were brought by well-meaning religious volunteers.

Helen's room was a place of warmth and brightness. Everyone said so. Walid kept filming, though Wes was never clear to what end.

"Perhaps," said Walid one day, "when we are finished, the boys she was with? They will see this film."

"They could come to visit!" said Wes.

"Eh?" said Walid. He stopped filming and regarded Wes. "Turn yourselves in. Repent. That's a terrible thing, to abandon a girl, isn't it? You are American and you want them dead," he explained. "We, of course, do not believe in the death penalty. Anymore: we have had our bumps. But still. Terrible thing."

"She is an inspiration," said Dr. Delarche one day as Wes and Helen painted. "This is not a bad thing." Dr. Delarche leaned against the wall in the lab coat she made look chic: it was the way she tucked her hands in the pockets. Since Wes had agreed to let Walid film, she came to the room nearly every day, though never when Walid himself was around. Maybe she had a crush on him, though that seemed very un-French. He had a crush on her.

"The light in the paintings," she said to him. "Like Monet, *hein*?"

"God, no," said Wes. "I hate Monet. Where you going, Helen? Red? Here's red."

"Renoir," suggested Dr. Delarche.

"Worse. No," said Wes, "I will take your side against the Italians with wine, and coffee, and even ice cream, but painting? They have you beat. The French are too pretty."

"We are pretty," Dr. Delarche agreed. "And cheese also, we are better. Wine, of course. Everyone know that. So then. You are making plans?"

He shook his head pleasantly, not knowing what she meant.

"Soon Helen will go," she said.

"Die?" he said. He stopped his hand and felt the pressure of Helen wanting to move, but he pulled the brush from the brace and set it down. He was sorry he'd said the word in front of her.

"Ah, no!" said Dr. Delarche. She sounded insulted that he'd misunderstood her so badly. The French, in his experience, were often insulted by other people's stupidity. "From here."

"To another hospital."

"Home. To the United States. You will talk to the social workers, see what they know—she is better. Of course. She is much, much better, and now she is strong enough to travel. So, hurrah, isn't it? You will go home to your family."

"Of course," he said.

338 He left the hospital then; he almost never walked out of the building during the day. Neuilly-sur-Seine looked like a stage set built by someone who had never been to Paris and imagined it was boring: clean nineteenth-century buildings with mansard roofs, little cafés that served coffee in white china cups, nothing notable or seedy. He thought about taking Helen back to M. Petit's apartment and he realized that was the real reason he'd started going to the gym: he lifted weights so that he could lift Helen. Five flights up. Into the slipper bath. Around Paris, even. He'd walked enough of the city to know it was a terrible place for a wheelchair. No Americans with Disabilities Act, no cutouts in curbs. It would be easier on foot.

He would carry her to the Jardin des Plantes. They would paint the animals in the zoo, visit the mosaicked tearoom at the mosque. In his head he saw her improve by time lapse: her mouth closed, she sat straighter. He didn't care that their short-term visas would expire in two weeks. He could not picture them in America.

If she could not walk or speak in America, then she would not walk or speak for the rest of her life, and that was something he would not accept.

But when he called Laura on his way home that night, she said she was coming in two days. Kit would stay with friends. Her brother had given her a last-minute ticket. She wanted to see for herself how Helen was doing.

As Wes waited at the airport he worried he wouldn't recognize his wife—he always worried this, when meeting someone—and his heart clattered every time the electric double doors opened to reveal another exhausted traveler. When she came out, of course, he knew her immediately, and he felt the old percolation of his blood of their early dates, when he loved her and didn't know what would happen. *That's her*, he thought. She crossed the tile of the airport and it was no mirage of distance. She fell into him and he loved her. He felt ashamed of every awful thought he'd had about her for the past weeks. They held each other's tiredness awhile.

"You feel different," she said. "Thinner. You look kind of wonderful. How's Didier?"

"I hate him with every fiber of my being. You look more than kind of wonderful."

She shook her head. Then she said, "I don't want to go back there."

"Where?" he said. "Oh. Well, that's where Helen is."

"That's not where Helen is."

"She's better. She's—she'll know you're there." As soon as he'd said it he realized he'd been telling Laura the opposite, to comfort her: Helen didn't really know who was there and who wasn't and therefore it was all right that Laura and Kit were thousands of miles away in America.

"Really?" said Laura.

"Yes."

"How does she show it?"

They headed down to the airport train station. Wes had already bought the tickets back into Paris. At last he said, "She's painting. She's still painting, Laura."

The train stopped in front of them with a refrigerated hiss and they stepped on. "I know."

"What?"

"Kit showed me. On YouTube. I mean, it doesn't show her painting. She's not really, is she. I don't believe it."

He had heard about news traveling on the Internet, but he imagined that was gossip, or affairs, or boss badmouthing: it traveled locally, not from country to country.

"Who's really painting?" said Laura. "The therapist, or someone. One of those religious women. In some of the shots you can see a hand steadying her elbow."

"Helen," said Wes. "I promise. Come on. She'll show you."

At the Gare du Nord, Laura said, "Let's take a cab. Let's go see Helen."

"Don't you want to drop off your suitcase?"

She shook her head. "I wish you'd found another place to stay."

They went to the stand along the side of the station. He hadn't been inside a taxi since their first day in Paris. Mornings, he went to the hospital underground, afternoons he came back by foot. He felt suddenly that every national weakness a people had was evident on its highways.

"Do you have cash?" Laura asked as they pulled up.

"I thought you did."

"I just got here. I have dollars."

He dug through his pockets and found just enough. They stepped outside.

"I hate it here," Laura said, looking at the clean façade of the hospital.

"I know. I hate it, too."

340 "No. You're better than me. You don't hate it. You hate the situation. That's the right response. Me, I want to run out the door and never come back. I would, if I could."

"This way," he said. "They moved her."

At first Wes was struck by how good Helen looked, the pink in her cheeks, the nearly chic haircut, and then he glanced at Laura and then he understood how little, really, their daughter had changed. It had been six weeks. She looked dazed and cheerful. She couldn't speak.

"Hi, honey," said Wes. "Look. Mommy's here."

"Oh, God," said Laura.

"Sshh," said Wes.

But Laura was by the bed. She touched Helen's cheek. "Honey," she said. "Sweetheart. Shit." She looked down the length of Helen and pulled up the sheet: her bent knees with the pillow between, the wasting muscles, the catheter tube. She shook her head, rearranged the sheet. "I know, I know what you think of me, Wes."

"I don't—"

"It's not that it's not her. It's that—whichever this person in the bed is, she's where my Helen should be. That's what I can't get over and it's what I know I have to."

Laura was wearing a dress she had bought in the July sales when they'd first arrived, red, with blue embroidered flowers on the shoulders like epaulets. She had belted it too tight. She had lost weight, too.

"Just sit," he said to her. "There are chairs. Here's one. We'll paint. Shall we paint, Helen?"

He wound the brace around her wrist, always a pleasing task, and slid in Helen's favorite long-handled brush, meant for oils, not watercolors. He propped up the pad on the wheeled table that came over the bed, got the water, the colors, dampened the paints. They began.

"You're doing it," said Laura.

"No," he said patiently. "I'm just steadying her hand."

"Then let go," said Laura.

He did, and he believed it would happen: her hand would sail up, like a bird tossed in the air. It would just keep flying. Yes, that was right. If anything, he wanted to tell Laura, he was holding her hand too still, he was interfering. She didn't need him anymore.

But her hand went ticking down to the bottom of the page, and stopped.

Helen's jaw worked, and Laura and Wes watched it. She had not made a noise in weeks. She did not make one now. The short haircut looked alternately gamine and like a punishment. Wes picked her hand back up, placed it, let go. Tick, tick, to the bottom of the page.

"So you see," said Laura.

Wes shook his head. No. She'd needed the help but he was not capable of those paintings.

And if he was, what did that mean? The paintings were what was left of Helen.

"She's not a fraud," said Wes.

"No, I don't think she is," said Laura. "I don't think she's anything. She's not at home, Wes."

"Isn't she?" said Wes.

"No," said Laura. She tapped her head. "I mean here, in her brain, she's not at home. It doesn't matter where her body is. Her body will be at home

anywhere. But it matters where *your* body is. We need to take her home and you, too."

"It isn't just me who's seen it," said Wes.

"Who doesn't love a miracle girl," said Laura, but with love. "I wanted one, too, honestly. I would have loved it, if it had been real."

But, thought Helen—because Helen *was* at home, Helen heard everything—wasn't it more of a miracle this way? Her mother was right. She could not move her hands: that was her father. But she saw the pictures in her head, those fields with the apartment blocks, that golden light—and she couldn't move her hand to get them on the paper. Her father did. There was the miracle everyone spoke about, in English and in French. The visiting nuns said it was God, but it was her father who took her hand and painted the pictures in her head. Every time he got them right: the buildings, the light posts, those translucent floating things across her field of vision when she wasn't exactly looking at anything, what as a child she thought of as her conscience—floaters, her father once told her they were called. "I have them, too," he'd said. They were worse in the hospital, permanent static. She saw, he painted the inside of her snow-globe skull, all those things whizzing around when she fell—the water tower on top of the building, the boy who'd kissed her, the other boy who'd pushed her, those were their faces in the corner of the page, the bottles of wine she'd drunk—back home she'd had beer and peppermint schnapps and had drunk cough syrup, but not wine. Wine was everything here. Those boys would come visit her. They'd promised they would when they dropped her off. She had to stay put. *Don't let her take me, Daddy*. Her mother hadn't looked her in the eye since she'd come into the room, but when had she, ever, ever, ever, thought Helen. All her life, she'd been too bright a light.

"Careless Helen," said Laura, and then to Wes, "Do you know, I think I've only just forgiven her."

"What for?" asked Wes.

She rubbed her nose absentmindedly. "Funny smell. What is that?"

Not medicine nor illness: the iridescent polish the manicurist had applied to Helen's toes.

In order to wake up every morning, thought Wes, he'd convinced himself of a lot of things that weren't true. He could feel some of his beliefs crumble like old plaster—life in Paris, walking the streets with Helen in his arms, revenge on Didier, even Dr. Delarche's crush. Of course they would

go back to the States, where Kit was, they would talk to experts, they would find a facility, they would bring Helen home as soon as they could, where she would be visited by Addie of the braces and the clarinet, and boys from her school. She might never walk again. But her body would persist. It was broken but not failing. She was theirs for the rest of their lives, and then Kit would inherit her. That was what Laura had seen from the first day, and it had crushed her, and she was only just now shifting that weight from her chest.

Helen painted. That was real. He knew his own brain, what it could make up and what it couldn't. He looked at his wife, whom he loved, whom he looked forward to convincing, and felt as though he were diving headfirst into happiness. It was a circus act, a perilous one. Happiness was a narrow tank. You had to make sure you cleared the lip.

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