

THE DARK
BENEATH
THE ICE

AMELINDA BÉRUBÉ

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*To Robert Knipe, Shirley Black, Lila Pulos, and Janet Cover,
because enthusiasm is caught, not taught.*

ONE

THE SILENCE STILL CLINGS TO me.

If I close my eyes it's there waiting for me, filling my mouth, heavy as water. Ready to swallow me again.

I rest my forehead against the window, willing the ordinary sounds around me to wash the memory away: the windshield wipers, the spatter of the rain, the rattle in the wheel well. In the driver's seat beside me, Mom breathes in little hitches, trying not to sound like she's crying.

I risk a glance at her; she's wiping her eyes. Her hair is usually tied up in a neat sweep of gleaming black, silver threads glinting through it. Today she's yanked it through an elastic, pieces straggling dull and stringy around her face. Before I can look away again her gaze meets mine and she attempts a half smile.

It hurts to see it. I study the flowers in my lap: lilies—big, splashy orange ones. The smell is giving me a headache. They're for Aunt Jennifer, for taking care of me. It's not like I haven't been to Aunt Jen's overnight before, not like it's some huge favor. How long is she planning to leave me there?

Mom slams on the brakes, and I clutch the bouquet to stop it from sliding to the floor. She grates out a few choice swear words at the car ahead of us.

"I left your father a message," she says. "I sure hope he calls you."

I take the words in like water—like an icy lake, swallowing their impact without a splash, letting them sink. I turn back to the window, watch my reflection slide over the river and the low-slung clouds. My face is thin and pale, my eyes dark hollows. I look like a ghost.

Mom heaves a sigh, yanks a tissue from the box sitting between us. She won't tell me where she's going. She won't tell me why. Not that I've pressed her for details. There's a traitorous piece of me that's relieved. Mom's always been unpredictable, prone to wild mood swings she apologizes for later, and Hurricane Laura, as Dad puts it, has been howling full blast these past couple days. We used to joke about battening down the hatches, waiting out the storm. But this time, Dad's the reason she's in pieces.

And he left me to pick them up by myself.

I won't think about it. Just like last night—whatever happened last night. It's a stone, and it's vanishing into the water, leaving me serene. Unmoved.

Aunt Jen's building is long and low, brick and stucco, a little shabby at the edges. It's a strange contrast with the palatial homes on the next street, but that's what this whole neighborhood is like. The boat launch at the end of the road is barricaded and piled high with sandbags to keep the river from swallowing the pavement. Right beside it, half a dozen two-story row units are surrounded by a high cedar hedge. Aunt Jen's is the last one before the water. As the car crunches to a stop in the driveway, the sun comes out, as if from behind a veil. Suddenly, over the seawall, the river is all blue glitter, the trees drooping over the end of the street glowing golden-green, the last drops of rain sparkling as they drip from the leaves.

We sit silently in the car for a long moment. Seagulls wheel overhead, crying.

"Wait here," Mom manages eventually, taking the flowers. She slams the door without waiting for me to respond and hurries over to Jen's gate in the hedge, where a flush of pink roses shines in the sun.

I get out more slowly once she's disappeared behind it. Their voices drift toward me: Mom's barely muffled wails, Jen's reassurances. I can't make out words from here, though. I kick at a rock, following it down to the end of the road toward the seawall.

The river shouldn't be this high. Behind the seawall—a chest-high barrier that zigzags behind the imposing homes lining the waterfront—the water is brown, choppy, slapping at the concrete a foot below the top, an occasional wave sending spray sloshing over onto the grass. By now it's usually fallen low enough that

the boat launch stands open to the river; later in the summer it drops all the way down to a stony outcropping that makes for a great place to skip rocks. It's hard to imagine that now.

The rain hasn't stopped for more than a couple of hours at a time this past week; I can't even remember the last time the sun was out for this long. It won't last. The news has been talking endlessly about record precipitation and the threat of flooding, images of picnic tables standing in the water and empty outdoor swimming pools with their surfaces pocked with raindrops. The DJs hosting the radio morning shows, in between laughing at their own jokes, moan about how summer is never going to come. Usually I love the peace and softness of rain, its soothing murmur on the roof. But it's starting to feel oppressive lately. Inescapable.

I turn my back on the water, breathe in its green, weedy smell, and tell myself to relax. Aunt Jen's place has always been cozy, a haven of good memories going back to when I was little. I used to play "inflatable Auntie" with her, pretending to blow her up like a beach ball. She would puff up obligingly and then deflate again, sagging in her chair and making a loud raspberry noise for full effect. I tried that game once with my mom, but she put on a pained smile and told me she didn't like it. I think she was worried I was implying she was fat. Aunt Jen, comfortably plump compared to Mom, doesn't seem to care about that sort of thing; she keeps her graying hair cut short, doesn't wear makeup, and lives in jeans and sweaters unless forced to dress up, when she just drapes herself in something long and flowy.

The gate creaks, and Mom hurries out toward me, folds me into a tight hug. She's not even trying to hide that she's crying now. Aunt Jen follows behind her but heads to the car, popping open the trunk, although she casts a worried look our way.

"It's only for a little while," Mom whispers. "Just a little while. It's not you, sweetie, I just can't deal with this, not on top of everything else."

"With what?" My voice breaks too, and despite my resolve, they come bubbling up: all the questions I haven't dared to ask. "Mom. Please tell me. Did something happen last night?" She lets me go, half turns away, wrapping her arms around herself as if I punched her, her face crumpling. "Mom, *what happened?*"

"Nothing," Mom sobs. "Nothing. Nothing."

She draws a fierce breath, then another, and grips my shoulders, fixing me with a tearful glare.

"Nothing happened, Marianne!" Her fingers dig into my arms. "Understand? It's not you. I just need to get some help. I'm going to get some help, all right? I'll come and get you as soon as I can, and...and we'll figure everything out. Okay?"

I nod. There's nothing else I can do. The sun is gone again. I'm cold from the tips of my fingers to the hollow of my back, despite my sweater.

"Okay," Mom repeats. Her lips tremble. "I love you."

She pulls away, takes long steps back toward the car, and yanks the door open. She folds her arms over the steering wheel and rests her head on them for a moment while her shoulders shake. With the glass between us, I can't hear her sobbing.

“Come on, Mare-bear.” It’s Aunt Jen’s arm around me now, a band of warmth, pulling me close. “Let’s go inside.”



We step into Aunt Jen’s living room, a cool, leafy cavern. Gray light filters through plants that spill from shelves and dangle from hanging planters. The piano, a mass of dark, carven wood, is the only surface that isn’t draped with fronds or vines. The little radio on the side table next to the old maroon couch fills the room with earnest, thoughtful conversation.

“I’ve set up the spare room for you,” Aunt Jen says, pulling the patio door closed behind us. “You can get yourself settled in a bit, and then we’ll have a cup of tea.”

Hugging my pillow, my laptop case banging against my leg, I follow her up the stairs. There are empty spots on the wall where pictures of my parents used to hang. I feel for my phone in my pocket. Dad hasn’t called. I hope he will. I hope he won’t.

The room hasn’t changed: the window looking down onto the garden and the river beyond it, a twin bed with a threadbare quilt, moss-green walls, a white dresser topped with a menagerie of little china animals—a tiger, a monkey, a turkey, a horse. Mom told me they belonged to my grandmother, who died when I was still a baby. I used to play with them when I was little.

“There’s plenty of space in the dresser if you want to unpack,” Aunt Jen offers tentatively. “It’s never fun living out of a suitcase.”

I set down the laptop case and fluff my pillow a couple of times before arranging it on the bed, trying to avoid her gaze.

“Well. I’ll go put the kettle on, Mare-bear, okay? Take your time.”

“It’s Marianne, please, Aunt Jen.” But she’s already out the door.

I sink down on the bed, which creaks under me. The rest of my life is unrecognizable, but everything here is the same. It’s like I’ve stepped into some parallel universe. Like any second I’ll hear my parents laughing downstairs as Jen pours glasses of wine, and none of this will have happened.

There is one thing that’s different. Usually there’s a picture of me and my parents on the wall beside the mirror. Now a much smaller frame hangs a little crookedly in its place, holding a snapshot from some distant summer: just me, striking a *ta-da* pose beside a leaning sandcastle. I remember that red swimsuit.

The photo must be from the beach right down the street from here, so close that we used to go there all the time. I remember those trips in flashes: Mom’s smile as she glanced back at me from the front seat, strings of hair whipping around her face in the gale from the open window. Dad’s hand on her bare knee. My sandaled toes tipping up toward the jewel blue of the sky at the apex of a swing. Dad diving for a volleyball and sprawling in the sand, making me laugh so hard my sides ached. The sparkle of the water, its delicious chill when I waded in. Swimming out as far as I dared, diving as deep as I could, reaching for the murky bottom.

I took yoga classes with Mom after I quit dance. To help me

calm down, she said. Like she thought it would fix me. The studio must have been nice during the day, with sunshine pouring in through the wall of windows at the front. At night the fluorescent lights made everyone look tired and cold. At the beginning of each class, as we lay on our thin, hard mats, the instructor asked us to picture a place where we'd found tranquility, and every time that's what I called up: the water, cold and green. It's second nature now, the one useful thing I learned in those six weeks. I can summon it easily, lower myself into chilly weightlessness, the absence of sound, and hang suspended between worlds for a few long breaths until I'm cool and reasonable again. Lately I've frosted the surface over with a layer of ice, a shield keeping me submerged.

I close my eyes. The memory of silence, an empty horizon, rises around me, but I push it aside, force it down into the depths where dark water belongs. I'm not letting a bad dream spoil this for me, the one place where I'm truly safe. Around me I summon sunlight filtering down through the waves, a translucent, icy ceiling inches thick. Perfect, thoughtless peace closes over my head.

And then a noise like a firecracker, like a gunshot, yanks me back to reality. I leap to my feet, fear splashing through my chest.

It was the mirror above the dresser. Breaking. From a smashed, spiderwebbed epicenter, it's split side to side, slicing my reflection in two with a thread of silver, frozen lightning. The two halves of my dislocated image slide past each other as the frame trembles into stillness.

“Marianne?” Aunt Jen appears in the doorway, frowning. “Is everything—”

Her words disappear into an indrawn breath. I follow her stare back to the mirror, and then to the floor, where the wooden cat from the bedside table is lying on the linoleum next to the dresser.

“Oh, sweetheart,” she says. The words are gentle; horrified. I shrink away from them. What just happened? She thinks I threw it. I open my mouth to protest—*but I didn’t!*—but the words wither, half-formed.

Did I throw it?

Aunt Jen looks at me for another long moment, her lips pursed in consternation, then comes over to wrap an arm around my shoulders. She ushers me downstairs, leads me to the couch like I might break, pours me a steaming cup of some herbal tea that smells like flowers. The orange lilies stand in a vase on the dining room table, brassy and loud as trumpets.

I wrap my hands around the warmth glowing from the teacup to stop them from shaking. My heart is made of moths, fluttering against my ribs, in my throat.

“Are you going to tell Dad?” I blurt out as she sits down next to me. “About the mirror?”

“I don’t know, Mare-bear.” She eyes me over the rim of her own cup. “Do I need to?”

I shake my head, obviously. But I can’t remember picking up the figurine, much less throwing it. It’s a hairline crack in the day, a thread of blank space. Just like last night.

“Well. Listen, sweetie. I’m not mad. Honestly, I know this is

hard. It's awful, and I just want you to know you can talk to me if you need to. Okay?"

"Okay."

Silence descends while she waits for me to continue. Eventually she gives up and clears her throat.

"So," Aunt Jen says in a sprightly, let's-talk-about-something-else way. "You'll need to take the bus to school tomorrow. Just exams left after that, eh?"

"Yeah." Just two weeks. Just forever.

The radio chimes to announce the news. More rain in the forecast; they're piling sandbags in the East End.

"Well, I took some vacation days to look after things, so I'll have all the time in the world. You just let me know what you want to do. Or maybe you'd rather get together with some friends, you know... That's fine too."

I shake my head. Ingrid's the only one I want to spend time with. But San Francisco might as well be the moon. I slurp my still-too-hot tea and burn my tongue.

There's not really anywhere left for the conversation to go. Aunt Jen watches me for a while and finally sighs, perches her glasses on her nose, and picks up her crochet needle. I sip my tea a couple more times and then murmur an excuse about checking my email before escaping back to my room.

No notifications, of course, when I pull out my phone. I start a text to Ingrid for the hundredth time, and for the hundredth time I sit motionless, my fingers hovering over the screen until it goes dark. The words won't condense, somehow, from the

formless worry and grief. Music drifts up from downstairs: Aunt Jen's flying through the twinkling notes of a Chopin waltz on the piano. I think she means it to be comforting.

I used to dance to this when I visited, twirling around the tiny living room on the tips of my toes, my hair swinging out behind me, my arms swept over my head, fingers poised to pluck butterflies from the air, just like they'd taught us. Mom always applauded earnestly. I was her star. Dad would be watching us both, smiling.

Water can stop bullets if it's deep enough. The memory can't touch me. I just have to breathe, breathe, and let it sink. Like everything else.

Like my silent phone.

Call me, I want to type, but how many ways can you tell somebody you miss them before you end up sounding hopelessly needy? If I could talk to Ingrid about all this awfulness, it would lose its weight, disappear. If I confided in her, maybe I wouldn't feel so alone. But maybe—probably—it would just be oversharing. And I can't think of a way to tell her about the things that scare me most. Strange things.

Like the mirror. Its broken face keeps twinkling in the pale afternoon light, catching my eye, drawing it back. Eventually I grab the quilt folded at the end of the bed and throw it over the frame. Was it me? It must have been me. How else could that happen, glass simply breaking, out of nowhere?

T W O

MOM USED TO TELL ME all the time there's no such thing as perfect.

My family wasn't perfect. I knew that. But I thought it was working. It worked for me. My parents were never the hypercritical, clueless control freaks people at school always whine about. No brothers or sisters to fight with. It was quiet, but a comfortable quiet, a book-and-a-blanket quiet.

In my head I have this picture of us: Me curled up reading on the couch, not the chilly leather bench we got for the new house, but the old, olive-green corduroy one with a rip in the side Mom hid with a table. Dad in his habitual after-work spot, perched on an ergonomic stool in front of a canvas, taking advantage of the light from the north-facing window. He'd have traded his sober,

anonymous tie and jacket for one of the painting shirts we got him every year for Father's Day, the louder and sillier the better. His favorite had flamingos on it. Mom, meanwhile, would be just out of sight around the corner, clinking and humming in the kitchen. She'd come in to bring Dad a cup of coffee, reminding him not to put his paintbrush in it. He'd emerge from his reverie for long enough to smile up at her, for her to kiss his cheek.

After Dad's company took off, when we moved to the new house, it was different: all the chrome accents, white and black, straight lines. Dad insisted on all this stupid art that looks deep but doesn't mean anything, even though he claimed it was "expressive." My dance friends stared like tourists when they came over, craning their necks to take it all in, the sweep of the staircase that looks like it's floating, the huge soaring windows that turn the rolling hills on the far side of the river into wallpaper. The quiet there was emptier. The whole house was flooded with north-facing light, but Dad didn't have time to paint anymore. He kept a little caddy of brushes next to his desk, called it his five-minute project station; he'd add a few brushstrokes at a time, he told me, in between emails.

At night, inside, the house is like a ship, the prow facing out into the dark of the river. The only lights would be a white strip under Dad's office door on one side of the house and on the other, the washed-out blue flicker of the television in their room as Mom graded papers in bed.

Maybe the cracks widening between them should have been obvious. But I hadn't heard them fight since those awful few

days at the end of dance class, back in ninth grade. I think they must have, every once in a while. They never said anything to me about it, but Mom was like a barometer. Every now and again her anger suffused the whole house. Always unspoken, never explained, it seeped into every corner, followed me into every room. It echoed in the clanking of dishes as she stood at the sink, in the slam of the dryer door, in the whirring of the furnace filling the silence.

I asked her about it once. She said, without looking at me, that I didn't need to worry about it.

"Marriage is work, Marianne," she said. "Nobody agrees all the time. Reasonable people work out their differences."

That was her mantra. When I quit dance, that whole terrible week Dad didn't even come home, Mom had repeated it like a prayer. And it had worked, in the end. So I would wait, just like I had then: Holding my breath. Not rocking the boat. Being good. Keeping quiet.

And the clouds always passed. Mom would still make Dad his coffee. She would pad off to his office with it while I did my homework perched on a bar stool at the chilly stone counter of the kitchen peninsula. And Dad would emerge later with the empty mug and ask me about my day. I'd breathe a sigh of relief and feel a little proud that they were such reasonable people. People who knew how to stay calm and work things out.

When I think about it now, it's like Dad had been leaving for a long time, a point on the horizon getting smaller and smaller, so slowly I didn't see it happen. I didn't want to admit it. There

was always another explanation. In that cavernous glass ship it seemed only logical we would spread out a little thinner, bump into each other less. That I'd only see them by themselves, in their separate corners of the house.

It might have been work that kept Mom up past midnight. I was up studying for a test one night, and she came into my room with a plate of cookies to share and a mug of hot chocolate, saying she couldn't sleep. We had a wonderful, cozy chat about nothing much: the book I was reading, the shenanigans her first-year students tried to pull. I felt so grown up, like I was someone she could rely on, someone she could come to for company. But I heard her footsteps in the hall so many other nights. Dad didn't even get home until eight o'clock, and then he'd disappear into his office. Mom set her jaw and said you can't expect to work nine to five when you're running a tech start-up, even after the IPO. There was always a deadline, or a manager who left and took most of their employees with them, or a new client to meet with... He was busy, that was all. It didn't seem strange.

It's two days ago now that it all fell apart.



Tuesday night. The cathedral windows were going dim. The mascara streaking Mom's face was the first sign it was coming. She sat across from me, chin lifted, arms tightly folded, in the far corner of the couch. As far from Dad as she could get. She fixed her red-rimmed glare on a point on the wall.

And Dad, his elbows on his knees, spoke to the floor. Didn't meet my eyes except in the barest glances while he delivered this terrible, practiced speech about how he and Mom couldn't live together anymore, how they both loved me very much, how this wasn't anyone's fault. Mom snorted at the last statement, and he winced, letting his words trail off.

The rain hammered on the tall windows. I sat there, smooth and frozen, waiting for time to resume. Waiting to find out none of this weird, ugly drama was real.

But all that happened was that Mom stood up and stalked out of the room while Dad dropped his head into his hands.

"I was hoping it wouldn't come to this, bunny," he said as a door slammed, echoing across the house. "I'm sorry."

The blue-veined surface of the ice dimmed above me. I'd sink so deep they'd never find me. Dad shifted under my stare.

"It's okay to be angry." He sighed. "Let's just talk about things, okay?"

"Things," I echoed.

"Well, yeah. Lots of things. I need to explain."

A muffled, irregular sound crept through the silence between us. The sound of Mom crying.

I meant to say something. I meant to be reasonable and cooperative and all the things he wanted. But instead, I got to my feet and left the room. I barely saw where I was going. Around me the ice stretched out forever, a vast arctic sea.

Dad called after me. "Marianne? Come on, please?"

But he only called once.

Mom was lying on the bed, facing away from me. She didn't turn around when I came into the room.

"Mom?"

When she didn't answer I sat down on the bed, then lay down next to her, put my arms around her. And we stayed like that for a long time, listening to the rain beating on the skylights as the colors in the room dissolved into twilight.

Eventually she spoke, told me he didn't want counseling, and she couldn't make him stay. I listened in the dark as Mom sobbed about how she was sure he was seeing someone else, and where were we going to live now, and how could he do this, *how*. I tried to let it wash over me, to stay in the depths untouched, but I could feel the bottom dropping away beneath me, the directions melting, the compass meaningless, spinning in free fall.

After that broken night, after waking up alone in my parents' bed, nothing seemed real anymore. Going to school was unthinkable. Dad's absence was nothing unusual, but it screamed at me from every side, from every piece of furniture he'd picked out, every fixture they'd debated over. The spare tidiness of the house made no sense. The windows should have been smashed all over the floor, the rain blowing through the house. Mom couldn't sit still, pacing from room to room, raging. I trailed helplessly in her wake, wishing I could hide from the storm, unable to abandon her. If you stayed calm and waited long enough, Hurricane Laura would eventually blow herself out.

"I told him," she seethed. She stood in the middle of the living room, hands on her hips. I was perched on the edge of one

of the weird, hard decorative chairs that no one sits in, hands folded in my lap. I'd been watching her stalk around the living room in a prowling circle, all explosive energy, a wild thing in a cage. "I told him if he was going to do this to us, if he was going to do this *again*, he was going to be the one to tell you. Do you know the real reason why he missed your show in Montreal?"

That show was a blur of lights and anxiety in my head. Mom was a waiting shadow, a fierce backstage whisper, an even hand wielding lip liner when mine shook too badly. She'd stayed in the wings long past the end of her volunteer shift, earning flutters of admiring protest from the others. She was the queen of the dance moms, sticking on false eyelashes, organizing garment bags, threading safety pins together, applying hairspray to running nylons.

"Well, let's just say it sure as hell wasn't a business trip. And I *forgave* him. I took him back! And now he just walks out the door. Did he think I'd let him just sneak off without a word to you?" She tossed her hair, not needing an answer. "He thought he could dump everything in my lap. Like he *always* does. Well, it's different this time. He's not coming crawling back to us again. I hope he *has* found someone else. Maybe she can clean up after him and his fucking executive job—she can—"

Her words dissolved into a cry of fury and disgust, and she stormed from the room, leaving me to sink forward till my forehead touched my knees, too wrung out from listening to her to even cry.

When she came marching back into the room she had a knife in her hand. One of Dad's fancy kitchen knives.

“Mom!”

She climbed up on the couch, her feet barely sinking into the gleaming black leather, and buried the point of the knife in the painting that filled the wall there. She sawed at it, but the canvas refused to slice, so she reached up to yank at the hole she'd punched through it, hauling on the cloth until it ripped, a long, ragged slash, leaving it curling down like peeling skin.

She stood there, panting, and I waded forward. Didn't come too close.

“Mom. You should give me the knife.”

She looked around at me, her eyes widening, like she'd just remembered I was there. Cold, luminous water, I thought, looking steadily at her. A shield of ice. Beyond depth, beyond waves, beyond fear.

“I'm sorry, sweetie,” she whispered. “I'm just... I'm so angry. You didn't think—I didn't mean to—”

“Mom.” I was so calm. I would make this disappear like everything else. “Please.”

Her mouth twisted up; she put a hand over her face, turned away from me. I took her wrist in one hand, pulled the knife from her slack fingers with the other. Her muffled sobs followed me as I carried it back to the kitchen. I didn't run. My feet in their fuzzy socks were silent on the hardwood.

This was it. This was the bottom, the lightless sandy floor beneath the ocean, too cold and too heavy for anything to live. If I could make it through this, I thought, I could make it through anything.



Finally, thankfully, she left for a meeting with a lawyer. I fled to my room and immersed myself in cool, green silence until my heart-beat stopped hammering in my ears. Eventually the car purred back into the driveway. I ignored it, but then there were noises from the yard: a scrape and clatter.

When I reluctantly pushed the front door open, I found Mom kneeling in the mud in her nice faculty interview slacks in the middle of one of the garden beds, yanking long threads of quack grass and seedy dandelions from a matted tangle of some ground-hugging plant. Strings of black hair hung wet down her neck. The rain plastered her blouse to her back, water dripping from the tip of her nose, her forehead.

Maybe she wasn't crying. Maybe it was just the rain.

"Mom?" She didn't answer at first, just sniffed and wiped a hand across her face, leaving a streak of mud. I almost asked her if she was okay, but thought better of it. "What are you doing?"

"What does it look like?" She was crying. It left her voice broken and gluey. A dandelion stalk snapped in her hand. She threw it to the ground. "We're going to have to sell this place now. I can't afford to pay for it by myself. So it has to be presentable."

"Mom, it's pouring, can't it wait until—"

"Until what?" she shouted, finally looking up at me through her dripping hair. "Until your father shows up to help?"

I stared back at her, frozen, still leaning against the open door. I stood my ground. I didn't back away.

"This place will take forever to sell." She snatched a

dandelion digger from the path, renewing her attack. “The architect told us that when we were building it. He *warned* us. Three bedrooms in a place this size. And I said it didn’t matter. I said we’d be here forever.”

She sobbed once and stabbed the ground with the digger. Again, and again, and then she hit a rock and hurled the tool aside. It hit the side of the house with a bang, and she slumped over with her hands over her face. Crying like I’d never heard her cry, in noisy hacking sounds that echoed down the street.

I stepped gingerly over to her, put an arm around her shoulders, almost afraid to touch her. But she sagged into me, heavy and shaking, her forehead a weight on my shoulder. The rain pricked down around us, and the mud soaked slowly into my knees.

My phone was ringing when I finally managed to coax her back inside. The insistent chime echoed through the house as she disappeared down the hall, saying dully she was going to take a shower. Four, five, six times. Pause. And again.

I’d left it in the kitchen; it rang again as I trudged into the room. It kept ringing as I set the kettle on the stove to boil, fished the last few cookies from the cupboard, ate them mechanically. Finally I gave up and picked it up from the counter. I didn’t recognize the number.

“Hello?”

“Marianne?”

Dad. For a long beat I didn’t speak. My thoughts were a roaring blank.

“Marianne? Is that you, bunny?”

“Hi.” I heard the word come out of my mouth. I had to say something.

“You weren’t picking up. I thought if I kept calling... Is everything... How are you doing?”

I was talking to a stranger. My dad wouldn’t have left us. He would have calmed Mom down, worked things out. Why did he still sound like my dad? His concern was warm as a hug.

“Fine.” I took a deep breath, tried again. Was it going to be my job to tell him about the knife in Mom’s hand? Would he use that against her? “Well. Not so good.”

“I...I see.” Dad’s turn to pause. The silence stretched. A hiss of static skirled over the phone line. “Listen, we really need to talk. I need to tell you what’s going on with me.”

I didn’t want to talk. I didn’t want to know. Whatever he was trying to tell me, whatever I was going to have to accept, it loomed over me like a mountain, too heavy to carry, too huge to drown. I was choking on Mom’s fury already. I couldn’t do it. The phone crackled and whispered in my hand.

“Marianne?” His words faded in and out of the rising tide of white noise, like rocks in the river. “...there, bun? Listen, please, this doesn’t change anything...figure something...for coffee or...”

And after that—what? I might have closed my eyes. The rush of static on the phone washed over me between one breath and the next, an endless wave of sound, a vast, underwater gulf. Or was that part of the dream?

Because it’s all I can remember after that. The dream. The sand cold between my bare toes. Stepping out of the shadow of

the trees, silence smothering even the sound of my breath. The crescent of the beach stretched out to rocky points, barely visible. The faint orange glow of the city spilled over my shoulders, staining the ragged, pale boundary of a crust of ice. But out there, beyond the light, even that disappeared. There was no horizon. The surface stretching out before me was a cool breath on my face, an extension of the starless sky.

I couldn't look away from it. I couldn't stop walking. My feet carried me forward like they didn't belong to me. The water sliced into my feet, over my knees, panic climbing with it. Something pressed me forward, invisible hands forcing me down, irresistible as gravity. There was no fighting it, whatever it was—whoever it was. And if I couldn't break their grip I would drown. That's what they wanted. I knew it like I knew my heart was beating.

But it must have been a dream. When I woke up in bed it was morning, so I must have slept. When I opened my eyes in the faint gray light, Mom was sitting on the edge of my bed, hunched over, hands clasped between her knees, not looking at me.

"You should stay in your room for now, sweetie," she said hoarsely.

"Mom?" I pushed myself up on my elbow, blinking, trying to figure out what she was talking about.

"Just—please!" I recoiled from her sudden shout. She put her hands over her face, and then after a moment spoke through them. "Please listen, Marianne. I need you to stay in your room. Okay? Until I come and get you."

"Okay," I whispered. She pushed herself to her feet and left

the room without ever meeting my eyes, closing the door with exaggerated care behind her. Maybe I should have gone after her, tried to help, offered a hug. But as I sat up I realized I was still dressed under the covers. When I swung my feet to the ground I found them bare, just like in the dream: no socks to hide the calluses scabbing my toes, the lizard-scale patches where the skin had blistered away and healed and blistered again under the friction of pointe shoes. My jeans were stiff and gray with mud from kneeling next to Mom in the garden while she sobbed. And my hair spilled loose over my shoulders. It's just like Mom's, long and stick-straight and easily tangled, so I always braid it at night. I'd left it that way all day. Hadn't I?

Even now, hours later, I'm trying to think back to last night for an explanation and there's nothing there; the silence and the water have engulfed the whole evening, like a sinkhole. Did I go to bed that early? Without changing out of my mud-caked jeans? Why can't I remember?

But the questions only lead me back to the dream, to the weight of the water, the pit of the sky. Of the feelings that bubble up through the icy lake, it's not bewilderment or hurt or worry that stay with me. It's dread. I don't want to know what happened. I'm afraid to think about it for very long, but it hangs over me anyway.

Like the silence did, in my dream. Like the dark.