

(“*The Wayside*,” technically a novella, is one of fifteen stories included in the collection *GIRLS OF A CERTAIN AGE*, forthcoming from Little, Brown. It was previously published in *EPOCH*.)

The Wayside

By Maria Adelman

“It’s not just the words, it’s the attitude: the excitement you bring to the house and the people who lived here. You have to start animated *and* you have to keep that energy going the whole way through. For example—” he paused for a moment, his finger on his lips, and then put on his tour guide face: eyes wide, mouth stretched into an impossible smile. “Welcome to The Wayside. I’m your tour guide James.” I thought the smile might pop off his face. “The tour should take approximately one half hour, *and* I’ll be available to answer any questions you have up to a half hour after the tour is over.”

He paused and relaxed, still smiling. “Sort of like that,” he said. “I’m sure you’ve got it, May, you catch on fast.”

“Yeah, you keep saying that I’ve got it, *but* you haven’t let me do a tour yet,” I said, brushing my hair back with my hand for the millionth time that day. It was the summer between my senior year of high school and my freshman year of college, a hot, humid New England summer that made my hair puff an inch off my head so that I was constantly pinning or brushing it back despite the low success rate of such tactics.

“You’re almost ready,” he said, “*and* I think you only need a few more tours before we give you a run.”

“*But*,” I said, “I can do it after that?”

We had a war going on between *ands* and *buts*, or, at least, I had a war going on between *ands* and *buts*. James believed *but* was a negative word that subtracted positive meaning from the first part of the sentence, and therefore he rarely used it. He would say things like, “You’re doing a great job entering data into the computer *and* when you file my papers I can’t seem to find them.”

To counter his irrational elimination of *but*, I used it as frequently as possible in places where it was completely unnecessary: “I really like oranges,” I’d say during lunch break, “*but* I really like apples.” I’d never had the audacity to play such a game with my teachers, and maybe I only had the courage to play it now because I couldn’t tell if he noticed my point—his smile rarely disappeared, as if a parenthesis had been tattooed below his nose.

This was the first time I’d been employed as anything besides a babysitter, and I’d never been trained so thoroughly or so personally. By the end of my first week, I’d felt as if I’d been at The Wayside for half the summer. I arrived at work each morning preemptively exhausted, but James just kept smiling absurdly and beginning right away. His mouth was frog-like: broad and slightly protruding, his lips long, thin, and pink. I wondered which came first, his smile or the shape of his mouth. He was lean and clean shaven, wore thin silver-rimmed spectacles that

nearly matched his silvering hair. I imagined that each morning, after sit-ups and egg whites, he stood barefoot on a white tiled bathroom floor, shaving carefully, a pile of lather falling into an impossibly white sink.

What I had really wanted was a job at The Orchard, the historic site next door where Louisa May Alcott had written *Little Women* and also where my best friend Julie worked. The Wayside and The Orchard couldn't be more different. The Wayside *seemed* charming from the outside: a creamy house with green shutters, a wrap-around porch that jutted off one side, and an extra room that bloomed from the roof alongside three pink chimneys. The Orchard was just a big box with long dark brown siding in the typical old New England fashion.

But inside, The Orchard was bright and cheery as if the little women, including Louisa May herself, could come tumbling down the stairs at any moment. The Wayside, on the other hand, was so dreary that it felt like stage set for a play about murder. It was cold, even in the summer, with bile green carpets and drawn shades that made everyday seem overcast and dull. The Wayside had once been inhabited by the Alcotts and even a moderately famous children's author, but their mark was nowhere to be seen. If The Wayside was representative of or haunted by anyone, it was Nathaniel Hawthorne, though almost none of his original furniture was still there.

On my first Friday at work, James and I waited around to see if anyone would arrive at Visitor's Center for the final tour of the week. Or, he waited for another tour, and I waited for the end of the day, clicking my fingers quickly and softly over the cash register keys without pressing them, noticing that the fingernails I hadn't chewed off were lined fairly evenly in dirt. The Visitor's Center was a small building located thirty feet from The Wayside. Here, books were sold, tours began, and life-sized plaster statues of each author stood silently before displays of old pictures and famous quotes.

James had been sweeping, leaned his broom against the wall, then sat in a chair beside me. "What are your aspirations?" he asked. I almost laughed—even when a guidance counselor asked that kind of question it seemed absurd—but he was serious.

"I don't know," I said.

"Writing?" he asked, nodding towards the plaster authors.

"Oh, no," I said. "Not writing." I sensed disappointment, though it's hard to say why since he was still smiling his usual smile. "I'm going to college next year," I added.

"Good," he said, nodding. "That's good. You'll learn wonderful things there. You can do anything at your age—and I still believe I can do anything at mine." He nodded his head with so much enthusiasm that I thought it might bobble off. "It's all a matter of enough time," he added, "and you have yet to worry about that."

But I did, in a way, have to worry about that. I was hardly eighteen, but before long it would be impossible to claim that I was a child. This summer was a strange no-man's land, and I was trying my best not to consider the before and after that so conspicuously surrounded me.

Just then, a beaming girl and her mother entered the Visitor's Center. "Well, hello!" James said, jumping up as I mustered what I could of a smile.

James stared at the girl for a moment. She was carrying a notebook and pen. He closed his eyes and hummed. The girl watched intently. The mother smiled. James opened his eyes, his smile rubberbanding tight across his face. “It just came to me,” he said. “I have this feeling . . . this feeling that you must be. . . you must be a writer!” He paused. “Am I right?”

The girl giggled and looked at her mother who motioned for her to respond. “I *am* a writer,” said the girl. “And and and,” she looked up at her mother again, who encouraged her to go on. “AND! I’ve wrote a story and it was in the. . . in the *newspaper!*” She said “newspaper” almost in a whisper, as if it were a secret. I could barely remember a time when I had spoken with such enthusiasm.

James shook his head in amazement. “Wow!” he said. “And how old are you?”

“EIGHT years old!” the girl shouted, and I felt a pang of regret for already being too old to be a child prodigy.

“Well, we’ll need to give you a very special tour of The Wayside,” said James. It took a very special person to give a special tour of The Wayside—it took a very special person to make The Wayside interesting at all, especially with the cheery Orchard mocking us from next door.

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That night, like every Friday night, I had dinner at my dad’s tiny apartment in Carlisle, which was just outside of Concord. It was barely three rooms—a small kitchen attached to a bedroom attached to a bathroom. Instead of doors, the rooms were separated by hanging wooden beads. The place was neat and sparse: no wall decorations, few shelves, an air mattresses for a bed. Extra items were kept in piles, cereal here, gray custodial shirts there. He had found a round table on the street with three chairs missing bars at the back, and this was where we spent most of our time.

My mom referred to the evenings at my father’s as The Weekly Styrofoam Dinners, since we always ate takeout. After my first week of work, we ate Chinese food from black plastic boxes with black plastic forks. I sat with my legs curled up beneath me and my elbows on the table. My dad sat across from me, leaning forward into his food, assessing the contents.

“Chinese! What a change!” he said. “How’s work?”

“Well,” I said, “the man I work with is. . . ” I paused. “He’s very nice.”

“*Too* nice, you mean,” my dad said, poking through his meal.

“Here,” I said, pointing with a fork to a shrimp in my dish. “Yeah, too nice, I guess.”

“Maybe he wants in your pants.” My dad took the shrimp with his fork. He always believed one person was after what was in another person’s pants, probably a projection of his own wishes and, I guessed, the reason my parents had split up.

“He’s over fifty,” I said.

“A young girl like you? He’d love it. Watch out.”

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I came home to my mom’s later that evening to find the spot where I usually sat at the kitchen table covered in college forms, pages and pages requiring the same exact information, and then an additional amount of obscure information that was impossible to find. One of the forms was a

housing survey. I was supposed to specify if I was a night owl or an early bird. Everything on the survey was a kind of stupid metaphor like that, and I hadn't fill it out yet.

"What are these for?" I said to my mother, who was in the kitchen making her own dinner.

"What are these for?" my mother repeated. "Maybe they're for you to fill out before they're due? What do you think?"

"Well, you're in a good mood," I said, dropping my purse on the floor and heading into the family room to sit on the couch.

"Well, you're going off to college, you should be able to fill out a few forms without parental assistance. You said you'd fill them out *this week*."

"It still is *this week*."

"I hope you aren't planning to go off gallivanting with Julie tonight, because you've got plans, Honey." Had she been like this when my brother Frank was going away to college? I couldn't remember.

She came into the living room and sat on the other side of the couch, flipping on the news. I already didn't want to hear it. It always started straight away with the wars: this person captured, another person killed, trucks blowing up, buildings instantly in smithereens. No mention of Afghanistan—we'd already forgotten about that war, but hadn't yet remembered to mention we forgot.

"Do you *have* to watch that?" I asked.

"I need to know if my son is safe," she said. Frank was in Afghanistan. I wanted to tell her that her *son* was my *brother* and the goddamn news wasn't going to tell her if Frank was okay, all it was going to do was set her on edge and make her worry, and if not her, then me.

"Have we heard from him?" I asked.

"That email last week," she said, waving me away. "I would've told you."

Frank had gone right from college to the Middle East and had barely returned since, going on new tours every chance he could. I guess he liked war, though it wasn't the kind of thing one wanted to shout from the rooftops in a city like this, even though Bostonians, of all people, were raised with almost a parental love for America, believing that we had been present for both the country's conception and its birth. We loved the revolution, the Constitution, war, peace, and transcendentalism. Every April, Lexington and Concord shut down for Patriot's Day, our own version of Independence Day, which marked the first battle of the Revolutionary War with fireworks, barbecues, and beer. Neighbors who I'd only ever witnessed walking lazily down their driveways in button-downs and khakis on that day in April would march in the street carrying giant flags or fake rifles, wearing white wigs or fancy red coats with golden buttons.

But recently, the fireworks had not been as bright or as high or as many. This year, Patriot's Day came just a month after most of the city had been out waving poster boards and painted sheets, yelling, "Not one more day! Not one more dollar! Not one more death!" And "How many lives per gallon?" The equation made my stomach churn. I'd picture whole lines of

soldiers hugging their families goodbye and then, suddenly, in the very arms of a sister or a parent or a wife, each soldier would melt down into a lifeless black puddle shining at their feet.

Women would stand behind me in grocery lines saying things like, “Who in his right mind would fight such a useless war?” and “I wouldn’t want my son dying over there for no reason.” For a while, I couldn’t step into a single crowded place without hearing something like that. They claimed to protest on behalf of my brother, and in the next breath they called him an idiot. Sometimes it made me wish I lived in some other city, the apathetic kind they always talked about on the news.

I told him once he shouldn’t have to go. “I don’t *have* to go,” he said. “We have a *volunteer* military.” I wanted to say that he hadn’t *volunteered* to be unable to afford college unless he joined the military, but it wasn’t the time to get into it. “I *want* to go,” he said. “What else am I supposed to do? Go home?” I guess it was one war or the other, but I thought the whole rule in the army was that you didn’t leave anybody behind. And Frank had no excuses. He had known what it was like on Evergreen Drive, where, when he’d left, I was stuck alone without him.

When we were little, Frank would invite me into his room when our parents were having their very loud “discussions,” which she refused to call arguments. Frank’s baby blue room was covered with car posters and dust-filled model airplanes. He’d play music from his lime green boom box, showing me each tape’s case before playing it, pointing to the white sticker where he’d written the album name and artist in careful, black print. “If someone wants to know if these guys are cool, what do you say?” he’d ask. As it turned out, Frank only owned things that were *okay*, *cool*, or *very cool*, so I had three chances.

“You’re an idiot,” he’d say when I got it wrong, and he’d turn back to the boom box and not look at me until I got it right, at which time he’d look back in my direction and smile, throwing two thumbs up right next to his ears. At those times there was not a sound that existed outside of that room, a room that at other moments I could enter only under a barrage of Nerf or wiffle balls, a full on tackle, threats of death.

Between tapes, we’d both listen for silence outside of his room. If the discussion was over, our game was, too, and he’d rub his hand hard into the top of my head and then push me out the door. “Yeah, man,” he’d say. “You’re gonna be alright.”

He got all the looks: sandy hair, a lightly freckled nose, pink cheeks, a square jaw that I also inherited, though it looked strong and confident on him and sharp and boyish on me. Anyway, it was a face you could feel alright about being related to, a face you could end up missing if it wasn’t around for you to see it anymore.

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Julie visited me on lunch breaks to get a look at the other employees, like Ted. Ted was in his super-senior year of college, volunteering at The Wayside several hours a week for college credit. “Hey,” Julie would say to him sweetly, cocking her head. One day, not looking at me, zipping her thumb back and forth across a copy of *The Scarlet Letter* as if it were a flipbook, probably ruining that edge for good, she said, “You wouldn’t understand since you have, like,

zero hormones, but I'm telling you FYI that Ted is hot, should you ever be quizzed on the subject." I shrugged and took a bite of my apple, following Ted with my eyes.

If Ted wasn't there, Julie would settled for picking on Audrey. Audrey was more than a half-decade out of college, taking James' place at The Wayside twice a week. She brought pickles for lunch in a jar and ate them on Hawthorne's front lawn, the juice dripping onto her skirt. The first day I met her, she took her pickles out of the brown bag stealthily as if they were something more sinister. "No, I'm not pregnant, I'm trying to lose weight," she hissed. Then she started eating them, first holding them lightly between her thumb and forefinger, biting with a delicate crack, but by the end the bites were more ravenous, like a monkey chomping at a banana, pickle juice flying everywhere, so that for the rest of the day she smelled slightly of vinegar. Audrey was top-heavy, with a large balloon of a chest and a wide stomach, twiggy legs and curveless hips. In the end, though, she was about as not-skinny as I was not-skinny, which was not not-skinny enough to require a pickle-only diet.

"She looks like a dog guarding the house," whispered Julie one day, her forearms resting on the counter so that the silver bracelets she usually wore leaned sideways on the back of her hand. "Just like a dog, the way she eats pickles on the grass like that and snarls at me."

"Snarls at you?"

"She obviously doesn't like me," said Julie. Julie had just gotten a French manicure, and her fingers suddenly seemed absurdly long and incredibly clean. "She's so stuck up about her knowledge of *Nathaniel Hawthorne* and everything else. I bet she wants to go to grad school at *Harvard*." She tried to say *Nathaniel Hawthorne* and *Harvard* with a British accent, which she felt to be a signifier of pretentiousness, but it came out more with long Boston A's.

Audrey didn't quite *snarl*, but she certainly did scowl. She'd gone to Dartmouth and railed on her high school classmates who'd gone to Harvard and were never able to "experience leaving home." But she was twenty seven and worked at The Wayside, which was in Concord, which was about as close to not leaving home as Audrey could get. We had a lot of Harvard shirts in at The Wayside, and Audrey looked at them bitingly. She fared better with those from Boston College, Emerson, Tufts. I was planning to go to an even lesser-known Boston college — not a place of intelligence or stupidity, just a place, a resting ground before real life could take hold. And The Wayside? The Wayside was just a place before college.

"Sorry you got stuck at Wayside," Julie said still scrunching her nose about Audrey's eating habits. "Orchard is really fun." Come fall, Julie would be going to college in New York City, which was one reason why I'd wanted to work with her this summer.

"James is cool, though, I guess," I said. "He's going to let me do the tours soon," I said, not entirely sure this was true.

"He came on my tour on, like, Friday," said Julie.

"At Orchard?"

"I didn't tell you that? I heard he visits all the Emerson and Thoreau spots, too. He wants to be a writer—he's trying to soak it all in. Does that man every stop smiling?"

"He's taking a positive approach," I said as Audrey appeared in the doorway.

“Julie,” she said in her pissed off way, leaning her head down towards her neck so that she seemed to have multiple chins, “you better get back to Orchard.”

“You have pickle juice on your skirt, Audrey,” said Julie.

I wished Julie wouldn’t say things like that, only because Audrey then liked me less and treated me worse, and I had to try to make up for it. But it was true, the pickle juice had dripped into the white script of the A that rested in the bottom corner of her skirt, shading it just slightly green. Audrey loved *The Scarlet Letter*. “Wouldn’t it be wonderful,” she said once, “to be that kind of honorable outcast?” Her wardrobe suggested that when the initialed monogram paraphernalia became popular she had purchased all of the shirts, purses, and earrings she could find. She felt like Hester Prynne, I’m sure, all of those A’s surrounding her.

Audrey began organizing the already perfectly organized Hawthorne books on the shelf next to the cash register. “I mean, I like pickles, too,” I said. Or, anyway, I didn’t *not* like them. She grunted.

“So,” I said. “You’re planning to stay in. . . the tourism field?”

Audrey turned around. “I’m going into journalism,” she said. It was starting to feel like everyone around here was a writer or was trying to be one, as if greatness could rub off on people and onto things and back onto people again.

“What’d you major in during college?” I asked.

“Media studies,” said Audrey, who had returned to her organization of bookshelves after a pointed look at me. “I minored in English Literature, which is only one reason why I work here.”

“I don’t know what I’ll major in,” I said. “I’m mostly working here because Julie—”

“Of course,” said Audrey.

“Well, I needed a summer job, Audrey.”

“Why didn’t you go work at the mall or something? Have you even read Hawthorne?”

“In high school,” I said. I had. Sort of. I’d read *The Little Women* upwards of five times, but *The Scarlet Letter* I’d barely managed to get through once in my sophomore year. All I could remember from high school was that the first chapter was long and boring and about a door. When I’d started working, after I’d already read all of the captions and quotes on the displays and spent far too many hours tapping out *Hot Cross Buns* on the cash register keys, I’d picked up a copy of *The Scarlet Letter*. The first chapter was only two pages. It was still boring, as far as I could tell, and it was still, more or less, about a door.

“Anyway, it doesn’t matter,” I added. “Is this what you did before college? Work here?”

Audrey turned toward me again. “Look,” she said, almost nicely, “it’s not like I’ve been working here for my whole life. College is a big thing. You change. Watch it. You’ll see. You won’t want to work here next summer.”

“Besides,” Audrey added, “you’ll probably go into something like retail management.” She was at the books again, running a finger delicately across a long, even row of *The Scarlet Letter*.

One morning I came upon James just as he was opening the Visitor's Center. It was already humid, but James had a smile on his face and a song in his heart. "You're whistling, this early?" I asked.

He stopped whistling. "I'm at my favorite job," he said.

"Are you ever *not* happy?" I hadn't eaten breakfast yet. My hair was frizzed out to the sun.

"Sometimes, *and* even sadness gives us a larger view of life." It was too much at this hour. I was glad I hadn't eaten breakfast—nothing to puke up. He started whistling again, entered the Visitor's Center, and began dusting Louisa May Alcott.

"*And*," he said without looking up, "you can do the first tour today."

"Really? *But* do you think I'm ready?" I was nervous.

"Just one for today, *and* you can do more as the summer goes on."

I spent the morning dusting Hawthorne down to his nostrils, tapping out quick versions of *Mary Had a Little Lamb* on the cash register keys, realigning the spines of books, repeating facts over and over. The dates were the hardest, and I felt like I was sitting at a blue plastic chair in history class the morning of a quiz. "Nathaniel Hawthorne, 1804," I whispered. "Louisa May Alcott, 1832. Margaret Sidney, 1844." At ten to noon, a family of four entered the Visitor's Center.

"Welcome to The Wayside!" I shouted as I stood up, and they all jumped like I was one of the statues just come to life. "Would you like a tour?" I asked. "I'm your tour guide, May."

"Um, yes," the father mumbled. "A tour."

"It will begin in ten minutes," I said, slumping back into my chair, trying to quell my nerves. The little boy of the family started throwing fake punches at Nathaniel Hawthorne's creamy white leg and the little girl tugged on her mother's dress, asking when they were getting ice cream.

I knew this type. There were two main categories of tourists: those who were interested, and those who were not. The interested ones were mainly writers wielding notebooks and pens, or English professors in earth-tone scarves. Then there were those just trying to collect the whole set just to have the *whole set*, who figured *while we're here...* who took pictures in front of the house as proof. The family members these tourists forced along dragged their feet and yawned long yawns and glanced at their watches. They pretended to punch Nathaniel Hawthorne and asked when, exactly, they were going for ice cream.

I did about as well on my first tour as I should have expected. As we walked up the steep steps to the highest point in the house, the Sky Parlor as Hawthorne had called it, the mother complained, "But none of this is even Hawthorne's furniture?" James trailed behind us, watching how I fared.

"Well, it's Margaret Sidney's stuff, at least," I said as we entered the last dark room. "You can't underestimate the popularity of *The Five Little Peppers*." Margaret Sidney was the children's author who'd lived here—I'd never even heard of her until I'd become a Wayside

employee. “But, luckily, we’ve just arrived in a room with Hawthorne’s *actual writing desk*,” I said.

The woman was out of breath, wiping her brow with the neck of her dress. The children were slumped, the little boy scuffing his feet along the floor. I faltered, thought of what James would do now.

“Imagine him standing there!” I exclaimed. “Alone! His back to the world! To society! To everyone and everything he knew! Imagine him trying to come up with the first great sentence, that first line, of *The Scarlet Letter*!”

It didn’t have the same effect as when James did it. It was both too much and not enough. My eyes sat back in my sockets. My smile had flat-lined with the alarm clock that morning. The woman’s eyes widened slightly, and I knew she was trying not to roll them.

“I can’t even see the desk,” said the girl who had barely looked up during the entire tour, and who even now was looking at the floor.

As it turned out, they couldn’t see the desk, as it was around a small corner, its back to a window where the shade was tightly drawn.

I drew them to the velvet rope before the desk, as I had seen James and Audrey do many times, stretching my arm out to the piece of wood hanging off the wall, flat into the air.

“That’s not a desk!” shouted the boy.

“Where’s his chair?” said the girl.

“He wrote standing up,” I said.

The mother seemed tired at the thought, and I was tired of her. She should have been more impressed with Hawthorne’s work ethic. Louisa May Alcott, too, sacrificed physical comfort for her work, switching to her left hand when her right one was tired. People almost never loved their jobs that much; I certainly didn’t.

“I want to touch it!” said the boy.

“I’m sorry, we’ve got to stay behind this rope,” I said.

“It’s awfully dark in here, isn’t it Arthur?” said the woman to her husband. I had forgotten the husband was there—he hadn’t said a word during the entire tour.

“Very very quiet,” he said.

“Dark, I said it was dark, Arthur,” she snapped. This reminded me, in a way, of my own parents. I waved them back towards the stairs.

“Very very dark,” he said. “Why is it so dark?”

“Why is it so dark?” the mother said in a voice that seemed much too loud.

“Well,” I said, “we have to keep the shades down, as sun exposure can ruin various items in the room, bleaching them of their. . .historical accuracy. . .”

After the family departed from the Visitor’s Center James sat me down. “Good, very good,” he said, “*and* there are just a few things I would change.” It took him nearly an hour to go through them and included detailed explanations of sun exposure damage, grant refusals, and how to deal with slightly belligerent tourists.

Ted arrived in the middle of this, walking with a laidback sway as if he were walking into his own living room. He flashed me a knowing smile as James talked, shaking his head.

“My thought is, let’s say, *my goal* when giving a tour,” said James, “is to give that person or those persons a sense of the writers who lived here, especially Hawthorne. I want them to see his life so vividly that they feel, if just for a moment, as if they themselves could stand at that writing desk all day. That’s my goal. And when you give a tour, you should have your own goal, too.”

Would I ever give another tour or would I be condemned to man the Visitor’s Center forever? Maybe James would tell Audrey how bad I was, and Audrey then wouldn’t let me give tours, either. Audrey was an enthusiastic guide and even seemed pleasant as she described The Wayside. She was especially animated in the Sky Parlor where I had failed so miserably, as if she felt more love for that writing desk than for any human being.

As a child, I’d loved *Little Women* as if it were alive. I’d read my favorite parts over and over late at night in my bed on Evergreen Drive, and maybe I’d wanted to work at The Orchard to connect with that old self and those old friends. Maybe if I were giving tours of The Orchard, they’d be as good as Audrey’s.

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In towns like Lexington and Concord, visits to historical sites are usually made only at the request of out-of-town guests, but as a child I had gone frequently with my dad. We’d go to Walden Pond or Old North Bridge or one of the battlefields. We’d buy lunch and sit on the grass with our Styrofoam, imagining the fight that had taken place on that very spot. Sometimes, even now, I would walk the trail at Minute Man State Park or wander through the graveyard at Sleepy Hollow. I spent days jumping through eras, never quite landing in the now until Julie shook me saying, “College! College! We’re going to college!” By the end of August, she’d be in New York City and I’d be in Boston, but she had plans for the both of us. We’d visit each other every other month. We’d get fake IDs. We’d have wild adventures—“with boys!” Julie added with a wink like I didn’t understand.

It was the summer of the diner. We drove far and wide in Julie’s blue Range Rover, doubling back on our favorites, rating each based on how much aluminum it used in the decorating and on the tackiness of the designs on the Formica tabletops—the kitschier the better. We’d split a piece of cake and Julie would drink coffee while I drank diet coke from a translucent cup. I tried not to instill these evenings with preemptive nostalgia. I pretended that it would go on like this through college, every winter and summer break. I liked these diners, they made me feel transported to another era. From The Wayside to The Orchard to the diner, I could make it all day without ever having to feel like I lived in the present.

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Outside the Visitor’s Center after work one day, I saw Julie and Ted chatting on Hawthorne’s front lawn. For the second time that week, we were supposed to go to the diner with our high school friends, Marcus and Raman. I had little choice in the matter of attending—neither of my parents could pick me up from work, and hitching a ride with Julie meant I had to do whatever

she wanted. Julie had her eye on Marcus, so Raman and I sat together, folding our straw wrappers into squished accordions and then dropping water on them so they expanded like worms. Meanwhile, Julie and Marcus sat on the other side of the table making eye contact only with each other.

“. . . Walden, or something,” I heard Ted say. “I like to get there right before sunset.” I worked with Ted for a quarter of the week, and he’d hardly said two words to me.

“Yeah?” said Julie. Her head was angled sweetly to the side, and her soft hair fell over her shoulder. She brushed a piece of it behind her ear with a manicured finger. Marcus was making his way up to the house. “Maybe,” she said. “I’ve got to go. See you soon, k?” she patted Ted on the shoulder.

I walked from my spot outside the Visitor’s Center as if on some kind of cue, just as Marcus landed in front of Julie. “Hey Babe,” she said, giving him a hug with one bent arm, her silver bracelets hanging coolly from her tiny wrist.

*

After the diner, I entered my bedroom and knew by the sight of vacuum lines that my mom had been there. Now my messes were re-piled so that for a week anything I looked for would be impossible to find. My bed had been made, and on top of it was a collection of items that I’d rather stayed lost, things that had fallen into the infinite chasm between my bed and the wall—books from high school with numbers stamped on the spines, brochures from colleges I couldn’t afford, and *Antigone*, the book we were supposed to read as part of a college-wide “Summer Books” project. “I have to read this book, *Anti-Gone*,” I’d made the mistake of saying to Audrey one day. She just shook her head, scowled, and walked away, leaving me to say it again to my mother who corrected me with a similar shake of the head. After that, I’d put off reading the book and had almost forgotten about it. Being too stupid to pronounce *Antigone* was almost the same as being too stupid for college, for the scholarship I’d gotten, which, though I tried not to think about it, was starting to feel like a weight fat with expectation.

*

When Julie stopped by for lunch the following week, we didn’t end up talking about much. She bent a juice box draw back and forth, and I thought maybe the week before she and Marcus had hooked up in the diner bathroom during a long absence in which Raman and I had rearranged our French Fries into the shapes of animals. Compared to her, I felt like a child. It didn’t seem fair that she got to be the one distracted, when she was always doing the things teenagers were supposed to be doing.

After Julie left, Ted sauntered over to where I was stationed in front of the register. I felt the top of my head as quickly and surreptitiously as I could, flattening out my frizz. He put his head on one of his hands and his elbow on the counter, and with the other hand he tapped his fingers as if waiting for something.

“Yes?” I asked, my voice shaking a little, unexpectedly.

“I don’t get it,” he said.

“What?”

“The Alcotts lived *here*? But I thought they lived at the Orchard?” He acted for a moment as if he were really confused, and then he broke into a smile. It was a question I got daily. “You did a tour today? How’d it go?”

I shrugged.

“I’m sure you were beautiful.”

I kept my smile to myself, afraid that adding too much might reveal either my age or my nerves.

“So, you dating that friend of Julie’s boyfriend?”

“Julie’s boyfriend? I don’t know. No.”

He reached out towards my hand, a warm finger briefly touching mine. “You painted your nails.” I had. I had painted them a kind of bile green, to match the carpeting. “I’m thinking of going over to Walden tonight,” he said. “For the sunset.”

He was looking at me with his green eyes — not bile green, but a kind of pine-needle green. I looked down at the register, not sure what I was supposed to say. “Cool,” I chose finally.

“Yeah? Well, you should come.”

“Oh, I don’t know if I can,” I said.

“You don’t know if you can watch the sunset? Well, it’s true, you aren’t supposed to stare *directly* at it.”

“Well,” I said, still looking at the register, thinking that this was something my mom wouldn’t allow, not sure what I was allowed now that I was out of high school, not yet in college. “Could you pick me up from here?”

“Sure. 7:30?”

*

“Let’s meet up with Raman and Marcus,” Julie said.

“I can’t,” I said, looking out across the road instead of at her. “I have plans.” In actuality, I didn’t have a particular plan for how I was going to get back to or stay at The Wayside in order to meet Ted, but I was hoping that it would just work out.

“You can’t? You have plans?” Julie said, holding her hands up dramatically. “I’ve known you for, what, a billion years? Have you ever made *plans*?”

“Maybe I have my own secret life you don’t know about,” I said.

The truth was, in our whole history together, it had been she who had asked other people to go out for dinner or a movie, while I stood behind her like a scared younger sister, waiting for results. Besides, she was my ride. She knew everywhere I went.

“Alright,” I said. “I can go, but I have to be back here at 7:30.”

“What for?”

I shuffled my feet along the sidewalk outside The Wayside. “I’m meeting Ted,” I said finally.

“TED?”

“Shush,” I said, looking around.

Julie just stood there, rolling her eyes up towards the sky and shaking her head. “You won’t even make out with Raman at the movie theater! What are you gonna do with Ted?”

“What are you so mad about?” I said.

She stomped off across the street towards the parking lot saying, “God! Nothing about you makes any sense!”

“Let’s go!” she called from across the road. I walked slowly toward her with my arms pathetically crossed, like I was walking towards my mother.

We met Marcus and Raman at the diner with the pink and turquoise triangled counters and the mint green plastic seats. “You been waiting long?” she asked, hugging them each. I slid into the booth next to Raman. Julie talked about The Orchard, as if nothing had happened between us. I stacked the jelly packets into towers based on flavor, and then built sugar-packet roads between them.

“How adult of you,” said Julie, but Raman leaned over the table behind us to gather apricot jellies, handing them to me with his long fingers.

In the car, Julie and I were silent until I realized we were heading toward my house, not The Wayside. “Where are you going?” I asked.

“Does your mom even know what you’re doing?” Julie asked.

“What do you mean, ‘what I’m doing’? Am I breaking some kind of law?”

“May. He’s twenty-three. You don’t know what you’re getting yourself into,” said Julie.

“How do you get experience but through experience?” I shouted. “I’m still going to go out with him, even if you won’t take me now.”

“Fine. But I won’t be any part of it.”

“What am I? Seven?” I said. “Give me your phone so I can tell him I can’t go, at least.” She reached into her purse without taking her eyes off the road and practically threw the phone at me. I felt dumb and defeated calling him in front of Julie, asking for a rain check.

*

The Visitor’s Center was still locked. I leaned against the building, eating my bagel, then decided to look for James. When I turned the corner to the back of The Wayside I saw James atop a metal ladder stretched to the roof of the house, talking to a man who stood at its base.

“No one seems to care about the maintenance of this house,” James told the man. His voice was as close to annoyed as I’d ever heard it.

“We do, we do care about the maintenance of our historical houses very much. It’s just that we have not hired or paid you specifically to clean the gutters, so I ask you to please get down from there.”

“If I don’t clean these gutters, who will?” asked James. He leaned precariously far from the ladder to pull off a piece of peeling paint with his fingers. “The government paint job has not fared too well, *and* it was only done three years ago!” He dropped the piece of paint and watched it flutter down to the man’s feet.

“Sir, it’s a liability issue. I’m really gonna need you to get down.”

I waited for James to do his thing: big smile, popped eyes, impassioned lecture against those who let historic sites die: “This is the only National Historic Site to have housed *three* literary heroes!” etc.

But what he did was look at the sky. “I’m not sure how you’re going to get me down from here,” James said, “if I decide not to come down.”

“Seriously?” said the man.

James and the man were silent.

“Look, Sir,” the man said finally. “I don’t want to do this, but I can have you fired. Is that what you want? Will that get the house painted? Will that clean the gutters?”

“So fire me,” said James.

“Just come down,” said the man.

James looked down at the man. He looked at the sky. He looked down again.

Finally, he took a deep breath and began stepping down the ladder.

When he got to the bottom, he shook the man’s hand. “I’m sure you can see that maintenance is a big issue here, and I know you’re just doing what you’ve got to do.”

“Sorry, Sir,” the man kept saying as he helped James put away the ladder.

I squished back around the corner of the house, embarrassed for James who was so concerned about the dreary house of dead authors that most people have never read or even thought about.

I waited for James at the door of the Visitor’s Center, pretending I hadn’t seen a thing. When he came to unlock it, his smile was as broad as it has always been, and he was whistling.

It threw me off guard, felt like a lie. But I said, “Are you always this happy?” something I’d become accustomed to saying almost every morning.

“No,” he said with a smile as he let us in.

*

“I’m going out after dinner,” I told my dad as we ate leftover spaghetti from white Styrofoam boxes. “With friends,” I lied

“Can’t you go on your mother’s nights? She only has six of them,” he said.

“It’s a Friday,” I said.

“Did you get your room assignment for fall yet?”

Jesus, I thought. Despite not speaking to one another, it sometimes seemed like my parents coordinated their questions so I had to say everything twice. “Not yet,” I said.

“You should call them, make sure they have your registration stuff.”

“Mmmhmm,” I said. I wasn’t in the mood to discuss the next unknown place I would be living. I bit a meatball in half, and the middle was still cold.

“Are the dorms co-ed?”

“I think so,” I said.

“The bathrooms, too?”

“I don’t know.”

“Let’s hope they aren’t—guys are disgusting.”

I nodded.

“Let me know when you find out. I can call the school if it doesn’t come soon.”

“I’m sure it’ll come soon,” I said, though I’d only just mailed the forms.

My dad ate a piece of day-old garlic bread in nearly one bite. “So, has he tried something on you yet?”

“What?”

“You know, the man at work who is *very nice*.”

“Oh come on,” I said. For a second I’d thought he’d meant Ted, who I’d been fruitlessly trying not to think about all day. “He wouldn’t do anything. He really is just very nice.”

“Sounds like he likes you,” said my father.

“He doesn’t want to get in my pants, Dad, god.”

“You don’t know the power of a young woman on a man.” He paused, thinking.

“Parmesan cheese!” he said. “I knew we forgot something.”

Now that my father had brought up James, Ted was swept from my mind, and I couldn’t get the image out of my head of James up on that ladder. James cared for The Wayside the way my father had once cared for the battlefields. We used to lie on our backs in the deep grassy field near the North Bridge—which arched its way elegantly over the calm Concord River—watching the white clouds float through the sky. I’d point at them and laugh, name them, tell their stories, silly things I invented on the spot. There was a kind of peacefulness, though this was where soldiers had bled and died. The first shot of the Revolutionary War had been fired here, one bullet flying through the air slowly, setting in motion events which had led America to its place, to this place, to me in that grassy field. Lying there was like resting in the quiet eye of a storm, just us and the grass and the sky. Europe and Asia had sites that were thousands of years old, but this is what we had, this was our history. Funny, Frank almost never came with us, and now there he was, halfway across the globe on a sandy battlefield of his own. Had he really gone that far to get away from us? And where was I going? Thirty miles away, to the heart of Boston.

I thought about the place we used to live, my childhood home, a little rectangle set on a gentle green slope, with burnt red siding and a gray shingled roof. It had long ago been bought, invaded, remodeled. I missed it. The North Bridge, those battlefields, they were as close as I could get now to going home.

*

Ted picked me up around seven.

I’d changed into a blue dress.

“This a date?” my father asked, like it was a joke, but I could tell that he thought I looked nice. He waved at Ted from the window. “Is he going to come up?”

“No,” I said, giving my father a kiss on the cheek.

“Sorry about that,” I said in the car.

“About what?”

“My dad waving at the window.”

“Not a problem,” said Ted.

We arrived at Walden just before sunset. A breeze carried the smell of pine needles and water. People were speckled across the beach in too-small swimsuits, leaning back on blankets and chairs, layering on T-shirts and shorts as it cooled. I wondered what Ted and I looked like, walking together. Did people wonder what I was doing here with this man? Or did they wonder what he was doing here with me?

We walked past Thoreau's cabin, which might have been the only place in the greater Boston area smaller than my father's apartment. It had a sign out front: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life."

The essential facts of life? What were they? Thoreau had never been a teenage girl.

We sat down on the sand. I zigzagged my finger up and down the space next to me, hardly leaving a trail because the sand caved in on itself. The clouds were low and pink, a hazy reflection of pine trees floated in the water. The sun bubbled on the horizon.

"Hey," Ted said. "This is nice, right?" He took my hand and looked at me with his green eyes. I wanted to look away from him, look out into the water or at the children making things with the sand. What was I doing here, pretending to be something I wasn't?

After the sunset, we sat in the car. I knew what Ted wanted, and just so I didn't have to think about it anymore, I moved in to meet his lips, which were not quite wet but sticky. When we parted, I blushed like a child, but Ted pretended not to notice. I wondered what my father would think about this. Nothing, probably. It's exactly what he'd expect from a guy, never mind one like Ted. Ted put his hand on my thigh, near the edge of my dress. And what about James? What would he think?

"We should probably go," I said, and I turned toward the window to look out at the very same trees Thoreau had looked at when he was living life simply.

Ted dropped me off a block from my mom's. When I entered the kitchen, my mother was sitting at the table, which was set for dinner with the utensils and blue cloth placemats we had used since the beginning of time. "Hey," I said. Only when she didn't respond did I notice that her cheeks were glistening under our fluorescent kitchen light, tears whose tributaries had long run together so her face looked completely wet. She was staring out the window, perhaps oblivious to my presence. I didn't want to move or to speak again, for fear of alarming her.

But finally, quietly, I asked, "Are you okay?"

"Your brother—" how quickly a heart stops, feels for a moment contracted as tight as a brick that could expand and explode upon hearing the end of a terrible sentence, "—is getting married."

My whole body seemed to go soft. I wanted to melt into the kitchen floor or get down on my knees and thank the lord I didn't really believe in or smack my mother's wet cheek for making me think that the horrible, awful things I had dreaded for so long had come true. My mother sobbed, a hand to the side of her face nearest me, as if that would prevent me from seeing or hearing her.

"What's the matter?" I said. "Who's he marrying?"

She kept crying and then stopped with the noise of a stalled car, grabbing a napkin and wiping her face, still not looking at me. “A woman in the army,” she said. “He’s really gone, May,” she said. “He’s not coming back.”

“What do you mean?” I cried. “His tour’s almost over!” But the relief I’d felt a moment ago had already disappeared.

*

I was walking alone under a hot, pale after-work sun to Sleepy Hollow Cemetery. Julie and I weren’t really talking, and whenever I could get out of getting a ride home from her, I did. I crossed my arms as I walked, placing opposite hands on opposite shoulders, as if I might prevent them from burning. Every crevice and curve of my body was wet with sweat, and I kept wiping it away from my forehead so it wouldn’t sting my eyes. Cars whizzed by, covered in anti-war bumper stickers (“No Blood for Oil”), offering a cool breeze that I enjoyed so much it felt like treachery.

In the cemetery, I was relieved to find shade. Large trees sprouted tall among the grasses and gravestones, which were not in rows but scattered about. Some of the graves were simple, gray-lichened rocks with little greening plaques, others were large stone angels perpetually about to take flight. Occasionally a grave was marked with flowers or a flag.

I made my way down a small, paved path to Author’s Ridge, not a ridge at all, but a place you might recognize as important from the worn grass, the graves topped in remembrances and springing with flowers. One grave had a single rose resting on its top, another a pile of lilies. Someone had planted violets right next to Louisa May Alcott’s grave, though the rest of the area had been trodden to dirt and was scattered with wilting dandelions. Louisa’s grave was simple: a flat stone stuck in the ground and level with it. The grooved letters that made her initials had been lined in pebbles, I imagined by a child. I almost imagined that child was me, a long time ago.

I squatted next to it, dragging my fingers through the warm sun-soaked grooves of her name in the spots where there were no pebbles. This was one of the few local spots my mother had taken me, and Frank, too. Once, we’d each made impressions of the gravestones by rubbing crayons across paper. I’d done Louisa May Alcott’s grave in pink and kept it on my wall for almost a year. My brother had run around trying to make impressions of any grave that shared his name.

“What about this one?” my mom had said, pointing to a famous grave, maybe Emerson’s or Thoreau’s.

“Is his first name FRANK?” my brother had said, hands on his hips, and she let him run off and find another Frank.

It was a memory only funny in retrospect. At the time, I didn’t understand why one dead person should be more important than another. Each grave here was different from the next — a capitalistic cemetery. I wondered whether or not this was better than Levittown graveyards like Arlington where, from a distance, your dead brother looked exactly the same as anyone else’s.

My finger started to feel numb from running its course over and over around the O of the Alcott, and suddenly I got a strange sensation, a shiver in the heat, all the sweat on my body for a moment feeling cool. It was as if I had not only been here before, feeling the circle of this very O, but perhaps that I was here now as two people, myself and my former self. Was my former self a part of my current self? Was she inside of me? Or was she gone in such a way that she could be standing right next to me like a ghost?

*

One afternoon at the Visitor's Center when Audrey removed the jar of pickles from her brown paper bag, one of the guests laughed, "I used to bring jars of pickles like that to work when I was pregnant with my first. People thought I was crazy."

Audrey's eyes flashed and widened, as if they could leap from her sockets like frogs. "I am not pregnant!" she shouted. "Simply because I am overweight and twenty-seven does not mean I am having a child or am married or have a boyfriend. I'm single, and I want to be single! And I like pickles! Okay? Can't anyone just accept that I like pickles?"

I had never seen Audrey like this before. The handful of other visitors in the room looked down at their feet. The lady who had spoken took a cautious step backward. "That's fine," she said. "That's fine."

Audrey looked around at everyone not looking at her. "What?" she cried shrilly before she walked right out the door.

"Um," I announced. "The next tour will begin in approximately 35 minutes. Audrey, the tour guide, is having a rough day, but she'll be better after lunch, I'm sure." That I left to find Audrey, who was sitting in the front lawn eating her pickles fiercely, juice flying everywhere.

"Audrey!" I yelled.

"What?" said Audrey, taking another savage bite. "You're supposed to be in the Visitor's Center! Did you put up the sign? It's my lunch break now! Not yours!" She looked like she was going to continue speaking, but instead she stopped, ate the remaining half of a pickle in one bite, and wiped her mouth with her arm.

"You're scaring away the visitors, Audrey! Nobody said you were pregnant, God!"

"Fuck you," said Audrey.

She wiped the wet edges of each eye with her wrist, which only made them appear wetter because her temples were now slicked with pickle juice. "My twelfth rejection," she said. "Count them! Count to twelve! You can't! You don't have enough fingers to count to twelve!"

"What do you mean?" I said.

She didn't look at me, seemed to be speaking out into space. "I'll never be a broadcast journalist. I'm too fat." It was then that I realized that even if Audrey had been overweight when I met her, she certainly wasn't anymore. She was getting thin and, perhaps, even *green*.

"I thought you were going to be a writer-journalist," I said.

She snorted at my phrasing. "I am," she said. "I am going to write my stories, and then broadcast them. But not if I don't get a job! Not if I've been rejected by twelve stations! And I'm not pregnant! There is absolutely no possible way I will ever be pregnant!"

“You can’t get pregnant?” I asked.

“Forget it,” she said. “I’m going to end up just like Christine, I know it. If I ever get a job, it will all end up that way.”

I didn’t know who Christine was, but I knew Audrey had a habit of referring to famous people as near acquaintances, like her good friends Louisa and Nathaniel. “Christine?” I asked.

“Christine Chubbuck! A woman you would know if you had any interest at all in broadcast journalism!”

I had almost no interest at all in broadcast journalism.

“She committed suicide on live television during her broadcast. She was twenty-nine and lonely and depressed and she never dated and she told everyone she was going to kill herself, and then she did, on live television. At least she became famous! At least she found a way to do that!” She stuffed an entire, final pickle in her mouth, and it snapped in two on its way in. She crumbled the brown paper bag into a ball in her fist and didn’t let go of it, just held on so tight her knuckles turned white, and I returned to an empty Visitor’s Center.

I followed Audrey on her next tour, to make sure she was okay. In the Sky Parlor, one of the tourists asked why the shades were drawn. Audrey explained it beautifully, fully composed and purged of her earlier outburst. A woman in her forties wanted to touch Hawthorne’s desk. I thought she would see the obvious meaning of a velvet rope, but Audrey calmly explained why no one could touch the desk. If I had asked, I bet Audrey would have bitten my head off. “Not even the staff who work here have touched it,” she said. I wondered if that was true, if Audrey or James had never touched the desk they so admired, if they had ever hoped that luck or perseverance, directly from the site of creation, could rub off on them.

*

Ted picked me up a block from the house, at a place he probably assumed was my actual address. I had never done this sort of thing in high school, and I felt like I was getting something essential out of the way.

We went to a diner Julie and I had long ago deemed far too unkitsch for its dearth of aluminum and its boring white linoleum table tops. I’d already eaten so I just ordered a diet coke and fries. Ted order a giant breakfast—eggs, toast, bacon, sausage, hashbrowns, and pancakes.

“You think you have enough food there?” I asked, trying to be funny and flirty and casual, or whatever I was supposed to be.

He nodded. “Gotta watch out, though,” he said, tapping his stomach. “Not so young anymore.”

I tore my fries in fourths so I would eat them slowly, sucking the salt and grease from each piece before eating the next. Ted was talking about the complicated system of college requirements which he had nearly, finally, fulfilled. I stacked the butter pads into a four-walled tower. “Cute,” he said. “I used to do that.”

Back in his car, I let him kiss me again, let his hands creep up my thigh, my shirt, to the back of my bra, which I felt click quickly and quietly open.

“Wait,” I said.

“For what?” he whispered into my ear so his words rested in its crevices, hot and moist.

“Not right now.”

“When?” he said, whispering again, as if it were a game.

“Really,” I said, moving away from him, trying and failing to clip my bra back together with one hand.

“What, then?”

“What do you mean? I need to go home,” I said, but I knew what he meant and I knew what he wanted, and all of a sudden it hit me, what Audrey had really meant by saying she couldn’t be pregnant.

*

James decided to take me on a “one-on-one practice tour.” He said I’d “gotten the facts and stories” and he wanted to work on “the nuances.” On our way around the house, he talked about his life, still smiling: a wife who had long ago died of cancer, a grown son who visited often, his writing career which hadn’t, just yet, taken off. “Can you *really* be this happy?” I asked him again.

“Why can’t you believe that? Tell me, you’re so young and why can’t you believe that?”

I didn’t know why I couldn’t believe it, but I couldn’t. “I’m sorry for making fun of how you use *but*,” I blurted out. “Though I totally disagree with its absence.”

“I appreciate playfulness with language,” he said.

Something was bothering me, though. Something about how he was always smiling, about how he seemed to believe that *and* — that words at all — could ward off negativity like a cast spell. I told James I’d seen him on the ladder, that I knew he couldn’t’ve been happy then. “But when you came down to unlock the Visitor’s Center, you didn’t know I’d seen and you were whistling again, just like that! Wasn’t that fake?”

“I don’t want to bring down morale here—the gutters, the peeling paint, the shades, they bring down morale enough.” He nodded to himself. “I can see how my smile might feel like a lie to you, *and*—”

“*But*,” I said.

“*And*,” he said with a laugh, “I don’t mean it like that. For me it’s ... aspirational.”

“Sounds like a lot of work.”

“I’m glad we’ve had this summer to get to know each other,” he said. “I think it’s important to find friendships with people of all ages and types, so you can understand the world in contexts other than your own. That’s why reading is so important. That’s why writing is so important.”

When we arrived in The Sky Parlor, James shook his head. “I just wish we could pull the shades up! To be able to look at the things Hawthorne did, the way he did? What he so purposely had his back to as he worked?”

It seemed true, as if the shades were causing everyone to miss a key piece of Hawthorne’s story, as if the dreariness of The Wayside was caused by this ridiculous order to keep the shades down, an order given by the same people who refused to repaint the house. It wasn’t fair to the

house, or to history, or to James, or to me. The darkness made the house seem unreal, a caricature of what it once was. Why had The Orchard been given more grant money than The Wayside? The Orchard's shades stayed up and sunlight poured through special, protective windows. It was as if The Wayside had literally been put by the wayside because it wasn't special or interesting enough, the loser of some literary popularity contest that I had cast a vote in by wishing I was working at The Orchard.

I realized I admired James. I thought his smile was fake, but I felt something earnest at his core. He managed himself the way he tried to manage The Wayside: clean the gutters, paint the siding, and step by step it might all one day be as good as you dreamed.

"Do you ever lift the shades?" I asked. "Have you ever? I would love to see them lifted."

He paused for a moment. "I have," he said. I looked wide-eyed around the room, imagining it swallowed by light. "Just briefly, just quickly. I wouldn't want to ruin anything. I think it's important for the house to feel, sometimes, the way it once was." Maybe he found The Wayside to be his home the way I found the North Bridge and the battlefields to be mine.

I walked over to the velvet rope, swinging it back and forth while looking at the flat piece of wood hanging off the wall. "What about his desk?" I asked.

"Once, when the shades were up. . . I touched it and I stood there. I felt like a writer. People can be connected like that, through things and places. I wish everyone could see this room that way, could have that feeling." He did not invite me to see it that way, perhaps it was because I had no aspirations of becoming a writer.

*

"How's your mom?" my father asked at our dinner of burgers and fries. This was one of the questions he put on rotation along with, "How's Frank?" The two spoke occasionally, but ever since the impending marriage, which he'd heard about through me, I hadn't been asked a word about him.

"Good," I said. "I mean, fine, you know." We had finished eating already. I was tearing off little pieces of the white Styrofoam, piling them inside the box that remained.

"I was out by the hardware store the other day. . . ." he trailed off, took a sip of his remaining coffee. "I go right by your new place to get there, you know." He still called it "the new place" even though my mom and I had lived there for many years. My mom, on the other hand, referred to it as the only place, as if we had never lived anywhere else, as if our entire history had occurred in a home where my father had never lived. "The place looks great," he went on, "but you really should let your mother know to get someone to trim the bushes out front. I've got the number of this guy in the Rolodex. Remind me to give it to you before you leave."

"Sure," I said, though I knew I wouldn't give my mother the number.

"Hey," I added. "I passed by Old North Bridge the other day. They're doing a little construction on it."

"Well, it is old. Got to maintain it."

“Yeah, but what’s funny is that whenever they do construction on it, it’s not to make it look newer, but to keep it looking old.”

“That’s why it’s a National Historic Site,” my father said. “I haven’t passed it in quite awhile, actually.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said. “When you do see it, it will look almost exactly the same as the last time you saw it, and that’s the point.” My box was now obliterated, torn into dusty, white wreckage. “When are you going to get actual dishes?” I asked.

He shrugged, collecting our Styrofoam. He took out his Rolodex and found the name of the lawn service on a business card that he’d stapled in, with their name and number and hours. In slow script he copied out the name of the lawn service and the number on a new card and put that into his Rolodex. He carefully bent the staples out of the business card and gave that to me to give to my mother.

*

The next time I saw Ted he nodded his head at me like teachers used to when they passed in the hallway and couldn’t remember my name. I flashed him a quick, awkward smile and looked back down at the register, my face burning red.

Later, James asked, “How are you getting along with the folks here at work?”

“What do you mean?”

“Julie hasn’t been coming around. You don’t seem to talk to Ted anymore.”

I shrugged, but I was surprised he’d noticed. I’d hardly talked to Ted in the first place.

“Ted’s a couple years older than you,” he said.

“We were hardly ever even friends,” I said.

“And Julie?”

“I don’t know,” I said, which was the truth. The rest of the truth was that work was starting to feel lonely. I gave tours and tried to think of my goals, but I didn’t have any. I didn’t want to consider my future. I punched the keys on the register one at a time like a typist who doesn’t know where any of the keys are, and I abandoned my barrettes and headbands, letting my hair do whatever it wanted. I surrendered, finally, to *Antigone*, wanting to give it a chance like I’d never really given Hawthorne. If Audrey was Hester Prynne, maybe I was Antigone, my brother away at a war nobody in Boston believed in, and he was fighting it for me and he was fighting it for them and he was fighting it most of all for himself, and it didn’t matter what I believed in besides my brother, besides believing that he believed in what he was fighting for, and I thought, sure, I would bury myself with him if it came to that.

Some days were so hot and humid that being outside seemed to switch off your brain. The drives to work with Julie were quiet and sad. She hadn’t asked me to go out with Raman and Marcus again. “That Ted thing is over, anyway,” I said to her one day, and just getting it out of my throat felt like a concession. After that she started smiling at Ted again, flipping her hair back and forth in his presence, but she hardly said a word to me.

*

Early one Friday morning I arrived at The Wayside to find Audrey devouring pickles on the front lawn, a place where I'd only seen her eat lunch. She had already unlocked the Visitor's Center and I thought she might be letting down her Rottweiler guard of the place.

I kept looking out at her from the Visitor's Center. Something was strange about the way she was sitting there in the grass, but I couldn't place what it was. She was wearing a low-cut white shirt, a little loose on her now, with a red, scripted A in the corner. She kept taking something out of her pocket and rubbing her fingers below her eyes. It took me several glances to realize that she was just putting on makeup.

When Audrey came in I could see that she was wearing both mascara and eyeliner, thick and dark as if she were going to a nightclub. She had half-moons of makeup under both of her eyes, her foundation a shade too light. She took out her compact again and rubbed a finger under the bottom rim of both eyes until I blurted out, "It's fine" for fear of it getting cakier.

"You take the tours today," she said, smacking her makeup container shut.

During my tours I tried to work the magic that James had taught me, but it fell flat, like a joke in the wrong hands. In a morning group of elderly woman, only two advanced to the Sky Parlor and by the time they got there, they were too tired to be interested. Around lunchtime a young girl on a small tour said loudly to her mother, "The other house was better."

In the late afternoon a new tour gathered, a family of four that looked unexpectedly pleasant, and a young man who I was sure had sisters at The Alcotts. Occasionally men came over to The Wayside on their own so they wouldn't have to endure the little women. Audrey hadn't spoken to me since that morning, had simply sat in the register chair as if it were her throne, reading a novel and surveying the tourists. But now she jumped up. "My tour," she hissed.

I followed behind the group. She toured with her usual ease, but I was uneasy. She didn't look like herself. I led the guests down from the Sky Parlor back to the Visitor's Center, but only when I got downstairs did I realize not everyone was behind me.

"Where's that guy?" I asked the family.

"With your friend there, the tour guide," said the father. Audrey didn't usually do that, but sometimes James kept the interested behind to answer more questions.

I rung up *The Five Little Peppers*. "Here you go," I said handing the book to the girl.

I sat back at the register, wondering what was going on with Audrey. Just when I got up to see if Audrey was returning, I saw a young man exiting the house in a quick walk. I ran out to the front lawn, about to call to him to make sure everything was okay, when I heard Audrey.

"It's free!" she yelled. "It's free! I promise, I won't tell anyone!" It seemed to me like yelling out the front door of Nathaniel Hawthorne's house was pretty much as good as telling everyone, and I turned to look at her.

She was running out of the front door, her breasts bobbing up and down with the small gut of her stomach. It didn't really hit me that she was naked until she stopped, suddenly, in the middle of the lawn. The guy was gone but she whispered anyway, "You can have me. Don't you want me? Don't you want me? Who wants me?" She sat down right there on the lawn, her head

curled up to her knees, her entire body rocking back and forth, a giant sob bursting from her as sudden as a firework.

“Audrey!” I yelled. I looked for something to cover her, but there was nothing nearby. Where were her clothes? “Audrey,” I said, “what happened? Let’s get your clothes,” I said. I put my arm in the nook of her elbow and made a motion like we should stand up, but she wouldn’t move. She didn’t push me away, she didn’t yell, she just kept sobbing, louder and louder.

People had gathered, watching or staring or pointing or walking swiftly back to the parking lot. I let go of Audrey and stood right in front of her. “Hey, you,” I yelled to a woman who was staring wide-eyed into our lawn. “Go in the house and find her clothes!” The woman just stood there, looking around her. “Or watch her while I go! Come on!”

The woman returned with Audrey’s clothes, which had been inside one of the bedrooms, but they turned out to be useless, because Audrey wouldn’t budge. Finally, I asked for a phone and called 911. I couldn’t think of anything else to do.

*

“Wow!” said my dad as soon as he opened the door. “You’re a star! That story is everywhere!”

The local station had arrived on the scene almost immediately after the ambulance, and I’d mumbled a few meaningless words in front of the camera.

“Slow news day,” I said. Really, though—slow news day? We were fighting two wars. And what could the news ever know about Audrey? Audrey, who, I supposed, for years and years had carried around what she hadn’t done like a weight that had finally crushed her.

“She just ran straight out of the house, no clothes?”

“I guess,” I said.

“Where is she? Mental institution?”

“I guess,” I said.

“What? You didn’t like her. That’s what you said, wasn’t it? That she was mean.”

“That’s not the point,” I said.

At that moment, there was a knock at the door. My father and I looked at each other. My dad opened the door, and there stood James. The apartment felt suddenly smaller, impossibly small.

“I’m James,” he said, thrusting out his arm for a handshake. “I work with May. You must be May’s dad.” He smiled at my father and then at me, but his smile was only kind, not happy. I hadn’t really thought of it until then, but my dad and James were probably about the same age.

“Sounds like she went off the deep end. You must have a lot of a red tape over there with the whole incident,” said my dad.

“It’ll be okay,” said James, nodding.

“You going to have to get someone new in there?”

“Alright, Dad,” I said. “Can I just talk with James for a few seconds?”

“Oh, yeah, sure,” said my dad, making his way slowly behind the beaded curtain.

“How are you?” asked James. He must have found the address off the emergency contacts.

"I'm okay," I said.

"You did a good thing there."

"I don't feel like I did much of anything."

"I talked to Audrey's parents. She's going to spend the night at the hospital, then go home. She won't be coming back though, to The Wayside, I mean."

"Okay," I said.

"Listen, if you need a few days off, take them. I'll be filling in for Audrey."

"I'll be fine," I said.

"If you change your mind, just give me a call."

"I'll really be fine," I said.

"I'm glad you were there today. I'll let you get back to your dinner. Tell your Dad it was nice to meet him."

Behind the curtain, my dad was sitting on the end of the bed doing nothing. I knew he had been listening, as if one had any other choice in that place. "He does seem very nice," he said.

"He really is."

For a moment, neither of us spoke. "Are you sure he doesn't want to get in—isn't after you or something?"

"Dad, shut up."

"I mean he came all the way over here to—"

"Why do you keep asking?" I interrupted, more angrily than I had meant.

"Why? What do you mean 'why'?" I have never slept with anyone I would consider a girl rather than a woman."

What did *I* mean? What did *he* mean? I didn't really want to know.

The room fell silent. I looked down at my hands, the white crescents of my fingernails chewed nearly to nothing. I thought of Julie's nails, how she let them grow, glossed them clear so that even in the diner's dimness they each reflected a thin, white strip of light that floated back and forth across her nails as she moved her hands. How could you tell a girl from a woman? It wasn't age, anyway.

I couldn't do this tonight—this small room, this small meal, these small boxes. Was there anyone left in this town besides James who I even remotely understood?

"I forgot," I said. "I have plans. I need to use the phone. It's late."

In some other time, I would've called Julie. And in some other time before that, I would've knocked on Frank's door, let him push me around a little.

I called Ted.

"May?" he asked, like he'd forgotten who I was.

"May," I said again. "I'm ready. To go out. Walden."

"Now?"

"Yeah."

"It's almost sunset."

“Just pick me up.”

Before I left, my dad looked out the window from the sink where he was rinsing off a pile of plastic utensils. Ted had grown a new goatee that made him look much older. “Which friend is that?” he asked, his thumb rubbing the dent of a spoon. “I don’t remember him.”

As soon as I got in the car I told Ted, “We can sneak in, on the far side of the lake.” I’d never done it myself, but it was a well-known entry point among high schoolers.

“What do you suggest I do with the car?” Ted asked.

“You don’t have to go,” I said. “You can drop me off at my mom’s.” But I didn’t feel like going back to my mom’s. I put my hand on his thigh. I didn’t look at him. It’s funny, how quickly you learn what bargaining chips you have.

“We can get bikes from my parents’ house,” said Ted.

His parents’ house was a giant rectangle, fresh white with a bright red front door. Ted tapped a number into the keypad and the garage door hummed opened. He rolled a bike towards me, one where the center bar faded from dark pink to purple. “My little sister’s bike,” he said.

“You have a sister?”

“At boarding school. Well, camp for the summer, or, really, some kind of course in New York. I forget the specifics.” He rolled out his own bike from behind a garbage can of sports balls.

“How old is she?”

“Like your age. Like seventeen, eighteen at the end of the month.”

“Oh,” I said. Funny, for some reason I thought Ted hadn’t really known my age, but I guess he could do the math if he knew I was starting college that fall.

Ted sped out in front of me, looking back to make sure I was keeping up. I rode in his wake, happy to be outside, helmetless, moving. I smelled like sweat and heat, but it was cooling as the darkness came in and I loved how the air felt blowing past me. We left our bikes by the road and snuck quietly through the woods.

By the time we were on the shore the sun had long disappeared below the horizon. Only the thinnest sliver of moon and the dots of stars lit our way. We stood close to each other, our hands clasped, walking slowly and silently across the sand. When we reached the water Ted bent down and felt it with his hand, then took off his shoes and put in his feet. I put my feet in, too. The water was warm from the hot day, warmer than the air.

“Let’s go in,” he whispered into my ear. His breath was hot. Before I could answer he had let go of my hand and begun taking off his clothes. I squinted in the dark. He was not one of the skinny, hairless creatures I had been friends with in high school, though I had never seen them naked and they were more than that now, even if not in my memory.

His body looked like armor, his pectorals and stomach raised in muscle. A thin trail of dark hair led down from his navel. I didn’t feel like I was so much here on this beach, but like I was watching a movie I wasn’t supposed to watch. It was Julie who should be with a man who looked like this, who should be with a man at all. Or Audrey, maybe she should have this.

“Come on,” said Ted.

“I am,” I said, though I hadn’t moved.

I waited until he got in and I took off my clothes with as little ceremony as possible and got into the water, where the reflected moon reminded me of Julie’s fingernails.

Ted swam perfect freestyle back and forth in a little line across the tip of the pond, and I paddled a doggy paddle in place until he came up behind me, feeling my wet back with his hands, and bringing them further front, cupping my breasts. He whispered in my ear again, “The shore.”

I nodded in the dark. Pretending that you knew what you were doing and actually knowing what you were doing were almost the same thing.

I lay on my back. The sand stuck to everything wet, which was all of me.

“It’s okay,” he said, and he didn’t say much else after that.

How quickly the things you hear so much about are over, and how little you need to be a part of them. Death probably happens in an instant, too.

We lay there for a minute. The sand stuck to me, had invaded every crevice of my body. I shivered. Ted’s breathing was heavy, but mine was shallow. I tried to listen to my own breath, just so that my heart would beat slower. “Can I do anything for you?” he asked, but I didn’t really know what he meant.

Finally he rolled away from me. “Let’s rinse off in the water,” he said.

He jumped right in, but I got up slowly. All of the weight in my head seemed to rush down to my feet, and I felt dizzy. I squinted into the dark, down toward the sand. Even in the night I could see the dark spot that had formed beneath me. Did all rights of passage include the blood? Men went to war and spilled their blood, and women spilled their blood just like this. It seemed stupid. Still, I wished for a moment that I could keep it, some proof in case I didn’t believe myself in the morning.

Earlier that year, during all of those rallies protesting the newest war, I had seen a college student with punky pink hair and a nose ring carrying a sign written in three different colors of Sharpie, peace signs in the Os: “Fighting for peace is like fucking for virginity,” it said. Behind her stood a slew of others like her, holding signs made from ripped cardboard boxes, saying: “Make love not war.” They chanted it, over and over, as if the two were opposites, as if one prevented the other. But sometimes making love was like heading into battle, and maybe for my brother heading into battle was like making love.

“You alright?” called Ted in the darkness.

I rubbed the spot away with my foot and dashed into the water. Despite how warm it was, my teeth clicked together in a shiver that I couldn’t seem to stop.

*

I awoke the next morning scratching sand out of my ear, and I thought of my brother who, on his first tour of Afghanistan, had written home: “It’s hot and sandy as hell. I don’t own anything without sand in it.” I wished he were here right now, not just so I could be sure he was safe or so I could meet his fiancée, but so he could attend a Styrofoam Dinner, could look out the window

at my father's and say, "Hey, how old is that kid?" because he would know the questions you're supposed to ask.

Once, when Frank was in high school, he pinned me against the wall of our house. I had been hanging out with a girl two years my senior, Linda Ashfield, who had been caught smoking cigarettes behind his school.

"You stop hanging out with that girl," he'd said to me.

"Why?" I said, struggling in every direction to get out of his grip. He already had muscles like the hulk.

"She does all kinds of shit behind the high school, and I don't want you getting mixed up in it," he said.

"I'm just trying to be friendly," I said. "Let go of me!" I struggled again, but he had me. "I'll yell," I said.

He put a pre-emptive hand over my mouth, I spit into it, and he promptly wiped my own spit across my face. "Listen, you stop hanging out with her or I'll tell mom and dad."

"They won't care."

"If they don't care, I'll find some other way to make your life miserable."

"It's not fair," I said. "You can't control me."

"Listen," he said. "The truth is, you're cooler than she is. So just shut up, get over it, and do this one thing for me." The funny part is, I was relieved. I had an excuse. I didn't want to smoke cigarettes behind the high school.

*

I called Ted, but he said he couldn't hangout this weekend, that he'd see me Monday. On Saturday, I called Julie and asked if we could all go out, the four of us, like we had at the beginning of the summer. I didn't even feel like I was giving in. I was just tired of being alone. We went to the diner that Julie and I didn't like, the one Ted had taken me to. "Marcus likes to go here," said Julie. "He says it's fancier." She'd forgotten the whole point of going to the diners in the first place.

"So, what about Audrey, huh?" said Julie in the car. "She must have been insane all along. I knew she was kind of crazy, but this just proved it. It's too perfect."

"You could probably stop making fun of her, Julie."

"Jesus Christ, May. You've had a stick up your ass all summer. What happened to you?"

"I'm not as much of a stick in the mud as you think I am," I said.

"I said *a stick up your ass* is what I said," said Julie, and then we were quiet the rest of the ride, because I couldn't find it in me to be nice.

Our table was spectacularly white, like milk. I kept putting my finger in my ear and finding sand. A few grains spilled onto the white table, standing out like little periods on a blank sheet of paper.

"Are you alright?" Raman asked after I'd torn apart several packets of sugar, first dumping the sugar into the coffee I'd ordered, and then shredding the paper into little mounds.

"Fine," I said. "Tired."

The coffee was terrible, but I downed the whole thing anyway. “See,” said Julie. “It’s not so bad.”

It was so bad. What was bad was that life was all about waiting for adult-like things to get less-bad. Children were smart, they just liked things that were already good, like cereals with marshmallows and candies shaped like animals and swing sets.

A group walked in, sitting a few booths behind us, laughing and talking, college students, or maybe grad students. They looked eons older than us, somehow, as if their faces had completely and definitively grown into their faces, whereas ours still hadn’t quite decided what to be.

I kept looking back at them. I could picture Ted among them, maybe with his arm around the pretty one with straight and shiny brown hair.

“Really, are you alright?” Raman asked again.

Julie was stirring around her coffee with a little red straw. She’d only drunk half of it, not even. Raman was onto his second Sprite. “Maybe it’s the coffee,” said Julie. “May’s not used to drinking coffee.”

“I’m used to more than you think I’m used to,” I snarled, in far too Audreyish a fashion.

*

I went home and I went to bed. I stayed in my room until my mother went grocery shopping Sunday afternoon and I had to go into the kitchen in my underwear to answer the phone. I thought it might be Ted.

“Hello,” I said, my voice crackly and unused despite my best efforts.

“Heyyy,” said a far away, tunnely voice that I recognized immediately.

“FRANK!” I yelled. “Frank, you should come home!”

“Home, man? I’m getting hitched.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I’ve heard.”

“Mom’s totally flipped, huh?”

“I know,” I said.

“I knew wedding planning would be her kind of thing. She’s going to love Shelley. You are, too.”

My heart stopped for a quick second. What had mom said to him? And *Shelley*? All I could picture was a fanned out shell, ribbed, a potato chip. “Yeah,” I replied, thinking of my tour voice. “I can’t wait—we all can’t wait.” *All*? As if in his absence we had become some kind of family unit. “We want to see you and her and, you know, have you shove wedding cake in each other’s mouths.”

“I’m sure you’d love that,” said Frank. “Is mom there?”

“No, she’s out shopping. She’s gonna be pissed she missed you.”

“Shelley’s calling card has been fucking up and she’s been using mine to call her family, so there’s, like, no minutes left. So I have to go pretty soon anyway.”

“Man,” I said, but didn’t know what to say next.

“Are you all ready for school?”

“Eh.”

“You’re going to have so much fun. Where are you working again?”

“The Wayside,” I said.

“That fucking place,” he said.

“Yeah,” I said. What could you say in a two-minute phone call?

“Look, I should go. Tell mom I’ll call her soon.”

“Alright,” I said. “Love you.”

And I knew my mom was right. He’d gone to the Middle East to get away from us, and he was finally returning now only because he’d be returning with a new wife, and within her he’d find a new family, a new home.

*

When I finally returned to The Wayside after the weekend, for the first time since I’d been there with Audrey, I felt somehow like I hadn’t been there for an eternity. Everything should have changed, but it hadn’t. The plaster statues had not stopped smiling, they had not stopped being in the middle of the actions they had always been in the middle of and always would be in the middle of, and even the books had not stopped being stacked as neatly as Audrey had left them. The paint had not stopped peeling, the furniture had not escaped from any rooms, and the visitors had not stopped coming. In fact, there were more of them. I answered questions concerning “The Incident” as calmly and tactfully as I thought Audrey would have.

“You’re doing a great job with the tours,” James said as I swept the floor.

“Hmm?” I said, working over a spot I had already done five times.

“How are you doing?” he asked.

“Everything is just different now, even though nothing has changed,” I admitted, not looking up. I pushed the frizzy hair up at the nape of my neck. I swear there was still sand in my hair, and if it wasn’t really there then I was like one of those ghost-limbed amputees but with phantom sand that would never come out.

“Things are different,” said James. He sat down at the chair in front of the register.

“Seeing someone you know get so out of touch with reality like that, that had to be a shock.”

I wanted to tell him about Ted, tell him I had just done it to get it done with, to be Julie, to not be Audrey, to find out if that was the difference between the last piece of my life and the next, but that I didn’t find out anything. Sometimes the only difference between doing something and not doing something was what you could claim later.

“Audrey and I didn’t even get along,” I said.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said. “It’s still allowed to affect you.”

“I don’t even think she ever touched Hawthorne’s writing desk.”

“Few people have,” said James. He stood up and put his hand gently on my shoulder for a moment and then took it away, though the spot where it had been still felt soft and warm, and I wondered what he felt about me.

Ted arrived at that moment. “Hey,” he said, nodding toward James and me.

“Hey,” I said, and I didn’t smile, I just looked back in the other direction.

Later, when James was on a tour, Ted sauntered over to me. “Alright,” he said, “you mad or something?”

“Should I be?” I said.

“We’re not— I mean, it works differently when you’re older.” He had finally pulled the age card, a card he hadn’t pulled when we were kissing in the car or riding bikes to Walden after dark or skinny-dipping in the lake or lying naked on the sand.

“It doesn’t matter,” I said. “We’re finished anyway.”

“That’s the thing,” said Ted. “There’s nothing to be finished with. It was just a few dates.”

“Okay,” I said, and I still wouldn’t look at him.

“And you called me,” he said.

“*Okay*,” I said, but with every single word Ted spoke, he seemed to be poking a little hole in my chest.

“Alright,” he said.

I restocked books with a kind of vengeance. “Thank you for coming,” I said tersely to our guests, throwing down their purchases. I wanted to get out of there. I wanted to get out of suburbia and Boston and Massachusetts and the summer and the heat and my teens.

But I couldn’t leave any of it, no matter what I did. Even on the last tour block of the day any hope of closing early was foiled by some intellectual tourists on their final literary stop of the afternoon, a young woman and her father. I assumed she went to Brown, since that’s what her T-shirt said. James smiled a broad smile. I was reminded of those first days when I thought the smile might burst from his face and take on a life of its own. “You two are lucky,” he said, rubbing his hands together. “A private tour! As you probably know this is the home of—”

“Oh, she knows,” said the father. The girl—woman, I guess—looked down at her shoes, smiling.

“Ah,” said James who put his hands to his temples and closed his eyes for a moment as if she were a little kid. “You’re a writer, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” she said.

“A good one, too,” added the father.

“Do you have a favorite Hawthorne book?” asked James.

“*The House of Seven Gables*,” she said, smiling one of those involuntary smiles that comes when you like something too much to not admit it.

“Excellent choice!” said James. “Currently my favorite, too.” His smile was broad as always, but I’d been with him enough this summer that I could now read the different permutations of his happiness, and finding a fellow reader and writer was its own category of joy.

They began their private tour, and I stayed behind in the Visitor’s Center, doing nothing. Waiting. After forty-five minutes they should have been more than back. I was getting antsy. I put up the away sign and marched quietly into the house. I heard them upstairs, up-upstairs, in

the Sky Parlor. I walked up quietly, hoping to hear the tour's final monologue, which would mean we could all soon go home.

From halfway up the stairs I heard James say, "Oh heck!" A pause. "No one is here. Just for you, for you the writer and reader, to encourage you to write because it's a hard job and an important job, because of that, we'll open the shades. Just for a minute. Just so you can see." My heart stopped. I could hear the plastic rolling upwards. For some reason, I didn't dare move.

"Beautiful," said the father.

"You see how he wrote at the desk? With his back to the window?" And then I heard it, the clink of metal, the sound of a hook coming out of its loop, a velvet rope being taken down.

"I'm not supposed to do this," he said. "You're a writer, though, and you've traveled a distance. Go ahead, stand in front of it."

My breathing was heavy. I tried to stay quiet. I thought I would cry.

"What's the matter?" I heard him say. For a moment, I thought he was speaking to me, but he didn't even know I was there.

"Aren't you going to touch it?" I could hear his smile.

"Can I?"

Maybe he let one person touch it each summer, chose the person who would benefit most, who would get the magic out of it that he believed was in it and then use that magic. I could imagine her touching it, standing behind the unhooked rope, the light on her back, feeling like a writer with a world of possibilities opened to her because she knew exactly what she wanted and everyone believed she would get it. I thought of Audrey and her journalism, the doors of which had closed on her for reasons I couldn't understand. And I thought of myself, aimed at no door in particular, making decisions that now seemed random, standing on the steps of a home where three great writers had walked and kissed and talked and cried, and I thought of me there now, crying for the first time that summer.

My heart dropped into my stomach, something tight and hot invaded my throat. I tiptoed down the stairs backwards, as if trying to undo what I'd just done. I walked through the font yard, over the place where pickle juice and tears had soaked into the ground. I settled back into the Visitor's Center, where it seemed like I had never left.

Fifteen minutes passed before James and the visitors returned, all smiles and handshakes and pats on the back.

"Are you sure you're alright?" James asked after they left.

"Uh-huh," was all I could muster.

"Are you thinking of Audrey?"

"Uh-huh," I said again, and I was. I was thinking of how much she wanted to be an adulteress like Hester Prynne, a heroic outcast, and how much she wanted to be a broadcast journalist, and how mean she was most of the time, and how messily she ate her pickles, which was probably why no one wanted her to broadcast the news. I thought of how she deserved to touch the desk more than I and how I deserved it more than that woman who had traipsed through last minute like that. How my father thought James wanted me in the way that Audrey

wanted someone, anyone. How James wasn't like that at all, but how I wished that he wanted me in some way, any way. How I had gotten what Audrey had wanted, but in the end maybe it wasn't even what she had really wanted. Right then I wanted to live in the ugliness of the dying Wayside the way I sometimes thought I could sleep forever on the North Bridge. I wanted to make a home there, and I didn't know why.

"I think I'll be a writer," I said.

"It's a hard life. You have time. You can do anything," said James, smiling, dusting the shoulder of Nathaniel Hawthorne.

But he didn't believe me, and I never touched it.