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Pockets: A Family Portrait

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Pockets: A Family Portrait
POCKETS: A FAMILY PORTRAIT

Claire

Claire opens her gym bag: tennis racket, balls, tiny green tennis skirt. She never wears white or black; she’s neither a preppy nor a goth. She rummages through her bag, then forgets what she’s looking for. Lip gloss? Chapstick? Her student ID. As if that could tell her who she is.

Her brother Gabe calls her a jock. That’s such a joke. A jock is someone who looks like Diana, the star tennis player at their rival school.

Chelsea, Olivia, and Allison from the tennis team sit with Claire at a picnic table on the lawn in back of the little cottage called the art studio. It’s their free period, which means they’re free to do what Chelsea, the captain, tells them. Today it’s watch a video. Chelsea turns on her iPod Touch. The tiny screen can’t shrink Diana’s bulging biceps, as she whacks the ball.

“God, she’s good,” Chelsea says, her mouth almost watering.

“Goddess,” Claire says.

“What?” Chelsea says.

“Goddess of the hunt. That’s what Diana means. She’s an Olympian,” Claire says.

“Only in her dreams is that girl Olympic,” Olivia says.

“Olympian.” Claire has learned a few things from her brother, like the difference between Olympic and Olympian. And this: There’s no point in trying to compete. She’ll never be the honor student her mom wants her to be, never be a geek like Gabe.

“What does your name mean?” Chelsea asks. “Loser?”

“It means clear in French,” Claire says, then fades out of the conversation. It gives her a headache to watch the ball go back and forth on the iPod screen, so she lets her eyes go blurry.
Not that she was clear-eyed before. She sleep-walked through Morning Meeting, Math for Global Awareness, and Pottery for Peace in a fog, as if she pops pills like Gabe. But she doesn’t even use Tylenol. She won’t snitch on him, though. She wouldn’t have snitched on her dad, either, but somebody must have, or he wouldn’t be in jail for a stash of coke in his car.

Claire could tell them he’s in Iraq. But having a soldier for a father would be worse in a Quaker school, where every class ends with five minutes of silence for peace.

She’d rather think about her stepdad Colin, who’s going to pick her up from school after practice, Dixieland jazz in his CD player, an anecdote from his Politics 101 class doled out like an afterschool snack, wearing a starched shirt that plays straight man to his goofy tie. He’s the only one who doesn’t treat her like a retard just because she’s getting Cs in the easy classes. She imagines all the girls coming to his office hours, dressing up especially for the occasion. She’d have a crush on him, too (can’t she?) if she weren’t related to him (is she?) Sweat drips down her forehead like a question mark.

She won’t correct the girls when they call him her dad. Sometimes she wishes he was.

The school chickens cluck, recycling food scraps, louder than a garbage disposal. She startles.

“You think Diana takes steroids?” Chelsea asks.

“Duh,” Claire says. The only question is how she doesn’t get caught, like Claire’s dad did. She tries to imagine it again: a cop stops her dad’s car and searches. A string of cars are all breaking the law, each in their own petty or grand way, and none of them gets stopped except her dad. Whoever the snitch is, she wants to whack him the way Diana is whacking the ball on the iPod screen. Claire lifts her tennis racket and punches the air with it, as if she could beat that guy into being.
“What the—” Chelsea says.

But Gabe’s friend Lee interrupts her, walking from ping pong to picnic table, his flip-flops snapping. “Wanna try something?” he asks Chelsea.

“You wish.” She turns her back to him and pretends to concentrate on the iPod screen.

“You don’t know what I’ve got.”

“I can’t party, we’ve got a big match tomorrow against St. Anne’s.”

“These aren’t party drugs, they’re performance enhancers.”

“What?” Chelsea says.

“Something that’ll put hair on your chest.” The girls’ breasts bulge out of their tight spaghetti strap tops. Claire’s wearing a faded swim camp t-shirt that doesn’t show anything. There’s nothing to show anyway.

Lee hands the bottle to Chelsea and says, “I’m betting on your team now.”

Chelsea checks that there aren’t any teachers, then puts a pill in each girl’s palm. They hide it in their fists.

“Take your vitamins,” Chelsea says, the last word with air quotes.

The girls hesitate. Claire’s fist clenches so hard it almost crushes the pill.

“Now!” Chelsea says. Everybody understands she gets to pick who plays and who sits on the bench, so they put the steroids in their mouths, but Claire doesn’t swallow. She’ll spit it out in the bathroom.

Lee asks what they’ve got in exchange, and the girls take out of their jacket pockets pills that make eyelashes grow longer, laxatives, and mega doses of appetite-suppressing caffeine.

“Girl stuff,” he says. “You can owe me.” He slips something into Claire’s pocket, but nobody sees.
She’s so surprised he picked her she gulps, and the steroid slides down her throat. Without a sip of water, the pill feels stuck between lungs and tongue. She feels herself swelling and throbbing.

She swallows the pill. It expands in her stomach to contain the first day, in first grade, when she knew what she wasn’t. When she failed the MAPS test, the WISC test, the Binet test, even the teacher observation that could be her entry into Quest, the gifted and talented track. She swallows the memory of her mom’s pulling a favor to get Claire a spot on the tennis team. She would swallow her pride, if she had any left.

The pill fizzes in her gut. Now is she a real jock, a gorilla, a monster? It’s weirder than the last time she got a vaccine and thought it gave her the flu on the spot. It can’t happen that fast, can it? Fast and quick and sleek and strong. And sick. The bell rings, so there isn’t time to throw up.

Diana thrashes a backhand across court one last time before Chelsea turns off the screen and the girls stumble toward their next class. Claire feels inside her jacket pocket: a square of plastic with something round inside. A condom. Is it just a stupid boy joke? Or does it have something to do with what Lee thinks she owes him?

It’s hard to imagine that Lee’s long bangs, lanky arms, and tiny goatee used to seem cute. Now all she can think is how he’s named after a Confederate general.

Gabe

PING. Every time the ball hits the table it feels like somebody is slamming Gabe’s eardrum. PONG!
He puts his head down on the grass. With his ears on the ground, the sound’s muffled. He’s got to ask Lee what he gave him today. Whatever it is, it should say on the label: “Not to be taken with ping pong.”

Gabe and his friends are playing during free period. That’s the only thing he likes better about this school than his old one: so many free periods. The school motto is “freedom with responsibility,” though the kids always say “freedom from responsibility.”

Lee and Jackson play on one of the half dozen tables on the lawn. From the ground, Gabe watches them swat the ball like a fly that won’t die. Lee and Jackson, as in Robert E. and Stonewall. Gabe’s stepdad doesn’t approve of these neo-Confederate names, which is a secret thrill.

Gabe stays still and says nothing. He’s perfected the technique from Morning Meeting. It’s like at public school when you’re finished with a standardized test and you can’t take out a book to read, so you look at the back of the kid in front of you. If he’s learned anything in this lame school, it’s to try to sit in back of Alma, the girl with the angel hair—little ringlets so tightly coiled they give him a hard-on—instead of the boy who’s got so much dandruff it’s like he’s molting.

“Hey, man, you’re up.” Lee is the winner, so he motions for Gabe to take Jackson’s place and play him.

“OK, Sara Lee,” Gabe says. Lee punches him on the bicep, and Gabe jabs back. They just had an assembly about promoting global nonviolence, but Gabe figures this is local so it doesn’t count. They don’t have Tug o’ War here on field day, they have Tug o’ Peace. So if one of the teachers sees them, he’ll just say they’re doing the Punch o’ Peace. “My ears are pounding,” Gabe tells Lee. “You got something to turn the volume down?”
“Sorry, dude, what’d I give you this morning?” Lee scoops a bottle from his pocket, after he makes sure the coast is clear. “People usually like these,” he says. “They’re my little sister’s. They’re supposed to make her more alert.”

“If I were any more alert I could hear your pimples pop.” His heart beats, his eyes blink over and over again, and it’s deafening.

Lee plucks a pill from the bottle in his pocket. “These are mom’s. They calm her down when my sister drives her crazy.” Gabe takes one and listens to the loud gulp of it going down his throat. Fifteen minutes later, he loses the ping-pong game but no longer feels as if the ball is ricocheting between his ears.

At lunch, he joins some of the juniors and seniors who get in their cars and head to Subway. Kids hop car to car, buying, selling, and trading pills from home. Blue and red, capsules and gels and tablets. Stuff for anxiety, depression, learning disabilities, concentration. Soft stuff, he tells himself, all doctor prescribed. His own parents’ medicine cabinet is so packed nobody ever notices if anything is missing.

In bio lab, Sandra—the teachers must have last names, but nobody knows what they are—passes out syringes to the class. A boy in the back row snickers.

“Is something funny?” Sandra asks, then passes out Q-tips so they can scrape their cheeks, mix the cells with rubbing alcohol, and insert them in the syringe. After they finish DNA testing, Gabe stashes the syringe in his pocket and school is dismissed.

Gabe sits on the grass, watching Jackson and Lee play another ping-pong extravaganza, while the kids too young to drive sit at picnic tables under magnolia trees, waiting for their parents to pull up. The lacrosse and hockey players find their fields, and the theater people shuffle into the multi-purpose room they call the performing arts center.
Gabe cradles the rough, transparent plastic of the syringe. It looks like the ones he saw in his dad’s briefcase, years ago, before the divorce. He didn’t tell anyone, of course. Did he? He was always too inquisitive, everybody said, too nosy. So geeky the only kids who hang out with him are the sons of professors, his step-dad’s colleagues. Maybe he said: Hey, mom, what are these?

His dad just had a little stash of coke in his glove compartment when he got a ticket for speeding and they put him in jail. At least that’s what his mom told him. If only he could see his dad and ask him what really happened.

Gabe tries not to think about his dad, but the longer he goes without seeing him, the more he can’t get him out of his mind. He lifts the top off the syringe and touches the liquid with his finger, as if he can feel his dad through their shared DNA.

He’s five years old, and his dad lifts him on his shoulders so he can see over the edge, deep down into the lush green dip of the Shenandoah Valley. His dad carries him up the switchbacks of Devil’s Stairs, past the Gravel Springs Hut, on the Blue Ridge Parkway. “We’re not like the people who drive here and just park at the designated overlooks. We’re not here for the easy vista,” his dad tells him.

He’s six years old and hiking at Ivy Creek. His dad pulls the poison ivy out of Gabe’s way. “I’m immune,” he says. Gabe realizes then, kryptonite has nothing on him, either. He could walk through fire. They belt out “Ninety-nine bottles of bear on the wall, Ninety-nine bottles of bear,” to scare off predators, his lungs like accordions.

He’s eight years old, cross-bow hunting, his dad teaching him how to stay stealthy and silent as a tree in a windless forest, to make his breath as small as a dime, to still his brain and body organs through force of will, tell time from the sun, directions from the stars.
He’s nine years old, at the Grand Canyon. His mom and Claire took the easy trail, but his dad leads him around the rim, in the furnace that is the desert in July. “We’ll be back before the girls!” he brags, and when Gabe trails behind on the climb back up, he tells him stories to distract his brain from his frying body. Tales about groundhogs flying on kites fueled by lightning. All of a sudden Gabe’s up there in the sky, too.

“Hey, dude,” Lee says, waving his hand in front of Gabe’s face. “Earth to Gabe.”

“What?”

“You’re turn.” He motions for him to rotate in.

Gabe steps up to the ping pong table then doesn’t move. When will he ever get to see his dad again?

Gabe wishes he could be like his sister Claire, pushing away these thoughts the way she slams a tennis ball over the net. There she is, walking out to the locker room to practice with the rest of the team. Gabe puts the syringe back in his pocket and picks up a paddle. Those tennis players are the real jocks. All Gabe can play is mediocre ping pong.

Chelsea meets Gabe’s eye, so he pulls out a prescription pain killer from home and shakes it above his head. “Anybody game?”

Lee grabs it before the tennis coach can see. “You wanna get in trouble?”

Gabe imagines the coach taking him to the headmaster’s office.

“You could get expelled, dude,” Lee says.

Jackson elbows Gabe. “Maybe even arrested.”

If only he could. If they took him to jail, he’d finally be near his dad. Gabe lifts his paddle and spanks the ball over the net, watching it fly on a kite fueled by lightning.
Molly

Lee honks in the driveway, and Gabe and Claire pile in, joining the carpool to school. The house settles into a post-kid quiet, purring like a cat finally left alone for the day.

Molly walks upstairs and empties Gabe’s blue jeans pockets into her bedroom trash can, preparing the dirty laundry to drop off at the service on her way to work. A few gum wrappers, a squished permission slip for a band field trip, sticky gum, an uncapped pen. Ink spills onto her fingers. Maybe Colin is right: the kids should do their own laundry, but teaching them how seems like just one more chore.

Colin emerges from the shower, smelling of chlorine. Molly breathes it in and drifts back to the hotel pool, where they met four years ago, in the middle of their separate divorces. The conference was sponsored by LAPS (Legal and Political Society), and they were taking a dip between sessions on justice and submerged populations.

That wet, slick body makes her muscles ache for the pool. Why can’t they find the time anymore, just because they’re married? At least there’s the shampoo and body wash she bought, which makes him smell, like he does right now, as if he just did the hundred meter butterfly. One whiff, and she’s back at the Marriott Hotel, watching his blue Speedo bob on top of the water.

There’s something else that wet, slick body makes her ache for. She doesn’t have to be in court for another hour, and he doesn’t have office hours until afternoon, so she suggests they get in the shower together. “You’re still so dirty.”

Colin laughs, kneels down on the laundry, then bristles when his knee touches something hard. He crouches down, still naked, and pulls a syringe out of Gabe’s pants pocket. “What’s that?”

Whatever it is, it’s killed the mood. Molly picks it up. “Probably a science experiment.”
“You’re so naïve!” Colin slips on underwear that looks, deliciously, like a swimsuit.

“Don’t you know what it is?”

“What?” She continues emptying tissues and food wrappers, broken hair ties, a bloodied band-aid from the clothes. She’d better hurry or she’ll be late for court.

“Ecstasy!”

“Ecstasy’s a pill,” Molly says.

“Well, it’s some kind of drug.”

Molly sets the syringe on the dresser, out of sight. “Gabe doesn’t do drugs.” It’s one of her mantras. She took out a second mortgage to switch the kids to a private school so they wouldn’t have the peer pressure she hears about from her clients.

“You’re sure?” Colin asks.

“He hangs out with people who are addicted to Dungeons and Dragons,” she says. “He’s not even interested in taking a sip of wine when we offer it at dinner. Anyway, he’s getting all A’s. Claire’s the one I’m worried about.”

“They all take drugs,” Colin says, putting an undershirt over his head.

“You’re such an expert on teenagers?”

“Half my undergrads are eighteen or nineteen.”

“And you’re very intimate with them.”

“What?”

“It’s just that you don’t know Gabe the way I do. I’ll talk to him when he gets home.”

“Of course he’ll deny it.”

“So what should I do? Take it to the forensics lab?”
Colin puts on khakis and a button down shirt, then a tie with the Communist hammer and sickle—a joke you can only tell when you’re tenured. “I’m a political scientist, not a real scientist.” He sprays breath freshener into his mouth. “Anyway, I gotta go. Office hours this morning.” He doesn’t seem to notice her sigh, catching him in a lie, as he gives her a peck and rattles the screen door behind him.

She finishes getting the laundry ready—unsticking slippery lip gloss from the pocket of Claire’s skinny jeans and removing the strawberry condom from her jacket. “Already?” she complains to the ceiling. “Claire isn’t having sex” is her other mantra, repeated every time she sees a fourteen year old, like her daughter, already pregnant. Some who even used condoms. She tries to conjure an innocent explanation. Another science experiment? But Claire’s taking Physics for Poets. They don’t do labs, just scientific anagrams.

Molly was so sure she had more time. Don’t boys go for girls who are more developed? She’ll have to get her a patch. A girl who forgets to turn in her homework can’t be expected to remember to take birth control pills.

The patch. Patch me up, Mommy. If only she could.

Molly can almost feel all those synthetic hormones coursing through Claire’s little-girl body, her knobby knees and freckled forehead. The black coffee in Molly’s empty stomach burns. The whiff of sticky strawberries, which she swears she can smell through the wrapper, nauseates her. Good. Now she knows she can get through the day without eating until dinner. Lately it’s been hard unless she takes two pills a day.

Sometimes Molly thinks all girls should be given the patch, like a routine vaccination, as soon as they pass puberty. She used to be such an advocate for personal freedom before she
became a public defender. Hell, that was the *reason* she took this job. But given the characters who stumble into her office, it’s a wonder she doesn’t quit.

Like the guy she met with yesterday who stole meat from the Stop N Shop. He told her to fuck off when she said he should settle. Her shoulders tense, remembering the conversation.

“They’ve got you on the surveillance camera,” she explained.

“I want a real lawyer,” he said.

She pointed to her diploma, from the University of Virginia Law School, on the wall: “I am a real lawyer.”

“One who gets paid.”

“I get paid by taxpayers.”

“You’re just selling me out cause you’re free. Cause I’m not like you. You get what you pay for.”

“If you settle, I can get you community service, no jail time. Not every lawyer could do that, but I’m good.”

“You think I steal? Just cause I look like this?” He flicked his fingers toward his body, which gave off a whiff of formaldehyde and ash. He didn’t seem to notice his fly was undone.

“It’s on the camera.”

“You in your fancy suit. Don’t you have some fancy way to get me off?”

“I’m not Wonder Woman.”

“No, you’re Wonder Bread.”

She laughed then, and she laughs again now. She’ll have to share that line with Clarice at lunch.
Molly puts on make-up, brushes her hair, then forces herself to look at the syringe. Gabe wouldn’t be sloppy enough to leave evidence in his pocket. Would he?

She could test the syringe herself at the county lab, but she doesn’t want anybody at work to ask questions. Plus, she doesn’t have time; there’s a hearing this morning, then she’s got to go to the jail and meet with Larry about his appeal. She stuffs the papers she needs to show Larry into her briefcase.

At the last minute, she decides to change into her tightest suit, the one Larry helped her pick out for her first interview after law school. It’s a thrill to slip into it, see it still fit after all these years. The only thing that hasn’t changed.

Yesterday, Larry didn’t look so bad himself, despite the jail clothes and drugs. He’s got good genes. A Jewish guy, who grew up reading the New York Times at the breakfast table every day, the Wall Street Journal their dessert, the New Yorker cartoons their afterschool snack. An uncle who was on the first trip to the moon. More than one Harvard law professor around the Thanksgiving table.

They’d known each other a long time before Molly admitted to Larry that she was the first in her family to go to college. That her grandparents only made it through eighth grade. That most people she knew worked in the coal mines, deep in the armpit of Appalachia. She hadn’t thought people like Larry would hang with people like her if they really knew.

Molly throws her family’s dirty laundry in the back seat of the car. Then she goes back in and gets the pile of dry cleaning, to drop it off at the end of the day.

Colin
Colin wants it bad. The way he wanted to teach poli sci, wanted tenure, wanted to marry Molly—and not because of the way she looked in a bikini, but because she had the guts to put her middle aged body into that tiny thing. She had spunk. She’s got drive, too. She’d be a brilliant judge.

Brilliant or not, there are some things she doesn’t understand. She’s got the zeal of a convert, the intolerance of an ex-smoker.

He promised he’d quit. He has quit, several times. She believes him when he says those tobacco pipes—over a hundred of them—in his office case are just for display. Because they are. “The history of the South is told through tobacco,” he tells students when they ask why the pipes are there. It’s the one stashed in his desk that he wants.

He reaches the office door, sticks the key in the lock, and tears it open. Then pauses. Lets the anticipation build, savors it. The pipes are gorgeous. They’re made of everything from clay to corncob to wood, one from almost every continent, from almost every person he’s ever loved, except Molly.

His favorite is his first: hand made of clay on a pueblo in New Mexico, it reminds him of the adobe houses that surrounded the sleepaway camp where he was a counselor during his summers in college. The one he bought from a roadside stand in the Navajo nation on the way to the Grand Canyon is a beauty, too: wood inlaid with slivers of silver and turquoise. There are five from his Peace Corps stint in Zimbabwe, each for a different ceremonial purpose, four carved out of wood and one made of ivory.

The pipes are what the students notice, but faculty usually comments on the Lincoln photo hanging above his desk. “Is that some kind of statement?” Ken asked the first time he saw it. The famous Ken Elliewood, who teaches Survey of Politics in a giant auditorium like he’s
Jerry Falwell saving souls. Ken, who employs armies of teaching assistants. Ken, who named his son Lee after the Confederate general. (It’s not Colin’s fault that Gabe became friends with the kid. It’s a small town.) Of course the Lincoln photo is a statement. “You’ve got your Southern Comfort, I’ve got mine,” Colin told him.

Anybody meeting Colin wouldn’t guess he grew up an hour to the east, near the Confederate White House in Richmond. Only after he’s had a few glasses of bourbon does his Southern accent seep through. He spent his university years up North—a few blocks from Grant’s tomb, at Columbia—learning how to speak Yankee. During school breaks, he’d tell his father what he was taught, an alternate reality of American history. The dinner conversation could get so heated sometimes he’d have to sleep in his car. He never imagined he’d return to the South.

Finally, Colin can’t hold back any longer. He pulls the desk key from his pocket and slides the drawer forward. He opens the window, sits on the ample ledge, and leans out. The window’s a half circle with wooden spires like wheel spokes, opening onto bricks and pillars.

Then he lights up. Inhales. Not just the tobacco, but the whole landscape of Virginia. The Blue Ridge Mountains, the Shenandoah Valley, the Rivanna River, the Piedmont, the James River, the crepe myrtle and dogwood, the idle days of his childhood, his father and uncles smoking pipes on the capacious front porch, rockers and porch swings, ceiling fans and long drinks made of mint in their hands. He inhales his father’s corduroy jacket with patched elbows, always the professor, always in costume, beard trimmed as meticulously as his shrubs.

He inhales the North Carolina tobacco farms his grandparents owned. Inhales the dark lessons etched in his mind from all the generations, a guilty pleasure. He exhales nerves. He breathes out his genes, his blood, his DNA. Strange fruit, sweet and twisted. He exhales stupid
no smoking indoors rules. He’s not worrying anymore that Molly might find out he’s still smoking. He’s off lying in the grass, a blade in his mouth, planning a treehouse.

A knock startles him out of his reverie. He shifts off the ledge and tries to blow all the smoke outside before he closes the window. Smoking inside is against the rules, but not if nobody can smell it. He snuffs his pipe and sticks it in his pocket, still too hot.

Colin opens the door. It’s Brigit.

As if her V-neck wasn’t low enough; it’s cut practically to her navel. Her skirt is as short as her attention span.

“Sorry,” she says. “I know it’s not office hours, but your light was on.”

“Have a seat.”

She slinks into the visitor’s chair. “I just wondered if you posted the list yet.”

“Did you see it on my door?”

“No.”

“Then no.”

“I really need to get into your honors seminar.”

“I can’t tell you before I tell everybody else.” He makes a mental note not to give her any special treatment.

“But I wondered if you saw what I left you after class.”

“Did you put it in my box?”

“No. In your pocket. You left your jacket on the chair. I went to the bathroom and took them off before class.”

“So you were --”

“--not wearing them during class. I’m not wearing any now, either.”
He turns away, in case she’s uncrossing her legs to prove the point. “If this has anything to do with the list, it’s not relevant. Just take them back.” He rummages in his blazer pocket, but nothing’s there.

“Not that one,” she says. “The trench coat.”

Shit. The one he threw in the dry cleaning pile.

Larry

The guards ask Molly if she’s a relative. “I’m his counsel,” she says. A funny word. As if all he needed was counseling. Deep-breathing exercises and an acapella rendition of “My Favorite Things.”

Molly walks in, carrying a bulky trench coat over her arm. She says hello and sits down across the glass partition. In her navy power suit, the one he helped her choose, she looks like a flight attendant, back when one of the job requirements was being sexy. The blazer is nipped and tucked to show off her figure, still like a college swimmer.

Not many women visit here, not many in form-fitting designer suits, anyway. The guys on either side of Larry eye her and whistle, and Molly covers up.

“What’s with the coat?” he asks, as she puts it on.

“I just grabbed something from the car. It’s Colin’s.”

“I thought you liked to be appreciated.” He strains to see a little blood rush to her cheeks.

“It’s cold here.”

“I know.” Even he can’t get used to it. The food is made of glue. The air is as fresh as draft beer in a bottle is draft. But it’s the reptilian chill that keeps him from feeling human.

His jumpsuit scratches against his skin. “How are the kids?”
“They’re fine,” she tells him, but he wants details.

“What are they doing?”

“Gabe made National Honor Society. Claire is still playing tennis. She’s getting pretty good.”

“Really?”

It’s the Christmas card answer, the response you give to grandparents, to old aunts and uncles you see only on holidays. He wants to know the words they say at night right before they go to sleep, what they take out of the refrigerator when they sleepwalk, what they mumble while singing along with their iPods, the color of their fingernails, the scratches on their knees. Do they still scratch their knees? “Tell me more.”

Molly points to her wrist. Her bone’s almost poking out, actually. Larry never thought about it before, how there’s a fine line between looking like a model and a junkie. “We can do this,” she says, “but we’ve got to be efficient.”

“What have you told them?”

“They don’t think you’re vacationing in Cancun.”

“But they don’t know you’re taking on my appeal?”

“What good would that do? They’ve heard about the drugs, but not that you’ve been accused of dealing. I wish they didn’t even have to know you’re here. But, unlike you, I’m not that good at making up stories.”

She used to lap up his stories as much as the kids did. The adventures of Brownie the groundhog and his wife Greta, who lived under the porch with their children Betty and Sam, playing board games woven out of clover and wild violets, under awnings of hostas.

“Better to keep them ignorant,” he says.
“You mean innocent,” Molly says.

“Whatever.” He scans the dropped ceiling. He’s seen kids visit their parents in here, when he was a public defender like Molly. It wasn’t pretty. And she is. So pretty. So skinny it’s like she subsists on air. A poster girl for those diet pills. A pin-up. A pin.

He follows his breath in and out. It’s supposed to help the withdrawal symptoms, but it doesn’t do shit. “I miss them. My kids.”

Molly doesn’t respond, just rubs her hands together then reaches into Colin’s coat pocket for warmth. She pulls something out, then puts it back quickly. A flash of black lace. If not for her sucking in her breath, he’d believe the panties a mirage.

She’s a pro, though. Composes herself, tries to distract him. Plucks out of her briefcase the business card of a detective. “He owes me a favor,” she says. Sly Molly, always the politician. “The coke they found in your apartment,” she continues. “It’s gone.”

“What do you mean?”

“Gone from the record. This detective, he helped me find some ‘irregularities’ in the police procedure for collecting evidence.”

Before he can even say thank you, she pulls some papers out of her briefcase and puts them up to the glass. “This is what I printed out, what we talked about yesterday,” she says, showing him two pages listing the mistakes the police made. “They’ll grill you about it on the stand, and we need to have a consistent story, so read carefully.” She lifts a pen and takes notes with her other hand. They don’t allow pens here; they could be weapons.

“You’re not even reading it,” she says.

Larry has been looking at her lap, not the document against the glass. “Sorry, I was thinking about something else.”
“What? Those?” She nods toward her jacket pocket.

“It’s been a long time since I saw your panties,” he says.

“They’re not mine.”

“I wish they were.”

“Me, too.”

“Look, Molly, you can’t deny there’s still something between us.”

“Yeah.” She laughs and taps the glass partition, then adjusts the document to eye level.

“Let’s focus, OK?”

He’d rather not. It’s like when he lived in New York City in the summer and he trained his nose not to smell, so he could ignore the fumes of garbage decomposing on the street. The way swimmers close their noses underwater. Larry can actually close his vision without closing his eyes. It’s a neat trick; he does it now and sees Jamal sitting in the client’s chair across from his desk at the public defender’s office on High Street and East 2nd.

Jamal had just gotten off. More specifically, Larry had miraculously won the case for him. The evidence was indisputable, but Larry swept the jury away with some kind of bullshit about underprivilege.

Jamal slapped his arms over Larry, a street version of a hug. Followed him into his office and said, “I’m gonna pay you back.”

The next week Jamal kept his word, walked in with a fist thump and bag of coke that was hidden somewhere in the deep recesses of his untapped talent, an inner pocket of his undershirt or skin. “I don’t got money, but you take this, it’s worth a fucking fortune.”

“You don’t owe me,” Larry said.

“Take it,” Jamal said.
He’d like to say he didn’t take it. Sometimes he does say that, even to himself. The memories are fuzzy, the way time is fuzzy when you’re about to climax. The moment when all you want—you’d give up your firstborn for it—is to have this moment not end, to suspend it over the bridge of your whole life. Then you come and you don’t know how much time has passed.

Thirty minutes? Your wife says thirty seconds.

That shit doesn’t come cheap, so he couldn’t keep dipping into their savings. They’d have to file for bankruptcy if he didn’t start dealing.

Now Molly closes the notebook. “Did you finish reading?”

“Yes,” he lies. She won’t understand if he says he’s got other things on his mind, and he’s got his eyes closed even though they look opened.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Molly says and starts to rise. “I’ll print out more.”

Larry looks at the clock. “We’ve got five minutes. Tell me more about our kids.”

Molly sits back down, on her hands to warm them this time. “OK. I found a syringe in Gabe’s pants this morning.”

“I don’t believe it,” Larry says.

“I didn’t want to, either.”

“He’s using?”

“That’s what Colin said, but he doesn’t know the kids like we do. And Claire had a condom in her jacket.”

Larry laughs.

“That’s not funny,” Molly says. “You didn’t go to a high school where half the girls got pregnant.”

“I’m sure it’s not what it seems. Nothing ever is,” Larry says.
“So now you’re a philosopher?”

“She’s probably saving up condoms to send to the AIDS pandemic in Africa.”

“Always a story.” She stretches the word “always” so far it covers every fuck-up, every year in their marriage. He wishes he could stop it. Fucking up.

She stands.

“Don’t leave.”

“I’ll be back, don’t worry. I’m good. Even if my clients say you get what you pay for.”

“I’ll pay you back. I’ll find a way.”

“I owe you.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Negligence. Accessory. Whatever you want to call it. I knew you were in trouble then, but I pretended I didn’t. Even to myself. But I should have stopped you before you got caught.”

“Don’t say that.”

“And you gave me the kids. I owe you for that.”

He can smell the juices flowing from her panties, not the ones from the pocket, but under her skirt. “You have other reasons to help me, don’t you?”

“No!” She probably means to be stern, but it comes off as flirtatious.

He smiles. She might be a good lawyer, but she’s a terrible actress.

“You have time for this?” Larry asks.

Molly shrugs. “That’s my problem. Your problem is: keep your story straight. Can you do that?” She presses a palm against the glass. He meets it with his own.

“I’ll get you out.” Her hands snap off the glass. The guard signals that it’s time to leave, then escorts her out.
Keep your story straight. Larry doesn’t care about his own story anymore. He wants to hear about Gabe and Claire. Wants it like he used to want the drugs. Wants them so his head won’t be clear, so he won’t have to see what’s right in front of him, walking out as fast as those high heels will take her. Far out of reach.

All Together Now

“It’s nothing,” Molly says aloud to herself as she peels off Colin’s trench coat, starts the engine, and turns the heat on even though it’s a temperate spring day, with azaleas and rhododendrons as common as grass. She trusts Colin, doesn’t she?

Colin takes a bottle of chilled Riesling—Molly’s favorite--out of the wine refrigerator, fills the ice bucket, and slides the bottle in. He’s a beer man, but you’re never too old to break habits. He finishes washing the leftover breakfast dishes, sets the table, and waits to hear Molly’s Corolla pull into the driveway.

Gabe zones out in the basement, sprawled on his bed behind a locked door with his iPod earbuds blasting the radio play of “The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy,” staring at the girls’ high school swim team pictures printed in today’s “Daily Progress,” his hands under the blanket. Someone knocks.

“Can I come in?” Claire asks.

“Wait,” Gabe says.

Claire understands private space. Normally, she doesn’t come down to the basement at all, but stays up in the attic, where she has her room. But she’s got to tell somebody. Right now.
Gabe finally opens the door, and Claire walks in. “We won!” she says.

“Could you stay out of my room?”

Claire walks back over the threshold. “I won both my single and double sets. I’ve never done that before.”

“That’s great,” Gabe says.

“You don’t believe me, ask Lee. He was there.”

“Lee doesn’t go to tennis matches.”

“He went to this one.” Her peeling toe nails suddenly beg to be polished. “And he took my picture.”

Nobody’s taken her picture at a game before, but she won’t admit that. Let Gabe think she’s like those girls in the newspaper he brings down to his room. Let him believe it wasn’t Lee’s magic pill that transformed her.

The screen door closes. “Mom’s home. Come to the table, kids!” Colin yells from the top of the stairs.

“Why does he have to call us kids?” Gabe asks.

“Why not?” Claire says.

“It must make him feel grown-up,” Gabe says.

Colin attempts to give Molly a kiss, but she scoots past him and puts the take-out on the table. They all sit down and spoon out rice, chicken with cashews, and spring rolls. Colin pours Molly some wine, and she downs the glass. It usually takes her the entire meal.

“I’ve been trying to call you all day,” Colin says. “You left your phone at home.”

“I’ve been in court and jail anyway. I couldn’t have taken a call.”

“What’d they put you in jail for?” Gabe asks.
“Very funny,” Molly says, pointing a chopstick at him. “You want to hear something else funny: Today was laundry day.”

“But we didn’t give you our clothes,” Claire says, looking down at her oversized t-shirt, wishing it would cover her entire body and make her disappear.

“Stop shaking the table,” Colin tells Gabe, whose foot doesn’t stop jiggling.

“I took them out of your rooms,” Molly says.

“You’re not supposed to go in our rooms, Mom!” The way Gabe says “mom” makes it sound like a swear word.

“I’m the guilty one?” Molly says. “I found a syringe, a condom, and” she points to Colin, “I’ll talk to you later.”

Gabe lets out a nervous laugh. “Mom, you’re too much. You know what the syringe was for? We did an experiment in bio. Scraped our cheek cells to test our DNA. You can e-mail Sandra and ask her.”

“I will.”

“And the condom,” Gabe says, “they distributed them to all the guys in health class.”

“I found it in Claire’s pocket,” she says.

“They must give them to girls, too,” Gabe says. Claire puts her head down so her long hair covers her face. She hopes they can’t see all the blood rushing to her cheeks, as she remembers Lee putting the condom in her pocket and imagines him taking it out and using it.

Colin says. “A student tried to bribe me.”

“Tried?”

“I didn’t accept it, I just didn’t check my pocket. I’m as honest as Abe.”

“Honest as a politician,” Molly says.
“Which means total liar,” Gabe says, spearing chicken with a chopstick with a thud.

“What are you guys talking about?” Claire asks.

“None of your business,” Molly says.

They all dig in, Claire eating almost as much as Gabe, for once. She finally finds space between bites to tell everybody about winning her match.

“Who wants a fortune?” Colin asks and passes out the cookies. “Maybe it will predict whether you’re ever going to win again.”

Claire can see the blue gel capsule that Chelsea will put in her palm tomorrow morning. Everybody else will take one, pop it in her mouth like a Tic Tac. Nobody even hesitated today, but they can’t all get kicked off the team, can they?

What Claire really wants is to ask her mom, but can she, without snitching on her teammates, without outing Lee and maybe getting Gabe questioned, too?

“Let me see my fortune.” Molly reads: “If you want to know a man, look in his pockets.”

Colin laughs. Gabe shakes his head. “It doesn’t say that.”

“Why can’t I make things up, too?”

Colin pours Molly the dregs of the wine, and she says, “This Riesling is really good.”

“Can I have some?” Gabe asks.

“You never want to taste wine at dinner,” Molly says.

“That was yesterday,” says Gabe. “You always think you know us, when you don’t.”

“I know,” Molly says. “That’s the one thing I do know.”