

JOHN TAIT

This Might Hurt Some

When Paul and Alice sit in her dorm room, tired from their exertions or just bored, they play weird games, sometimes pretend to give each other shots. Often they lunge across the bed with no warning. Other times they prolong the agony, locate vulnerable spots, apply pretend alcohol with pretend gauze, imitate the saccharine voices of nurses: "This might feel a bit uncomfortable"; "You're going to feel a little pinch." Then the pretend needle, the stabbing forefinger, driving home. Alice enjoys the game most, shrieks and pleads as Paul yanks down her shorts, priming his fake syringe, sighing: "I'm sorry, Miss Park, but rabies is a serious business."

Sometimes Paul imitates a nurse he remembers from some grade school inoculation, a blond woman with a lumpy face and sweater, her distraction ploy a disinterested question ("What's your favorite food?") then the syringe stuck in the shoulder. He remembers how, even though he'd just watched her do it to the kid before him in line, seen the boy's startled tears, Paul still fell for it because she asked about his brothers and sisters, and he couldn't help but answer.

Alice loves this imitation most, the more outrageous Paul's distractions ("What's your sign?"; "Who's your favorite Spice Girl?") the better, her answers interrupted by his finger stabbing her stomach, her hip, the meat of her thigh. It makes her howl with laughter and pretend pain.

Paul thinks now about all these needle-wielders, these nurses and doctors, can't help but imagine there must be some sadism mixed in there. Do the warnings, the surprises and distractions, actually lessen the pain? Do they protect the stabbee or the stabber? Like with the parent who tears off the Band-Aid on the count of two rather than three, it feels dishonest somehow. Paul remembers that nurse's lumpy face and false smile as she shoved one child from the chair and ushered in the next, and he's even more convinced that the adult world, or at least the world outside of Alice's

dorm room that they watch with disdain, is mostly cowardice or cruelty.

During Paul and Alice's Thanksgiving visit to Little Rock, Alice's father, Mr. Park, is in trouble again. The tribunal assembles in the dining room, Alice's older brother, Richard, the corporate lawyer, presiding as usual. Paul has watched a few of these proceedings, a little amazed. His own father, though he gets blamed for much back home in Houston, would never suffer through a humiliation like this. But now, from her seat at the cherry dining room table, Richard's wife, Susan, lays out the charges, how that afternoon her father-in-law took the only available car, his Cadillac, to the dealership for servicing at the exact moment a vehicle was needed to take his grandson, Steven, to Taekwondo. Richard listens to his wife's testimony with tabled fingers, cuts off his father when he interjects, says he'll have his chance, though Mr. Park never does, just sits, miserable, as even his wife joins in, shouting in his ear in Korean. Finally, Alice is the only one defending her father, protesting meekly until Richard turns on her with his icy barrister's stare. So where was *she* when Steven needed to go to Taekwondo? Off shopping or seeing movies with Paul? Indulging herself? If the blame doesn't lie with her father, then maybe it's hers. And she's quiet then.

Later, Alice is so angry she shakes. Paul follows her upstairs, passing Susan on the way, exchanging nervous smiles because he still doesn't know her well, just that she is Richard's wife and was a lawyer too—maybe a better one than Richard, Alice has suggested—until she gave it up to be Steven's mother.

Alice collapses across the bed in her assigned guestroom. Paul sits at her side, waits until she speaks, whispering, "I hate him so fucking much."

"Yeah, that was kind of awful," Paul agrees.

Alice nods, tears squeezing down her tight cheeks, everything in her compressed as this first wave of rage works its way through her body. "I want to leave," she says. "Go back to Dallas."

Though Paul would love to agree, he is unable. "They'll be upset if we just take off, right? Your mom and dad, I mean."

"I don't care," Alice says, though her sigh afterward sounds resigned.

"I still don't understand why they let him act like that," Paul says. "Judge and jury and executioner."

"It's just how it works. He's the oldest son."

"I know. But still." Paul is an oldest son too, would never dream of speaking like that, so imperious and arrogant, to his parents back in Texas, would never try to pull rank like that over his sisters and brothers. He would get laughed out of the room.

It's not his business, any of this, Paul reminds himself with relief. Though he did imagine, while it was happening today, taking some action, stepping forward, Clarence Darrow-style. Yes, Steven's schedule was written on the fridge whiteboard, but how was Mr. Park to know, in this unfamiliar house, what "TKD" meant? And isn't there a conflict here? How can Richard be an objective adjudicator when his own child is the wronged party? Finally, could it be noted by the court, could it be read into record, what an abject asshole Richard is, what a petty tyrant and humorless dick? Bossing and criticizing. Gloating over his expensive house in this awful suburb, so huge and so empty that even though it's brand new it still feels haunted, frightening just to walk to the kitchen at night for a glass of water. The terrible austerity of it.

A few hours later, at dinner, there is some reconciliation, even laughter. Then, while the other adults are having their nightly debate about which movies to rent until no movies are actually rented, Paul sits for a while with Steven before the boy's bedtime, plays the five-year-old's favorite game, though it leaves Paul little to do but watch as the kid stacks Legos into precarious towers, then demolishes them over and over. It is fun in its own monotonous way. And Paul feels proud again that he's a good uncle-to-be, that the boy insists Paul be the one to play with him.

And then Paul's thinking about Alice again, about the distance that separates his assigned guestroom and hers, thinking so intently about that creaking twenty feet of corridor later on tonight that when Steven does the weird stuff, Paul just tells him to knock it off, feels embarrassed then relieved when Susan comes to collect the boy for bed.

Paul thinks of saying nothing to Alice about the weirdness with Steven. But then they're in the car home the next afternoon, reading dumb billboards aloud and pinching one another, eager to get back to Alice's small dorm room, to her narrow bed.

"So something happened last night while I was playing with

Steven," he does tell her then.

"Thanks for that. I know it's boring. I never know what he wants me to do."

"Right." Paul laughs. "It was just weird, this thing that happened. I mean I don't know if it was weird."

Alice turns to watch him.

"We were playing his Lego build-and-smash game, and then he got really quiet for a while, and then he said 'Do you want to play that other game?'"

Alice smiles as if Paul is setting up some joke.

"I thought he was just goofing around so I said 'sure.' And he undid his pants then. Just whipped it out." He mimes the act for her.

Alice explodes with laughter, her real laughter, not muffling her mouth with her palm the way she does at Richard's house.

"I know." Paul laughs too. "He's a little maniac. It was just the way he did it, I guess. Like it was expected or . . . it's hard to explain." He doesn't know enough about children, has little to compare this to, just his sister's wild, blond daughters down in Sugarland.

The mirth is leaving Alice's eyes. "I don't understand what you're saying."

"I don't either. It just felt strange. Or maybe not. Maybe kids just do shit like that."

"Okay." She's frowning now. "All right. What should I do, then?"

Paul is relieved that she says "I," has hoped this might happen, that he could hand this off to her. It's her family, after all, though he feels bad now at her burdened expression. "I don't know. Maybe it was nothing. Just little kid weirdness. Maybe we just wait. If nothing else happens, then. . . ." Paul shrugs.

"Okay," Alice says.

When Paul and Alice are alone in her dorm room in Dallas, they speak mostly in code—not just love talk or nicknames, an actual language unintelligible to others, invented not during the sex itself, where they mostly don't speak, but adjacent to it, before, after, and between. This language intrudes into the outside world rarely, in a convenience store once where Alice forgets herself and sings

something to Paul across a chip display, and Paul sees the curious expressions of the other customers and the clerk, feels embarrassed and angry because it's not for their ears, for their amusement.

And there's the day Alice's parents drive down to Dallas to take them to dinner, and though Paul and Alice know the Parks are due any minute, they can't help themselves, Alice telling him to stop, then to keep going, then to stop again, then time slipping away fully until the knock at the door, Alice's little shriek and the struggle to dress, her father asking some kid out in the corridor if this is in fact Brooks Hall.

And soon after, in the seafood restaurant down the street, Paul has yet another awkward conversation with Mr. Park while Mrs. Park looks on, smiling and grunting, and he can't stop thinking queasily about how the man just shook his hand, not even washed since what it was doing minutes before. Alice sits at the table across from him, face still a little flushed, tearing off pieces of breadstick and feeding them into her mouth so Paul can't help but think about just minutes ago, those same lips ringed around him. He fights off those images, fights off the thought that even in this restaurant, even here in front of her parents, he could whisper a few words to her now, a coded communication. And they would have no idea, Mr. and Mrs. Park, who still believe that the two of them live apart, that he sleeps in the bed two floors up that his roommates have taken over for storage, piled with sweatshirts the last he looked.

And soon after on the street, the four of them walking to the museum district, Alice strays close enough that Paul feels the static from her wool cardigan prick the hairs on his arm. He can feel a separate current too, the secret one, knows he could whisper to her now, just a word or two, but enough to make her blush, to enflame her, to stoke the fires for later when her parents are back on the highway north. This secret knowledge, these intimations, these things only they understand. And Paul feels more drunk on that for a moment than from the sips of soju Mr. Park snuck him from his flask at the restaurant.

Richard and Susan's separation in the spring, Susan's petition for divorce, comes as a shock—as a detonation—in Alice's family. It unfortunately comes just before midterms too. For five nights in

a row, Alice listens to her mother on the phone, the woman's voice pitched so high and strange with anguish that Paul would be able to understand every word if he knew Korean. Alice nods and grunts, one eye on her organic chemistry notes, though she seems stalled on the same page. After the fifth night of this, she weeps with exhaustion in Paul's arms.

"I think we have to go up there this weekend," she mutters. "To Little Rock."

"Okay." Paul can't keep the dismay from his voice, has his own exams to study for and papers to finish. "If you think so."

"It's Steven's birthday. The first since . . . I think we need to be there."

"I thought your parents are still renovating."

"We can stay at Richard's."

Paul's stomach plunges further. "I thought he sold his house."

"He did. He doesn't move out until next month."

On Friday evening, Richard meets them in his driveway, looking harried, still in his work suit. With much of its furniture gone to Susan's new home in West Memphis, the big house looks even more barren, a card table with a laptop where the cherry dining room table used to be, the curio cabinet bare except for a lone, framed shot of Steven. When Paul throws an apple core in the gleaming chrome kitchen trashcan, he sees it's stuffed with KFC bags, personal pizza boxes, ramen noodle wrappers.

There's a tall two-layer air mattress instead of a bed in their guestroom. Richard doesn't make a big deal about them staying together like he did during past visits, where he pointedly ushered Paul to his separate room down the hall. Either he's ceased caring, or maybe it was always Susan's thing.

That first night Alice stays up late talking with Richard down in the den while Paul works on his *Sir Gawain* paper, propped up on slipless pillows from the closet. The air mattress sways under him, feels like it might be softening. He holds a palm over the valve and the seams but can't tell where it's leaking, hopes it won't lose all its air overnight.

Alice comes up late and settles in with him, the bed wobbling under their combined weight. From her congested voice he can tell she's been crying, and she cries more now. Paul strokes her hair but doesn't ask.

She recovers. "He was just telling me what happened. With Susan."

"Okay."

There's more to it, Paul can tell. Alice seems frightened, stricken, eyes wide. "If I tell you, you can't tell anyone else. Okay? He doesn't want anyone to know. Especially Mom and Dad."

"Of course." Over the weeks, Paul has come up with his own theories about what happened between Richard and Susan, probably an affair, some paralegal or assistant. Richard seems enough of a hypocrite for that. Or maybe physical abuse, secret slapping. Or perhaps it's nothing more than what they've already seen. Maybe Susan just got tired of all the cold criticisms and corrections, of always putting herself last. Alice has told him Susan's already back working part-time at a Memphis firm.

But what Alice tells Paul then he hadn't expected. How last month Richard was dropping Steven for a playdate at Kevin's, his kindergarten friend two blocks over. How Steven told Richard in the driveway that he didn't want to go inside, then tried to explain why, Richard sitting in the driveway listening to his crying son, not completely understanding or wanting to. And once Richard did understand, his life so overturned in that moment, so blasted, he didn't tell his wife until a week later, just said they wouldn't be taking Steven to Kevin's anymore. When he finally did tell her what the boy had said, Susan called the police. After that, the arrest, the charges. Kevin's eighteen-year-old stepbrother who lives in the guesthouse.

"Susan blames Richard for it. Says he didn't protect him." Alice sighs. "And she's angry that he didn't tell her right away. I mean, she's being unreasonable, right? How could he have known? And the only reason he didn't tell her is because he knew how devastated she'd be. He's devastated." Alice scoffs. "It's so fucking selfish. So she thinks in addition to everything else that's happened to the kid, that he should grow up without a father? That that's the best thing somehow?"

Paul nods, can hear Richard's voice in these last words, thinks again about the complexity of Alice's loyalties. One moment she despises her *oppa*. The next she's ready to defend him to the death. It scares him a little bit sometimes.

"She just told Richard she's taking Steven to Orlando on

Monday.” Alice rubs her eyes. “Suddenly she needs him home Sunday morning to get ready. So everything is happening earlier tomorrow, I guess, lunch instead of dinner.” She sighs. “You can’t say anything about what I just told you. Okay? You can’t act like you even know. You can’t act weird. It’s important you don’t.”

“I wouldn’t. I won’t.”

Alice reaches for him then, and though neither of them is exactly in the mood, they make love mostly because they’re there together in that wobbly bed in that barren room. Though it’s different from other times, very different from the night, just a few months ago, when Paul snuck into this same room late, their brief, wild fuck on the carpet to avoid the squeaking bed, Alice’s mouth pressed into his shoulder, his ears pricked for footsteps in the hall. He lies on the mattress now, listens to the hiss from the ventilation ducts, feels the soft sinking beneath them, places his palm near the valve to try and feel the leaking air, turns to Alice finally.

“So do they know how long it had been going on? The stuff with Steven? I mean, do they know if—” Paul begins, almost relieved to see that he will get no answer, that Alice’s body is already contorted in sleep, her teeth pressing her lower lip in the way she does when she’s having bad dreams.

Around ten the next morning, when Alice emerges from the kitchen, shirtsleeves rolled, streaks of flour up her wrists, and tells Paul that Richard needs him to help get the birthday cake, he hesitates.

“You just have to hold it,” Alice says. “He’s worried it’s going to get wrecked during the drive. I’d go, but I’ve got to help Ma here.”

Paul puts on his jacket and shoes, wishes he had a chance to ask Alice the few other things he wondered as he lay sleepless last night—if Richard knows, or will be able to guess, what Paul now knows. This seemed somewhat important last night, seems very important now. There has been no time to talk in the morning commotion, the Cadillac with Alice’s parents arriving first, Paul roped into the human chain carrying in jars of kimchi, boxes of noodles, double-bagged vegetables. Then Steven’s arrival soon after, Susan dropping him off, staying out in her Volvo by the curb, Richard going out alone, a terse conversation before he shut Susan’s door and she drove off.

Paul goes now to meet Richard in the garage by his gleaming BMW, still immaculate though its inside smells faintly like old French fries. Richard mercifully turns on the NPR station, some panel discussion about the Dixie Chicks versus President Bush. They pretend to listen throughout the drive. Paul should make some attempt at conversation, he thinks several times, though every topic feels fraught. And, honestly, they have little to talk about. He remembers one of their early conversations when he told Richard he wanted to be a medievalist, how the man stared at him as if Paul had announced he planned to go live in a tree.

He does know that Richard went to Arkansas, that he watches football on weekends. "So what do you think the Hogs' chances are next year?" Paul asks.

"The what?" Richard looks distracted, annoyed. Paul already regrets his question.

"The Razorbacks? Do you think they can get it together again? That they should get rid of Coach Nutt?"

The man looks over a moment, winces as if it's an effort just to turn his head. "They probably have the same chances with or without him. I mean, the probabilities will be the same."

Paul nods, balances whatever new sympathies he's been feeling with the fact that Richard is, as usual, a dick.

The cake isn't ready at the shop. Or at least that's what Paul infers, watching from the parked car the silent movie of Richard waiting in line, speaking curtly to the counter girl, then listening, stiffening, speaking again, stabbing with his hands. Now Richard's on his phone, then writing something down, more words and gestures. The counter girl looks scared now, the customers behind Richard glancing at one another until one of them, an older woman in a tam o' shanter, taps Richard's shoulder and says something. Richard responds without looking back, and the woman recoils then shakes her head at the others in line.

Richard is out now and back in the car, starting it, driving to the SuperTarget across the highway. Paul thinks of accompanying him in, but from the way the man strides out from the car, he knows he should stay. Richard is back a surprisingly short time later, holding a large box and small bag. The box holds a square cake with icing the color of pool algae. The bag contains a plastic lighter and a package of candles. Richard hands the cake to Paul, who holds it in his lap in the trustworthy way he's rehearsed.

“Nice.” Paul says. “I didn’t know Target made cakes.”

On the way back, Paul wishes the man wouldn’t drive quite so quickly, wouldn’t jolt over every pothole. He holds the cake loosely, absorbing the shock. Richard turns on the radio again, volume up. Paul is almost certain by now that the man either knows or suspects what he knows. It’s nearly a relief.

“Hey, Richard. You know, I’m sorry about. . . .” He guesses it’s better not to get specific. “I’m sorry.”

Richard turns, his face working, a break in the impassivity, though he doesn’t look touched or gladdened, looks more as if he’s just been lashed, administered a shock. “Thanks,” he mutters, and clears his throat.

Later, Richard watches his son eat his slice of green cake, everyone else watching too, chuckling as the boy gives up on the utensils and eats with his hands, licks his fingers. Everyone enjoys the spectacle, enjoys the cake, until the old man, Alice’s father, complains the icing isn’t sweet enough, his wife hissing at him in Korean then, an immediate rebuke. Mr. Park makes a point of praising the cake after that, but it’s too late. A few minutes later, when Steven upsets a glass tumbler, breaking it, Alice’s mother leads the attack. The charge is negligence again, the fact that the old man was too busy stuffing his face to watch the boy beside him. Mr. Park mutters fiercely, head down, Alice joining in, tearfully defending her father, and Paul is relieved once more that he can’t understand much of it, that one of the reasons they’re speaking Korean is to leave him out of it. The combat continues, the two women’s voices rising, Alice’s father storming from the room. Only Richard says nothing, just sweeps up the glass shards with a dustpan then a wet napkin, something Susan would have done in the past while he supervised, pointed out all the spots she’d missed.

The summer after Steven’s freshman year at SMU, he is staying at Alice and Paul’s house in Plano, waiting out the two weeks before his summer sublet comes available. It’s been an enjoyable visit. Steven’s a great kid, quiet and considerate, wryly funny. The three of them stay up late binge-watching Netflix shows and talking. Steven goes shopping at Willow Bend with Alice. He plays video games with Paul in the afternoons when Paul isn’t teaching, mostly fantasy RPGs, a compromise between the frenetic MOBAs the boy

likes and the slow-paced strategy games Paul plays. They have fun, though there's a reserve the boy won't leave behind, thanking Paul for each soda and each bowl of chips. It's like the polite and deferential emails he sends Paul from time to time. It's hard to see much of the wild little boy in this quiet and composed young man.

Tonight, Alice has been staying up late with Steven once again, talking down in the living room. She comes to bed now and lies down, arms at her sides, breathing shallowly. At first, Paul thinks it's just insomnia, that affliction worse lately, up all night sometimes. She's been falling asleep at work, she admitted last month, nodding off in an examination room between patients. She still won't prescribe herself anything stronger than herbal tea.

"Well, this is going to be a mess," Alice says in the dark then laughs, hard and humorless.

Paul is annoyed how she can always tell when he's feigning sleep. "What is?"

"He just came out to me."

Paul raises himself onto his elbows. "What?"

"Steven. I mean we mostly knew, right?" She sighs. "Just having it confirmed though. Wow. This is going to be a mess."

Paul sits up fully. "Has he told anyone else?"

"Just Susan. I mean, he didn't tell her. She found out snooping in his stuff." Alice chuckles grimly. "Big surprise."

"It's nice he trusts you enough to tell you."

In the dim Paul can see enough of Alice's expression to know it isn't happy. "He just wants me to run interference, I think." She rubs her eyes with her palms.

"That's good, though. Maybe he can figure out how he wants to go about it, and we can help—"

"No, it's a done deal. He's sending the emails out tonight. Maybe as we speak." Alice laughs mirthlessly. "*Ka-boom.*"

"To Richard?"

"And Susan's family. And Mom and Dad."

"Oh no," Paul says then, because it's all he can think to say.

"Oh yeah."

"Can you tell him to hold off? He doesn't have to do it all at once, right? Maybe just get them prepared, feel them out first. Or maybe one at a time."

"I don't know."

"Like once Richard's okay with it, it will be easier for your

parents, right? I mean, it still won't be easy."

"It's maybe better if it happens like this. All at once. Or not at all."

"I don't understand."

"Because you're not Korean," she says. She used not to need to say this back when Paul was younger and more deferential. She says it now mostly as a joke, though one he must accept, does accept now, even though he has his doubts, even though he has Korean friends whose families are not at all like Alice's. But he says no more, lies back in the silence, watching as the glow of her phone gently strobes her chin.

The next morning, when Paul comes downstairs, Alice is already showered and dressed, seated at the kitchen counter.

"Well, the stuff's officially hit the fan." She sighs. "Pack a bag. We're going up to Arkansas. Getting together at Richard's."

"Does it have to be right now?" Paul whispers. He can hear the boy zipping his case up in the guestroom. "Wouldn't it be better to wait until things cool down?"

"Pack a bag," Alice says quietly.

Paul hesitates. He could say the truth, that he has much to do this weekend, paper-grading, a grant proposal. But he says nothing. He knows she would drop everything for him if the situation were reversed; she has proven this in the past. He gets few chances to reciprocate. Alice doesn't require much from him, especially these days.

In the car on the way up they're stopped for gas near the state border, waiting for Alice to come back from the restroom. Paul has a moment alone with the boy, who is hunched over his open book, one of the texts for his summer course, in the backseat. He's reading and taking notes on his phone, bleached bangs falling in his eyes. Paul reaches back, an awkward angle from the driver's seat, places a hand on the boy's shoulder. When the kid flinches, he pulls back.

"Sorry," Paul says. "Hey, I'm sure Aunt Alice already told you this. But we're in your corner, buddy. We're with you. Right?"

The boy's smile comes, quick but strained, the effort clear. "Yeah. Thanks." And then the boy's back to his book, to his phone.

The scene in Richard's living room is worse than Paul has expected, and he's been expecting bad. Twenty minutes after their arrival, the lunch of dumplings and noodles still untouched in the dining room, the uneasy silence finally broken by Alice's mother as usual, her words angry, vituperative, delivered into space so it's not clear at first who the target is until Alice's father snarls back. It continues from there, the old man holding forth now, shrugging, gesturing to Steven. And now Richard's eyes are bright with anger, and he's starting in. Paul watches the boy, sitting on the couch in the middle of it all, stiffen and swallow. He tries to meet eyes, to offer some reassurance, but the kid stares at his shoes.

Paul feels guilty sometimes that, fourteen years in, he's learned so little Korean, just a few food terms, interjections, colorful insults. Though maybe he's still grateful in moments like this for the remove it provides, how it allows them to handle things the way they choose. He guesses, if he could understand the words, he might be as furious as Alice now looks.

And now she's entering the fray, crossing the room, standing by her father. Over the past few years, Alice has taken on a new boldness in these situations. She starts in now, voice measured, staring formidably at her mother and Richard, who both look dismayed for a moment before they rally. On the couch, the boy looks between the two factions, then nowhere, lips pursed, enduring. Paul tries again to meet his gaze.

They break off a half-hour later, some sort of ceasefire, though not much seems resolved, the old man muttering to himself, his wife weeping raggedly by the stove, reheating dumplings in a pan. Alice heads for the stairs, and Paul follows her up. But she isn't crying, just breathing heavily like a boxer between rounds, cheeks flushed.

Paul only asks once it's clear she's not going to bring it up on her own. "Sorry, what was all that?"

"The usual." She laughs. "The determination of fault."

"Christ," Paul says.

"Mom started it, as always. Trying to blame Dad. His weird family. His squirrely genes. You know, his brother in Busan, the *bachelor*."

"Jesus."

"Then Dad was saying it was probably what happened to Steven when he was little, that thing with the neighbor. And then

Richard got mad. And they were all off to the races then.”

Paul thinks of saying nothing. It might be wiser. “So it sort of looked like you were siding with Dad.”

Alice huffs. “I’ve told you. I’m not letting them do that anymore, put everything on him. Scapegoat him. It’s not fair.”

“But, I mean, is that what you actually think?” Paul says and laughs. “What your dad said about Steven?”

She’s watching him now, clear-eyed, expressionless. “I’ve wondered. The effect all that had on him back then. Yeah, I guess I’ve always wondered that.”

“I mean, you know that they’re probably closer to right, your mom and Richard? In their fucked-up way. From what the science —”

“Don’t talk to me about science, all right.” Her expression has tightened.

He shouldn’t press it, shouldn’t take it personally, her words, her anger carried over from the fight. Though maybe Paul’s angry too now. “I mean, the whole basis of this argument is fucked. It’s not like the kid’s damaged or defective or something. He’s just who he is.”

“That’s not what I’m saying either.” Alice’s voice has lost its heat, speaking calmly now, clinically, her physician’s voice, the one he never much likes, that he can imagine delivering good or awful news with the same cool equanimity. “I’m just saying something happened to him back then. And it probably has affected him in a variety of ways. Ways we can’t even know. And it could have been prevented, right? Or limited.”

“What are you saying?”

She licks her lips. “I’m saying that maybe people didn’t protect him who could have.”

“Jesus. You’ve said it yourself. How was Richard even supposed to know?”

“I’m not talking about Richard.”

Paul is too surprised to speak then, just watches her.

“I remember you telling me it was nothing, what you noticed. That we should ignore it.” Alice isn’t looking at him. He wishes she would, that she would sound angrier, not this recitation of facts, reading vitals from a chart. “I can’t believe I listened.”

“This is fucked,” Paul says. “That isn’t what I said. That isn’t the way it happened.”

But she's already rolled away from him, facing the wall, shoulders stiff, phone in her hand, its face close to hers. And he is thinking, of all things, of that note they found a few weeks ago.

While spring cleaning this year, in a book within a shoebox within a milk crate, a folded note discovered. Paul brought it upstairs, amused. He and Alice unfurled it, sat and deciphered it together, this scribbled page of lined notebook paper, tucked in someone's backpack, amended, tucked in someone else's binder. Passed back and forth during the Italian cinema elective class they took together. Filled until there was no space left on either side.

"My god. What filthy little perverts," Alice laughed and blushed as they read aloud some of what was written, mostly weird jokes about the professor but also sex, lots of it, acts written like threats, descriptions of what he would do to her and she to him when next alone. The language giving way at some point to illustrations, crude drawings like a child's or the scrawlings on a cave wall. Pictograms. Hieroglyphs. Some Paul recognized. Some was lost. And so he laughed at the parts they could still puzzle out, felt wistful as he stared, like some old archeologist, at the parts that could no longer be deciphered.

And Paul feels much the same way now as he lies on the hard guestroom bed in Little Rock, as he watches Alice, body rolled away from him, her phone lighting her cheek green, then blue.

The next morning, Monday, there's an early détente, polite words at breakfast, people retreating to their separate spaces, their separate activities. Paul and Steven play video games up in Steven's room. Alice and Sandra, Richard's girlfriend, clean fish and talk in low voices. There's a tension, though, a ratcheting. Paul can feel it in his teeth, in his fingernails. Maybe that's why he agrees so readily in late morning to drive Alice's father to his ophthalmologist, a follow-up to the old man's spring cataract surgeries.

To anyone who will listen, the old man has been complaining about how he's seen no change since his operations, the same murky blur. But in Dr. Fukuda's office, he grins, flirts with the receptionist, comes out empty-handed with no prescriptions or appointment cards, has probably told them everything's fine. Limping out to the car, the old man suggests to Paul, as offhand as possible, that maybe they should stop at Dairy Queen on their way

back. And though Paul knows this is illicit, has heard the worried discussions about the old man's blood sugar, he takes him there.

The old man eats his sundae slowly, savors it, ambling back to the car, stretching in the sun. He's lost much over the past year, Paul knows, lost his driver's license after a few too many bumped fenders, lost his nearly-new Cadillac too, sold because his wife said she was afraid to drive it. He's probably just enjoying his time away from the house. Paul certainly is.

"Steven's a good boy," the old man says during the drive back, then in almost the same breath: "Did you know about it?"

Paul shakes his head. "Not until a few days ago. I mean, we'd wondered."

"Well, it doesn't matter. Not really." Mr. Park sighs. "Mi-Young is worried about people talking, you know. Our friends at church. People back home." He gestures vaguely over his shoulder. "To me it doesn't matter."

Paul nods, smiles. "Right."

"Richard and Sandra. Maybe they can have another kid. She's still young." The old man's eyes rise, hopeful, almost shy. "Or maybe you and Alice. Maybe there might still be some—"

"No," Paul says quickly. "No, I don't think that's in the cards, Dad."

The old man clears his throat, nods, returns to his sundae.

By the time they arrive back at Richard's house, something has happened. Alice and her mother sit stiffly on the couch. Richard stalks around the kitchen island, phone at his ear, face grim.

"He left," Alice whispers as Paul sits.

"What?"

"Steven. Ma and Richard got into it. Right after you left." She sighs. "Then, while Richard was in the shower, and I was at H Mart, Steven just took off, packed his stuff and took an Uber. He wouldn't tell Ma where he was going."

Paul nods, thinks of his last moments with the boy this morning after breakfast, playing one of the kid's MOBAs on the laptop in the upstairs guestroom, the boy offering to let Paul play several times, though he begged off because it was more fun to watch Steven play, to kibbitz and ask stupid questions. Acting normal because he suspected maybe that's what the kid wanted. He probably should have just kept watching the game and stayed quiet, but he didn't.

“So, is there anybody in particular?” he asked between rounds as the numbers counted down onscreen.

The boy turned from the game, face contracting with something like fright. “Anybody what?”

“You know. Any particular person?”

The boy’s face worked a moment, a twist of mortification before it went impassive again. “No.”

“It’s going to be fine, you know.” Paul said then, dropping his voice further. “I know it doesn’t seem like it. But it’s all going to be okay. Here. And where you are. You don’t need to worry. And you know you don’t need to listen to them, right? To their bullshit.”

The boy nodded quickly, a fast smile, though he flinched again after like he did in the car the day before, like he’d been prodded.

And then Alice shouting up about Mr. Park’s appointment, Paul heading downstairs, proud of himself for the first few minutes, then not proud. Because he has no idea. Because he has just been parroting what people say after all, platitudes he’s heard celebrities recite on Facebook and TV. He has no clue what the boy’s life is like, what sorts of miseries or joys, if he’s broken hearts or had his broken. If he’s living secretly with somebody the way Paul did at Alice’s years back, hiding his clothes under a dorm bed, staying silent while the other is on the phone with parents.

Later, Paul wanted to go back up, to apologize, to say he shouldn’t have talked about things, promised things he has no idea about. He was planning to do that after they got back from the ophthalmologist. He might not get the chance now.

“He’s okay,” Richard announces around 8:00 p.m., sighing and closing his phone. “He’s back in Dallas. Staying at a friend’s.” Richard lays his phone on the counter, plugs it into the charger there. He looks wrung out, his hair graying along the temples, his skin taut over his cheekbones, like his father’s. He looks a lot like his father these days. Mr. Park translates for his wife, who exclaims in relief, who says something else, something angry. And now Mr. Park is mad too, is waving his hands, is looking to Alice for help. The battle lines are redrawing. Richard stalks away up the stairs, face lined, exhausted.

“We should get going,” Alice mutters to Paul.

And though it’s late, though leaving now will mean arriving in Plano long after midnight, Paul quickly agrees.

“I don’t blame him for leaving,” Alice says near Texarkana, taking her driving turn, gliding past a pod of transports. “I couldn’t wait to get out of there, either. I don’t like what happens to me when I’m around them. I think things I don’t want to think. Say things I don’t mean.”

Paul nods, guesses this might be an apology for her words last night, or the closest thing to it he’s likely to hear.

She laughs. “I never thought I’d feel this way, but half the time these days I actually agree with Mom and Richard. That it’s better the wrong person’s to blame than nobody. Otherwise it’s all just meaningless, right?”

Paul nods.

“I know it’s just their way of dealing with hurt and fear. Protecting against it. Though I guess it’s better to live in a world where no one’s to blame. It’s healthier, right? Like no-fault car insurance.” She laughs, motions with her head at the Civic that’s passing them, its right hindquarter crumpled, its bumper latched on with cord.

“Right.” Paul nods. “You should tell them all that.”

“Or you could,” she says quietly.

Paul watches her. “What?”

“You’re a part of this family,” Alice says. “You’re a part of *this*. So you can say what you think. I wish sometimes you’d say the things you say to me to them.”

“I just don’t feel like it’s my business sometimes. It just doesn’t feel—”

“How is it not your business?” she says and sighs. “Why is it not?”

The email from Steven arrives a few weeks later, a day after the group email the boy sends everyone with the photos from his New Orleans trip, all shots of the boy standing alone, though the shadow holding the phone on the pavement in Jackson Square and in the grass by the St. Charles streetcar is the same, a long-legged

figure in shorts.

This second email is addressed only to Paul. Paul mutes the television, reads it on the living room couch, feels touched, maybe relieved. He thinks of bringing it upstairs to show Alice, why, he isn't sure, even calls to her up the stairs, though she doesn't answer. She was in bed, the last he saw, absorbed in some article. She won't appreciate the interruption. And the message is unremarkable really, is much like the boy's emails from before, just a few sentences: a new game the boy thinks Paul might like; a request for ideas for a presentation for his short story elective; some vague Thanksgiving plans. The email is polite, cheerful, brief. Paul has written letters like this himself to uncles he rarely saw. It will likely be this way from here on. They've never been entirely close, Paul reminds himself. Never as close as years back, playing with Legos in Richard's old house.

As he often does, Paul composes a long message back, then trims it, one paragraph gone then another, until his is just a few cheerful sentences too.

Yes, he'll check out that game. Yes, Chekhov's a safe bet for the story presentation. Yes, they will see each other at Thanksgiving.

He closes his laptop then, heads upstairs.

Alice is already asleep, Paul sees with surprise and a little disappointment as he enters the bedroom. Maybe she has given in at last, taken a couple of temazepam from the bottle that's been sitting on her nightstand table for weeks. She snores softly, teeth pressed into her lip, as he settles in beside her. And now Paul is the one unable to sleep, as if they've traded states somehow. She dozes blithely. He's the one lying burdened, lost in thought. Paul stares down at his wife's face in the dim light, surprised, as he often is these days, that things have come to be as they are, surprised too by the impulse that comes on him now—a cruel one, a perverse one—to poke her shoulder with his finger. Though he decides, in the end, that it's better to let her enjoy her hard-earned sleep, better to wait for another time, another occasion, because they will have plenty of time and occasions to talk about Steven's email or whatever. Will they not? And so he resists the urge to reach out in the dark, to prod her sleeping shoulder, a jabbing that would wake her, because what other reason would someone do that to a sleeping person, poke them with a finger, except to wake them up?