GONE GIRL

Also by Gillian Flynn

SHARP OBJECTS
DARK PLACES

GILLIAN FLYNN

GONE GIRL

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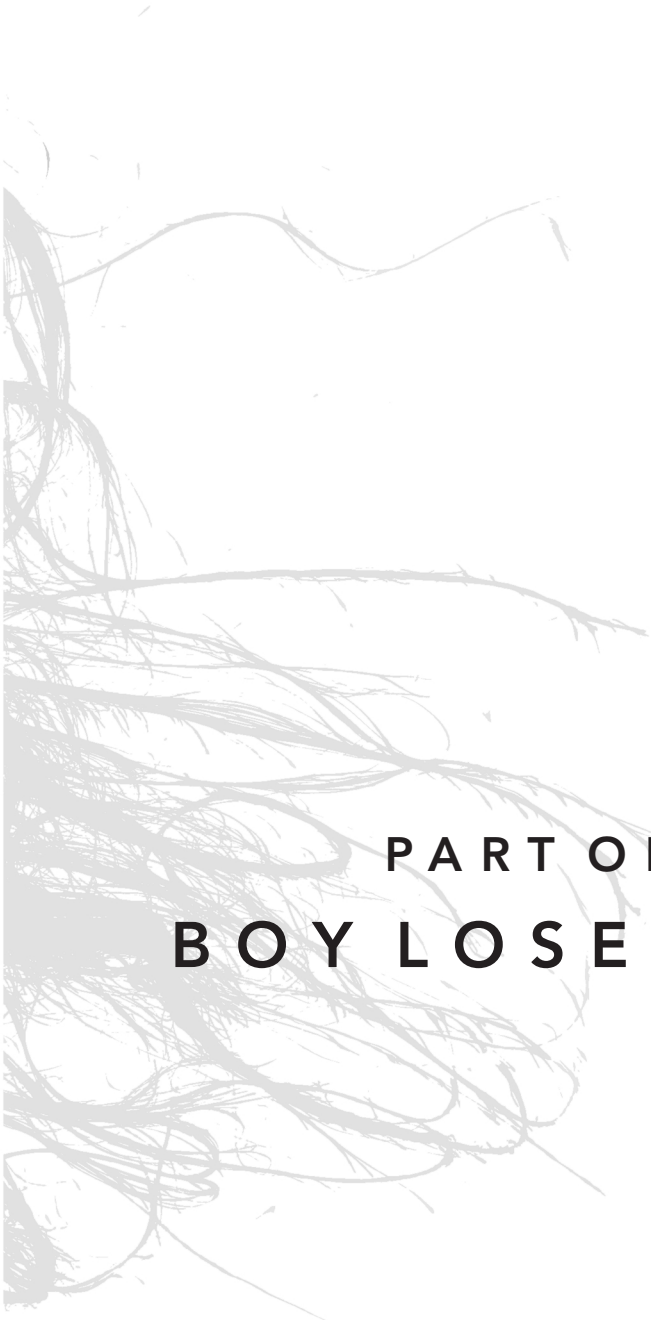
Love is the world's infinite mutability: Lies, hatred, murder even, are all knit up in it. It is the inevitable blossoming of its opposites, a magnificent rose smelling faintly of blood.

Pierre Corneille, THE ILLUSION



PART ONE
BOY LOSES GIRL

NICK DUNNE

THE DAY OF

When I think of my wife, I always think of her head. The shape of it, to begin with. The very first time I saw her, it was the back of the head I saw, and there was something lovely about it, the angles of it. Like a shiny, hard corn kernel or a riverbed fossil. She had what the Victorians would call *a finely shaped head*. You could imagine the skull quite easily.

I'd know her head anywhere.

And what's inside it. I think of that, too: her mind. Her brain, all those coils, and her thoughts shuttling through those coils like fast, frantic centipedes. Like a child, I picture opening her skull, unspooling her brain and sifting through it, trying to catch and pin down her thoughts. *What are you thinking, Amy?* The question I've asked most often during our marriage, if not out loud, if not to the person who could answer. I suppose these questions stormcloud over every marriage: *What are you thinking? How are you feeling? Who are you? What have we done to each other? What will we do?*

My eyes flipped open at exactly six a.m. This was no avian fluttering of the lashes, no gentle blink toward consciousness. The awakening was mechanical. A spooky ventriloquist-dummy click of the lids: The world is black and then, *showtime!* 6-0-0 the clock said – in my face, first thing I saw. 6-0-0. It felt different. I rarely woke at such a rounded time. I was a man of jagged risings: 8:43, 11:51, 9:26. My life was alarmless.

At that exact moment, 6-0-0, the sun climbed over the skyline of oaks, revealing its full summer angry-god self. Its reflection flared across the river toward our house, a long, blaring finger aimed at me through our frail bedroom curtains. Accusing: *You have been seen. You will be seen.*

I wallowed in bed, which was our New York bed in our new house, which we still called *the new house*, even though we'd

been back here for two years. It's a rented house right along the Mississippi River, a house that screams Suburban Nouveau Riche, the kind of place I aspired to as a kid from my split-level, shag-carpet side of town. The kind of house that is immediately familiar: a generically grand, unchallenging, new, new, new house that my wife would – and did – detest.

'Should I remove my soul before I come inside?' Her first line upon arrival. It had been a compromise: Amy demanded we rent, not buy, in my little Missouri hometown, in her firm hope that we wouldn't be stuck here long. But the only houses for rent were clustered in this failed development: a miniature ghost town of bank-owned, recession-busted, price-reduced mansions, a neighborhood that closed before it ever opened. It was a compromise, but Amy didn't see it that way, not in the least. To Amy, it was a punishing whim on my part, a nasty, selfish twist of the knife. I would drag her, caveman-style, to a town she had aggressively avoided, and make her live in the kind of house she used to mock. I suppose it's not a compromise if only one of you considers it such, but that was what our compromises tended to look like. One of us was always angry. Amy, usually.

Do not blame me for this particular grievance, Amy. The Missouri Grievance. Blame the economy, blame bad luck, blame my parents, blame your parents, blame the Internet, blame people who use the Internet. I used to be a writer. I was a writer who wrote about TV and movies and books. Back when people read things on paper, back when anyone cared about what I thought. I'd arrived in New York in the late '90s, the last gasp of the glory days, although no one knew it then. New York was packed with writers, real writers, because there were magazines, real magazines, loads of them. This was back when the Internet was still some exotic pet kept in the corner of the publishing world – throw some kibble at it, watch it dance on its little leash, oh quite cute, it definitely won't kill us in the night. Think about it: a time when newly graduated college kids could come to New York and *get paid to write*. We had no clue that we were embarking on careers that would vanish within a decade.

I had a job for eleven years and then I didn't, it was that fast. All around the country, magazines began shuttering, succumbing to a sudden infection brought on by the busted economy. Writers (my kind of writers: aspiring novelists, ruminative thinkers, people whose brains don't work quick enough to blog or link or tweet, basically old, stubborn blowhards) were through. We were like women's hat makers or buggy-whip manufacturers: Our time was

done. Three weeks after I got cut loose, Amy lost her job, such as it was. (Now I can feel Amy looking over my shoulder, smirking at the time I've spent discussing my career, my misfortune, and dismissing her experience in one sentence. That, she would tell you, is typical. *Just like Nick*, she would say. It was a refrain of hers: *Just like Nick to* . . . Whatever followed, whatever was *just like me*, was bad.) Two jobless grown-ups, we spent weeks wandering around our Brooklyn Brownstone in socks and pajamas, ignoring the future, strewing unopened mail across tables and sofas, eating ice cream at ten a.m. and taking thick afternoon naps.

Then one day the phone rang. My twin sister was on the other end. Margo had moved back home after her own layoff a year before – the girl is one step ahead of me in everything, even shitty luck. Margo, calling from good ole North Carthage, Missouri, from the house where we grew up, and as I listened to her voice, I saw her at age ten, with a dark cap of hair and overall shorts, sitting on our grandparents' back dock, her body slouched over like an old pillow, her skinny legs dangling in the water, watching the river flow over fish-white feet, so intently, utterly self-possessed even as a child.

Go's voice was warm and crinkly even as she gave this cold news: Our indomitable mother was dying. Our dad was nearly gone – his (nasty) mind, his (miserable) heart, both murky as he meandered toward the great gray beyond. But it looked like our mother would beat him there. About six months, maybe a year, she had. I could tell that Go had gone to meet with the doctor by herself, taken her studious notes in her slovenly handwriting, and she was teary as she tried to decipher what she'd written. Dates and doses.

'Well, fuck, I have no idea what this says, is it a nine? Does that even make sense?' she said, and I interrupted. Here was a task, a purpose, held out on my sister's palm like a plum. I almost cried with relief.

'I'll come back, Go. We'll move back home. You shouldn't have to do this all by yourself.'

She didn't believe me. I could hear her breathing on the other end.

'I'm serious, Go. Why not? There's nothing here.'

A long exhale. 'What about Amy?'

That is what I didn't take long enough to consider. I simply assumed I would bundle up my New York wife with her New York interests, her New York pride, and remove her from her New York parents – leave the frantic, thrilling futureland of Manhattan

behind – and transplant her to a little town on the river in Missouri, and all would be fine.

I did not yet understand how foolish, how optimistic, how, yes, *just like Nick* I was for thinking this. The misery it would lead to.

'Amy will be fine. Amy . . .' Here was where I should have said, 'Amy *loves* Mom.' But I couldn't tell Go that Amy loved our mother, because after all that time, Amy still barely knew our mother. Their few meetings had left them both baffled. Amy would dissect the conversations for days after – 'And what did she mean by . . . ,' as if my mother were some ancient peasant tribeswoman arriving from the tundra with an armful of raw yak meat and some buttons for bartering, trying to get something from Amy that wasn't on offer.

Amy didn't care to know my family, didn't want to know my birthplace, and yet for some reason, I thought moving home would be a good idea.

My morning breath warmed the pillow, and I changed the subject in my mind. Today was not a day for second-guessing or regret, it was a day for doing. Downstairs, I could hear the return of a long-lost sound: Amy making breakfast. Banging wooden cupboards (rump-thump!), rattling containers of tin and glass (ding-ring!), shuffling and sorting a collection of metal pots and iron pans (ruzz-shuzz!). A culinary orchestra tuning up, clattering vigorously toward the finale, a cake pan drumrolling along the floor, hitting the wall with a cymballic crash. Something impressive was being created, probably a crepe, because crepes are special, and today Amy would want to cook something special.

It was our five-year anniversary.

I walked barefoot to the edge of the steps and stood listening, working my toes into the plush wall-to-wall carpet Amy detested on principle, as I tried to decide whether I was ready to join my wife. Amy was in the kitchen, oblivious to my hesitation. She was humming something melancholy and familiar. I strained to make it out – a folk song? a lullabye? – and then realised it was the theme to *M.A.S.H*. Suicide is painless. I went downstairs.

I hovered in the doorway, watching my wife. Her yellow-butter hair was pulled up, the hank of ponytail swinging cheerful as a jumprope, and she was sucking distractedly on a burnt fingertip, humming around it. She hummed to herself because she was an unrivaled botcher of lyrics. When we were first dating, a Genesis song came on the radio: 'She seems to have an invisible touch, yeah.' And Amy crooned instead, 'She takes my hat and puts it on the top

shelf.' When I asked her why she'd ever think her lyrics were remotely, possibly, vaguely right, she told me she always thought the woman in the song truly loved the man because she put his hat on the *top* shelf. I knew I liked her then, really liked her, this girl with an explanation for everything.

There's something disturbing about recalling a warm memory and feeling utterly cold.

Amy peered at the crepe sizzling in the pan and licked something off her wrist. She looked triumphant, wifely. If I took her in my arms, she would smell like berries and powdered sugar.

When she spied me lurking there in grubby boxers, my hair in full Heat Miser spike, she leaned against the kitchen counter and said, 'Well, hello, handsome.'

Bile and dread inched up my throat. I thought to myself: *Okay, go.*

I was very late getting to work. My sister and I had done a foolish thing when we both moved back home. We had done what we always talked about doing. We opened a bar. We borrowed money from Amy to do this, eighty thousand dollars, which was once nothing to Amy but by then was almost everything. I swore I would pay her back, with interest. I would not be a man who borrowed from his wife – I could feel my dad twisting his lips at the very idea. *Well, there are all kinds of men*, his most damning phrase, the second half left unsaid, *and you are the wrong kind.*

But truly, it was a practical decision, a smart business move. Amy and I both needed new careers; this would be mine. She would pick one someday, or not, but in the meantime, here was an income, made possible by the last of Amy's trust fund. Like the McMansion I rented, the bar featured symbolically in my childhood memories – a place where only grown-ups go, and do whatever grown-ups do. Maybe that's why I was so insistent on buying it after being stripped of my livelihood. It's a reminder that I am, after all, an adult, a grown man, a useful human being, even though I lost the career that made me all these things. I won't make that mistake again: The once plentiful herds of magazine writers would continue to be culled – by the Internet, by the recession, by the American public, who would rather watch TV or play video games or electronically inform friends that, like, *rain sucks!* But there's no app for a bourbon buzz on a warm day in a cool, dark bar. The world will always want a drink.

Our bar is a corner bar with a haphazard, patchwork aesthetic.

Its best feature is a massive Victorian back bar, dragon heads and angel faces emerging from the oak – an extravagant work of wood in these shitty plastic days. The remainder of the bar is, in fact, shitty, a showcase of the shabbiest design offerings of every decade: an Eisenhower-era linoleum floor, the edges turned up like burnt toast; dubious wood-paneled walls straight from a '70s home-porn video; halogen floor lamps, an accidental tribute to my 1990s dorm room. The ultimate effect is strangely homey – it looks less like a bar than someone's benignly neglected fixer-upper. And jovial: We share a parking lot with the local bowling alley, and when our door swings wide, the clatter of strikes applauds the customer's entrance.

We named the bar The Bar. 'People will think we're ironic instead of creatively bankrupt,' my sister reasoned.

Yes, we thought we were being clever New Yorkers – that the name was a joke no one else would really get, not get like we did. Not *meta*-get. We pictured the locals scrunching their noses: Why'd you name it *The Bar*? But our first customer, a gray-haired woman in bifocals and a pink jogging suit, said, 'I like the name. Like in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and Audrey Hepburn's cat was named Cat.'

We felt much less superior after that, which was a good thing.

I pulled in to the parking lot. I waited until a strike erupted from the bowling alley – *thank you, thank you, friends* – then stepped out of the car. I admired the surroundings, still not bored with the broken-in view: the squatty blond-brick post office across the street (now closed on Saturdays), the unassuming beige office building just down the way (now closed, period). The town wasn't prosperous by a long shot. Hell, it wasn't even original, being one of two Carthage, Missouris – ours is technically *North* Carthage, which makes it sound like a twin city, although it's hundreds of miles from the other and the lesser of the two: a quaint little 1950s town that bloated itself into a basic midsize suburb and dubbed it progress. Still, it was where my mom grew up and where she raised me and Go, so it had some history. Mine, at least.

As I walked toward the bar across the concrete-and-weed parking lot, I looked straight down the road and saw the river. That's what I've always loved about our town: We aren't built on some safe bluff overlooking the Mississippi – we are *on* the Mississippi. I could walk down the road and step right into the sucker, an easy three-foot drop, and be on my way to Tennessee. Every building downtown bears hand-drawn lines from where the river hit during the Flood of '61,'75, '84, '93, '07, '08, '11. And so on.

The river wasn't swollen now, but it was running urgently, in

strong ropy currents. Moving apace with the river was a long single-file line of men, eyes aimed at their feet, shoulders tense, walking steadfastly nowhere. As I watched them, one suddenly looked up at me, his face in shadow, an oval blackness. I turned away.

I felt an immediate, intense need to get inside. By the time I'd gone twenty feet, my neck bubbled with sweat. The sun was still an angry eye in the sky. *You have been seen.*

My gut twisted, and I moved quicker. I needed a drink.

AMY ELLIOTT

JANUARY 5, 2005

– Diary entry –

Tra and la! I am smiling a big adopted-orphan smile as I write this. I am embarrassed at how happy I am, like some Technicolor comic of a teenage girl talking on the phone with my hair in a ponytail, the bubble above my head saying: *I met a* boy!

But I did. This is a technical, empirical truth. I met a boy, a great, gorgeous dude, a funny, cool-ass guy. Let me set the scene, because it deserves setting for posterity (no, please, I'm not that far gone, posterity! feh). But still. It's not New Year's, but still very much the new year. It's winter: early dark, freezing cold.

Carmen, a newish friend – semi-friend, barely friend, the kind of friend you can't cancel on – has talked me into going out to Brooklyn, to one of her writers' parties. Now, I like a writer party, I like writers, I am the child of writers, I am a writer. I still love scribbling that word – WRITER – any time a form, questionnaire, document asks for my occupation. Fine, I write personality quizzes, I don't write about the Great Issues of the Day, but I think it's fair to say I am a writer. I'm using this journal to get better: to hone my skills, to collect details and observations. To show don't tell and all that other writery crap. (*Adopted-orphan smile*, I mean, that's not bad, come on.) But really, I do think my quizzes alone qualify me on at least an honorary basis. Right?

At a party you find yourself surrounded by genuine talented writers, employed at high-profile, respected newspapers and magazines.

You merely write quizzes for women's rags. When someone asks what you do for a living, you:

a) Get embarrassed and say, 'I'm just a quiz writer, it's silly stuff!'
b) Go on the offense: 'I'm a writer now, but I'm considering something more challenging and worthwhile – why, what do you do?'

c) Take pride in your accomplishments: 'I write personality quizzes using the knowledge gleaned from my master's degree in psychology – oh, and fun fact: I am the inspiration for a beloved children's-book series, I'm sure you know it, *Amazing Amy?* Yeah, so suck it, snobdouche!

Answer: C, totally C

Anyway, the party is being thrown by one of Carmen's good friends who writes about movies for a movie magazine, and is very funny, according to Carmen. I worry for a second that she wants to set us up: I am not interested in being set up. I need to be ambushed, caught unawares, like some sort of feral love-jackal. I'm too self-conscious otherwise. I feel myself trying to be charming, and then I realise I'm obviously trying to be charming, and then I try to be even more charming to make up for the fake charm, and then I've basically turned into Liza Minnelli: I'm dancing in tights and sequins, begging you to love me. There's a cane and tapdancing and lots of teeth.

But no, I realise, as Carmen gushes on about her friend: *She* likes him. Good.

We climb three flights of warped stairs and walk into a whoosh of body heat and writerness: many black-framed glasses and mops of hair; faux western shirts and heathery turtlenecks; black wool pea-coats flopped all across the couch, puddling to the floor; a German poster for The Getaway (*Ihre Chance war gleich Null!*) covering one paint-cracked wall. Franz Ferdinand on the stereo: 'Take Me Out.'

A clump of guys hovers near a card table where all the alcohol is set up, tipping more booze into their cups after every few sips, all too aware of how little is left to go around. I nudge in, aiming my plastic cup in the center like a busker, get a clatter of ice cubes and a splash of vodka from a sweet-faced guy wearing a Space Invaders T-shirt.

A lethal-looking bottle of green-apple liqueur, the host's ironic purchase, will soon be our fate unless someone makes a booze run, and that seems unlikely, as everyone clearly believes they made the run last time. It is a January party, definitely, everyone still glutted and sugar-pissed from the holidays, lazy and irritated simultaneously. A party where people drink too much and pick cleverly worded fights, blowing cigarette smoke out an open window even after the host asks them to go outside. We've already talked to one

another at a thousand holiday parties, we have nothing left to say, we are collectively bored, but we don't want to go back into the January cold; our bones still ache from the subway steps.

I have lost Carmen to her host-beau – they are having an intense discussion in a corner of the kitchen, the two of them hunching their shoulders, their faces toward each other, the shape of a heart. Good. I think about eating to give myself something to do besides standing in the center of the room, smiling like the new kid in the lunchroom. But almost everything is gone. Some potato-chip shards sit in the bottom of a giant Tupperware bowl. A supermarket deli tray full of hoary carrots and gnarled celery and a semeny dip sits untouched on a coffee table, cigarettes littered throughout like bonus vegetable sticks. I am doing my thing, my impulse thing: What if I leap from the theater balcony right now? What if I tongue the homeless man across from me on the subway? What if I sit down on the floor of this party by myself and eat everything on that deli tray, including the cigarettes?

'Please don't eat anything in that area,' he says. It is *him* (bum bum BUMMM!), but I don't yet know it's *him* (bum-bum-bummm). I know it's a guy who will talk to me, he wears his cockiness like an ironic T-shirt, but it fits him better. He is the kind of guy who carries himself like he gets laid a lot, a guy who likes women, a guy who would actually fuck me properly. I would like to be fucked properly! My dating life seems to rotate around three types of men: preppy Ivy Leaguers who believe they're characters in a Fitzgerald novel; slick Wall Streeters with money signs in their eyes, their ears, their mouths; and sensitive smart-boys who are so self-aware that everything feels like a joke. The Fitzgerald fellows tend to be ineffectively porny in bed, a lot of noise and acrobatics to very little end. The finance guys turn rageful and flaccid. The smart-boys fuck like they're composing a piece of math rock: This hand strums around here, and then this finger offers a nice bass rhythm . . . I sound quite slutty, don't I? Pause while I count how many . . . eleven. Not bad. I've always thought twelve was a solid, reasonable number to end at.

'Seriously,' Number 12 continues. (Ha!) 'Back away from the tray. James has up to three other food items in his refrigerator. I could make you an olive with mustard. Just one olive, though.'

Just one olive, though. It is a line that is only a little funny, but it already has the feel of an inside joke, one that will get funnier with nostalgic repetition. I think: *A year from now, we will be walking along the Brooklyn Bridge at sunset and one of us will whisper,*

'Just one olive, though,' and we'll start to laugh. (Then I catch myself. Awful. If he knew I was doing *a year from now* already, he'd *run* and I'd be obliged to cheer him on.)

Mainly, I will admit, I smile because he's gorgeous. Distractingly gorgeous, the kind of looks that make your eyes pinwheel, that make you want to just address the elephant – 'You know you're gorgeous, right?' – and move on with the conversation. I bet dudes hate him: He looks like the rich-boy villain in an '80s teen movie – the one who bullies the sensitive misfit, the one who will end up with a pie in the puss, the whipped cream wilting his upturned collar as everyone in the cafeteria cheers.

He doesn't act that way, though. His name is Nick. I love it. It makes him seem nice, and regular, which he is. When he tells me his name, I say, 'Now, that's a real name.' He brightens and reels off some line: 'Nick's the kind of guy you can drink a beer with, the kind of guy who doesn't mind if you puke in his car. Nick!'

He makes a series of awful puns. I catch three fourths of his movie references. Two thirds, maybe. (Note to self: Rent *The Sure Thing*.) He refills my drink without me having to ask, somehow ferreting out one last cup of the good stuff. He has claimed me, placed a flag in me: *I was here first, she's mine, mine*. It feels nice, after my recent series of nervous, respectful post-feminist men, to be a territory. He has a great smile, a cat's smile. He should cough out yellow Tweety Bird feathers, the way he smiles at me. He doesn't ask what I do for a living, which is fine, which is a change. (I'm a writer, did I mention?) He talks to me in his river-wavy Missouri accent; he was born and raised outside of Hannibal, the boyhood home of Mark Twain, the inspiration for *Tom Sawyer*. He tells me he worked on a steamboat when he was a teenager, dinner and jazz for the tourists. And when I laugh (bratty, bratty New York girl who has never ventured to those big unwieldy middle states, those States Where Many Other People Live), he informs me that *Missoura* is a magical place, the most beautiful in the world, no state more glorious. His eyes are mischievous, his lashes are long. I can see what he looked like as a boy.

We share a taxi home, the streetlights making dizzy shadows and the car speeding as if we're being chased. It is one a.m. when we hit one of New York's unexplained deadlocks twelve blocks from my apartment, so we slide out of the taxi into the cold, into the great What Next?, and Nick starts walking me home, his hand on the small of my back, our faces stunned by the chill. As we turn the corner, the local bakery is getting its powdered sugar delivered,

funneled into the cellar by the barrelful as if it were cement, and we can see nothing but the shadows of the deliverymen in the white, sweet cloud. The street is billowing, and Nick pulls me close and smiles that smile again, and he takes a single lock of my hair between two fingers and runs them all the way to the end, tugging twice, like he's ringing a bell. His eyelashes are trimmed with powder; and before he leans in, he brushes the sugar from my lips so he can taste me.

NICK DUNNE

THE DAY OF

I swung wide the door of my bar, slipped into the darkness, and took my first real deep breath of the day, took in the smell of cigarettes and beer, the spice of a dribbled bourbon, the tang of old popcorn. There was only one customer in the bar, sitting by herself at the far, far end: an older woman named Sue who had come in every Thursday with her husband until he died three months back. Now she came alone every Thursday, never much for conversation, just sitting with a beer and a crossword, preserving a ritual.

My sister was at work behind the bar, her hair pulled back in nerdy-girl barrettes, her arms pink as she dipped the beer glasses in and out of hot suds. Go is slender and strange-faced, which is not to say unattractive. Her features just take a moment to make sense: the broad jaw; the pinched, pretty nose; the dark globe eyes. If this were a period movie, a man would tilt back his fedora, whistle at the sight of her, and say, 'Now, there's a helluva *broad*!' The face of a '30s screwball-movie queen doesn't always translate in our pixie-princess times, but I know from our years together that men like my sister, a lot, which puts me in that strange brotherly realm of being both proud and wary.

'Do they still make pimento loaf?' she said by way of greeting, not looking up, just knowing it was me, and I felt the relief I usually felt when I saw her: Things might not be great, but things would be okay.

My twin, Go. I've said this phrase so many times, it has become a reassuring mantra instead of actual words: Mytwingo. We were born in the '70s, back when twins were rare, a bit magical: cousins of the unicorn, siblings of the elves. We even have a dash of twin telepathy. Go is truly the one person in the entire world I am totally myself with. I don't feel the need to explain my actions to her. I don't clarify, I don't doubt, I don't worry. I don't tell her everything, not anymore, but I tell her more than anyone else, by far. I tell her as

much as I can. We spent nine months back to back, covering each other. It became a lifelong habit. It never mattered to me that she was a girl, strange for a deeply self-conscious kid. What can I say? She was always just cool.

'Pimento loaf, that's like lunch meat, right? I think they do.'

'We should get some,' she said. She arched an eyebrow at me. 'I'm intrigued.'

Without asking, she poured me a draft of PBR into a mug of questionable cleanliness. When she caught me staring at the smudged rim, she brought the glass up to her mouth and licked the smudge away, leaving a smear of saliva. She set the mug squarely in front of me. 'Better, my prince?'

Go firmly believes that I got the best of everything from our parents, that I was the boy they planned on, the single child they could afford, and that she sneaked into this world by clamping onto my ankle, an unwanted stranger. (For my dad, a particularly unwanted stranger.) She believes she was left to fend for herself throughout childhood, a pitiful creature of random hand-me-downs and forgotten permission slips, tightened budgets and general regret. This vision could be somewhat true; I can barely stand to admit it.

'Yes, my squalid little serf,' I said, and fluttered my hands in royal dispensation.

I huddled over my beer. I needed to sit and drink a beer or three. My nerves were still singing from the morning.

'What's up with you?' she asked. 'You look all twitchy.' She flicked some suds at me, more water than soap. The air-conditioning kicked on, ruffling the tops of our heads. We spent more time in The Bar than we needed to. It had become the childhood clubhouse we never had. We'd busted open the storage boxes in our mother's basement one drunken night last year, back when she was alive but right near the end, when we were in need of comfort, and we revisited the toys and games with much oohing and ahhing between sips of canned beer. Christmas in August. After Mom died, Go moved into our old house, and we slowly relocated our toys, piecemeal, to The Bar: a Strawberry Shortcake doll, now scentless, pops up on a stool one day (my gift to Go). A tiny Hot Wheels El Camino, one wheel missing, appears on a shelf in the corner (Go's to me).

We were thinking of introducing a board game night, even though most of our customers were too old to be nostalgic for our Hungry Hungry Hippos, our Game of Life with its tiny plastic cars to be filled with tiny plastic pinhead spouses and tiny plastic pinhead

babies. I couldn't remember how you won. (Deep Hasbro thought for the day.)

Go refilled my beer, refilled her beer. Her left eyelid drooped slightly. It was exactly noon, 12–00, and I wondered how long she'd been drinking. She's had a bumpy decade. My speculative sister, she of the rocket-science brain and the rodeo spirit, dropped out of college and moved to Manhattan in the late '90s. She was one of the original dot-com phenoms – made crazy money for two years, then took the Internet bubble bath in 2000. Go remained unflappable. She was closer to twenty than thirty; she was fine. For act two, she got her degree and joined the gray-suited world of investment banking. She was midlevel, nothing flashy, nothing blameful, but she lost her job – fast – with the 2008 financial meltdown. I didn't even know she'd left New York until she phoned me from Mom's house: *I give up*. I begged her, cajoled her to return, hearing nothing but peeved silence on the other end. After I hung up, I made an anxious pilgrimage to her apartment in the Bowery and saw Gary, her beloved ficus tree, yellow-dead on the fire escape, and knew she'd never come back.

The Bar seemed to cheer her up. She handled the books, she poured the beers. She stole from the tip jar semi-regularly, but then she did more work than me. We never talked about our old lives. We were Dunnes, and we were done, and strangely content about it.

'So, what?' Go said, her usual way of beginning a conversation.

'*Eh*.'

'Eh, what? Eh, bad? You look bad.'

I shrugged a yes; she scanned my face.

'Amy?' she asked. It was an easy question. I shrugged again – a confirmation this time, a *whatcha gonna do?* shrug.

Go gave me her amused face, both elbows on the bar, hands cradling chin, hunkering down for an incisive dissection of my marriage. Go, an expert panel of one. 'What about her?'

'Bad day. It's just a bad day.'

'Don't let her worry you.' Go lit a cigarette. She smoked exactly one a day. 'Women are crazy.' Go didn't consider herself part of the general category of *women*, a word she used derisively.

I blew Go's smoke back to its owner. 'It's our anniversary today. Five years.'

'Wow.' My sister cocked her head back. She'd been a bridesmaid, all in violet – 'the gorgeous, raven-haired, amethyst-draped *dame,*' Amy's mother had dubbed her – but anniversaries weren't something

she'd remember. 'Jeez. Fuck. Dude. That came fast.' She blew more smoke toward me, a lazy game of cancer catch. 'She going to do one of her, uh, what do you call it, not scavenger hunt—'

'Treasure hunt,' I said.

My wife loved games, mostly mind games, but also actual games of amusement, and for our anniversary, she always set up an elaborate treasure hunt, with each clue leading to the hiding place of the next clue until I reached the end, and my present. It was what her dad always did for her mom on their anniversary, and don't think I don't see the gender roles here, that I don't get the hint. But I did not grow up in Amy's household, I grew up in mine, and the last present I remember my dad giving my mom was an iron, set on the kitchen counter, no wrapping paper.

'Should we make a wager on how pissed she's going to get at you this year?' Go asked, smiling over the rim of her beer.

The problem with Amy's treasure hunts: I never figured out the clues. Our first anniversary, back in New York, I went two for seven. That was my best year. The opening parley:

This place is a bit of a hole in the wall,
But we had a great kiss there one Tuesday last fall.

Ever been in a spelling bee as a kid? That snowy second after the announcement of the word as you sift your brain to see if you can spell it? It was like that, the blank panic.

'An Irish bar in a not-so-Irish place,' Amy nudged.

I bit the side of my lip, started a shrug, scanning our living room as if the answer might appear. She gave me another very long minute.

'We were lost in the rain,' she said in a voice that was pleading on the way to peeved.

I finished the shrug.

'*McMann's*, Nick. Remember, when we got lost in the rain in Chinatown trying to find that dim sum place, and it was supposed to be near the statue of Confucius but it turns out there are two statues of Confucius, and we ended up at that random Irish bar all soaking wet, and we slammed a few whiskeys, and you grabbed me and kissed me, and it was—'

'Right! You should have done a clue with Confucius, I would have gotten that.'

'The statue wasn't the point. The place was the point. The moment. I just thought it was special.' She said these last words in a childish lilt that I once found fetching.

'It *was* special.' I pulled her to me and kissed her. 'That smooch right there was my special anniversary reenactment. Let's go do it again at McMann's.'

At McMann's, the bartender, a big, bearded bear-kid, saw us come in and grinned, poured us both whiskeys, and pushed over the next clue.

When I'm down and feeling blue
There's only one place that will do.

That one turned out to be the Alice in Wonderland statue at Central Park, which Amy had told me – she'd *told* me, she *knew* she'd told me *many* times – lightened her moods as a child. I do not remember any of those conversations. I'm being honest here, I just don't. I have a dash of ADD, and I've always found my wife a bit dazzling, in the purest sense of the word: to lose clear vision, especially from looking at bright light. It was enough to be near her and hear her talk, it didn't always matter what she was saying. It should have, but it didn't.

By the time we got to the end of the day, to exchanging our actual presents – the traditional paper presents for the first year of marriage – Amy was not speaking to me.

'I love you, Amy. You know I love you,' I said, tailing her in and out of the family packs of dazed tourists parked in the middle of the sidewalk, oblivious and openmouthed. Amy was slipping through the Central Park crowds, maneuvering between laser-eyed joggers and scissor-legged skaters, kneeling parents and toddlers careering like drunks, always just ahead of me, tight-lipped, hurrying nowhere. Me trying to catch up, grab her arm. She stopped finally, gave me a face unmoved as I explained myself, one mental finger tamping down my exasperation: 'Amy, I don't get why I need to prove my love to you by remembering the exact same *things* you do, the exact same *way* you do. It doesn't mean I don't love our life together.'

A nearby clown blew up a balloon animal, a man bought a rose, a child licked an ice cream cone, and a genuine tradition was born, one I'd never forget: Amy always going overboard, me never, ever worthy of the effort. Happy anniversary, asshole.

'I'm guessing – five years – she's going to get *really* pissed,' Go continued. 'So I hope you got her a really good present.'

'On the to-do list.'

'What's the, like, symbol, for five years? Paper?'

'Paper is first year,' I said. At the end of Year One's unexpectedly wrenching treasure hunt, Amy presented me with a set of posh stationery, my initials embossed at the top, the paper so creamy I expected my fingers to come away moist. In return, I'd presented my wife with a bright red dime-store paper kite, picturing the park, picnics, warm summer gusts. Neither of us liked our presents; we'd each have preferred the other's. It was a reverse O. Henry.

'Silver?' guessed Go. 'Bronze? Scrimshaw? Help me out.'

'Wood,' I said. 'There's no romantic present for wood.'

At the other end of the bar, Sue neatly folded her newspaper and left it on the bartop with her empty mug and a five-dollar bill. We all exchanged silent smiles as she walked out.

'I got it,' Go said. 'Go home, fuck her brains out, then smack her with your penis and scream, 'There's some wood for you, bitch!' '

We laughed. Then we both flushed pink in our cheeks in the same spot. It was the kind of raunchy, unsisterly joke that Go enjoyed tossing at me like a grenade. It was also the reason why, in high school, there were always rumors that we secretly screwed. Twincest. We were too tight: our inside jokes, our edge-of-the-party whispers. I'm pretty sure I don't need to say this, but you are not Go, you might misconstrue, so I will: My sister and I have never screwed or even thought of screwing. We just really like each other.

Go was now pantomiming dick-slapping my wife.

No, Amy and Go were never going to be friends. They were each too territorial. Go was used to being the alpha girl in my life, Amy was used to being the alpha girl in everyone's life. For two people who lived in the same city – the same city twice: first New York, now here – they barely knew each other. They flitted in and out of my life like well-timed stage actors, one going out the door as the other came in, and on the rare occasions when they both inhabited the same room, they seemed somewhat bemused at the situation.

Before Amy and I got serious, got engaged, got married, I would get glimpses of Go's thoughts in a sentence here or there. *It's funny, I can't quite get a bead on her, like who she really is*. And: *You just seem kind of not yourself with her.* And: *There's a difference between really loving someone and loving the idea of her.* And finally: *The important thing is she makes you really happy.*

Back when Amy made me really happy.

Amy offered her own notions of Go: *She's very . . . Missouri, isn't she?* And: *You just have to be in the right mood for her.* And: *She's a little needy about you, but then I guess she doesn't have anyone else.*

I'd hoped when we all wound up back in Missouri, the two would let it drop – agree to disagree, free to be you and me. Neither did. Go was funnier than Amy, though, so it was a mismatched battle. Amy was clever, withering, sarcastic. Amy could get me riled up, could make an excellent, barbed point, but Go always made me laugh. It is dangerous to laugh at your spouse.

'Go, I thought we agreed you'd never mention my genitalia again,' I said. 'That within the bounds of our sibling relationship, I have no genitalia.'

The phone rang. Go took one more sip of her beer and answered, gave an eyeroll and a smile. 'He sure *is* here, one moment, please!' To me, she mouthed: 'Carl.'

Carl Pelley lived across the street from me and Amy. Retired three years. Divorced two years. Moved into our development right after. He'd been a traveling salesman – children's party supplies – and I sensed that after four decades of motel living, he wasn't quite at home being home. He showed up at the bar nearly every day with a pungent Hardee's bag, complaining about his budget until he was offered a first drink on the house. (This was another thing I learned about Carl from his days in The Bar – that he was a functioning but serious alcoholic.) He had the good grace to accept whatever we were 'trying to get rid of,' and he meant it: For one full month Carl drank nothing but dusty Zimas, circa 1992, that we'd discovered in the basement. When a hangover kept Carl home, he'd find a reason to call: *Your mailbox looks awfully full today, Nicky, maybe a package came*. Or: *It's supposed to rain, you might want to close your windows*. The reasons were bogus. Carl just needed to hear the clink of glasses, the glug of a drink being poured.

I picked up the phone, shaking a tumbler of ice near the receiver so Carl could imagine his gin.

'Hey, Nicky,' Carl's watery voice came over. 'Sorry to bother you. I just thought you should know … your door is wide open, and that cat of yours is outside. It isn't supposed to be, right?'

I looked at the clock. It was two p.m. 2-0-0.

'I'd go over and check, but I'm a little under the weather,' Carl said heavily.

'Don't worry,' I said. 'It's time for me to go home anyway.'

It was a fifteen-minute drive, straight north along the river road. Driving into our development occasionally makes me shiver, the sheer number of gaping dark houses – homes that have never known inhabitants, or homes that have known owners and seen them

ejected, the house standing triumphantly voided, humanless.

When Amy and I moved in, our only neighbors descended on us: one middle-aged single mom of three, bearing a casserole; a young father of triplets with a six-pack of beer (his wife left at home with the triplets); an older Christian couple who lived a few houses down; and of course, Carl from across the street. We sat out on our back deck and watched the river, and they all talked ruefully about ARMs, and zero percent interest, and zero money down, and then they all remarked how Amy and I were the only ones with river access, the only ones without children. 'Just the two of you? In this whole big house?' the single mom asked, doling out a scrambled-egg something.

'Just the two of us,' I confirmed with a smile, and nodded in appreciation as I took a mouthful of wobbly egg.

'Seems lonely.'

On that she was right.

Four months later, the *whole big house* lady lost her mortgage battle and disappeared in the night with her three kids. Her house has remained empty. The living room window still has a child's picture of a butterfly taped to it, the bright Magic Marker sun-faded to brown. One evening not long ago, I drove past and saw a man, bearded, bedraggled, staring out from behind the picture, floating in the dark like some sad aquarium fish. He saw me see him and flickered back into the depths of the house. The next day I left a brown paper bag full of sandwiches on the front step; it sat in the sun untouched for a week, decaying wetly, until I picked it back up and threw it out.

Quiet. The complex was always disturbingly quiet. As I neared our home, conscious of the noise of the car engine, I could see the cat was definitely on the steps. Still on the steps, twenty minutes after Carl's call. This was strange. Amy loved the cat, the cat was declawed, the cat was never let outside, never ever, because the cat, Bleecker, was sweet but extremely stupid, and despite the LoJack tracking device pelleted somewhere in his fat furry rolls, Amy knew she'd never see the cat again if he ever got out. The cat would waddle straight into the Mississippi River – deedle-de-dum – and float all the way to the Gulf of Mexico into the maw of a hungry bull shark.

But it turned out the cat wasn't even smart enough to get past the steps. Bleecker was perched on the edge of the porch, a pudgy but proud sentinel – Private Tryhard. As I pulled in to the drive, Carl came out and stood on his own front steps, and I could feel

the cat and the old man both watching me as I got out of the car and walked toward the house, the red peonies along the border looking fat and juicy, asking to be devoured.

I was about to go into blocking position to get the cat when I saw that the front door was open. Carl had said as much, but I assumed it was taking-out-the-trash-back-in-a-minute open. This was wide-gaping-ominous open.

Carl hovered across the way, waiting for my response, and like some awful piece of performance art, I felt myself enacting Concerned Husband. I stood on the middle step and frowned, then took the stairs quickly, two at a time, calling out my wife's name.

Silence.

'Amy, you home?'

I ran straight upstairs. No Amy. The ironing board was set up, the iron still on, a dress waiting to be pressed.

'Amy!'

As I ran back downstairs, I could see Carl still framed in the open doorway, hands on hips, watching. I swerved into the living room, and pulled up short. The carpet glinted with shards of glass, the coffee table shattered. End tables were on their sides, books slid across the floor like a card trick. Even the heavy antique ottoman was belly-up, its four tiny feet in the air like something dead. In the middle of the mess was a pair of good sharp scissors.

'Amy!'

I began running, bellowing her name. Through the kitchen, where a kettle was burning, down to the basement, where the guest room stood empty, and then out the back door. I pounded across our yard onto the slender boat deck leading out over the river. I peeked over the side to see if she was in our rowboat, where I had found her one day, tethered to the dock, rocking in the water, her face to the sun, eyes closed, and as I'd peered down into the dazzling reflections of the river, at her beautiful, still face, she'd suddenly opened her blue eyes and said nothing to me, and I'd said nothing back and gone into the house alone.

'Amy!'

She wasn't on the water, she wasn't in the house. Amy was not there.

Amy was gone.