# 1.

*We are on our way to the hospital,* Ryan's father says.

*Listen to me, son:*

*You are not going to bleed to death.*

Ryan is still aware enough that his father's words come in through the edges, like sunlight on the borders of a window shade. His eyes are shut tight and his body is shaking and he is trying to hold up his left arm, to keep it elevated. *We are on our way to the hospital,* his father says, and Ryan's teeth are chattering, he clenches and unclenches them and a series of wavering colored lights–greens, indigos–plays along the surface of his closed eyelids.

On the seat beside him, in between him and his father, Ryan's severed hand is resting on a bed of ice in an eight-quart styrofoam cooler.

The hand weighs less than a pound. The nails are trimmed and there are calluses on the tips of the fingers from guitar playing. The skin is now bluish in color.

This is about 3 am on a Thursday morning in May in rural Michigan. Ryan doesn't have any idea how far away the hospital might be but he repeats with his father *we are on the way to the hospital we are on the way to the hospital* and he wants to

believe so badly that it's true, that it's not just one of those things that you tell people to keep them calm. But he's not sure. Gazing out all he can see is the night trees leaning over the road, the car pursuing its pool of headlight, and darkness, no towns, no buildings ahead, darkness, road, moon.

# 2.

A few days after Lucy graduated from high school, she and George Orson left town in the middle of the night. They were not fugitives--not exactly-- but it was true that no one knew that they were leaving, and it was also true that no one would know where they had gone.

They had agreed that a degree of discretion, a degree of secrecy, was necessary. Just until they got things figured out. George Orson was not only her boyfriend, but also her former high school history teacher, which had complicated things back in Pompey, Ohio.

This wasn't actually as bad as it might sound. Lucy was eighteen, almost nineteen—a legal adult—and her parents were dead, and she had no real friends to speak of. She had been living in their parents' house with her older sister, Patricia, but the two of them had never been close. Also, she had various aunts and uncles and cousins she hardly talked to. As for George Orson, he had no connections at all that she knew of.

And so: why not? They would make a clean break. A new life.

Still, she might have preferred to run away together to somewhere different.

They had arrived in Nebraska after a few days of driving, and she had been sleeping so she didn't notice when they got off the interstate. When she opened her eyes, they were driving along a length of empty highway, and George Orson's hand was resting demurely on her thigh: a sweet habit he had, resting his palm on her leg.

She could see herself in the side mirror, her hair rippling, her sunglasses reflecting the motionless stretches of lichen-green prairie grass. She sat up.

"Where are we?" she said, and George Orson looked over at her. His eyes distant and melancholy. It made her think of being a child, a child in that old small-town family car, her father's thick, calloused plumber's hands gripping the wheel and her mother in the passenger seat with a cigarette even though she was a nurse, the window open a crack for the smoke to trail out of, and her sister asleep in the back seat mouth-breathing behind their father and Lucy also in the back seat opening her eyes a crack, the shadows of trees running across her face and thinking: *Where are we?*

She opened her eyes and sat up, shaking this memory away.

"Almost there," George Orson murmured, as if he were remembering a sad thing.

And when she opened her eyes, there was the motel. They had parked in front of it: a tower rising up in silhouette over them.

It had taken Lucy a moment to realize that the place was supposed to be a lighthouse. Or rather—the front of the place, the façade, was in the shape of a lighthouse. It was a large tube-shaped structure made of cement blocks, perhaps sixty feet high, wide at the base and narrowing as it went upward, and painted in red and white barber pole stripes.

THE LIGHTHOUSE MOTEL, said a large unlit neon sign-- fancy nautical lettering, as if made of knotted ropes--and Lucy sat there in the car, in George Orson's Maserati, gaping.

To the right of this lighthouse structure was an L-Shaped courtyard of perhaps

fifteen motel units; and to the left of it, at the very crest of the hill, was the old house, the house where George Orson's parents once lived: not exactly a mansion but formidable out here on the open prairie, a big old Victorian two-story home with all the trappings of a haunted house-- a turret and wrap-around porch, dormers and corbelled chimneys and a gable roof and scalloped shingles. No other houses in sight, barely any other sign of civilization, barely anything but the enormous Nebraska sky bending over them.

For a moment Lucy had the notion that this was a joke, a corny roadside attraction or amusement park structure. They had pulled up in the summer twilight and there was the forlorn lighthouse tower of the motel with the old house silhouetted behind it, ridiculously creepy. Lucy thought that there may as well have been a full moon and a hoot owl in a bare tree, and George Orson had let out a breath.

"So here we are," George Orson said. He must have known how it would look to her.

"This is it?" Lucy said, and she couldn't keep the incredulousness out of her voice. "Wait," she said. "George? This is where we're going to live?"

"For the time being," George Orson said. He glanced at her ruefully, as if she disappointed him a little. "Only for the time being, honey," he said, and she noticed that there were some tumbleweeds stuck in the dead hedges on one side of the motel courtyard. Tumbleweeds! She had never seen such a thing before, except in movies about ghost towns of the old west, and it was hard not to be a little freaked out.

"How long has it been closed?" she said. "I hope it's not full of mice or--"

"No, no," George Orson said. "There's a cleaning woman coming out fairly

regularly so I'm sure it's not too bad. It's not abandoned or anything."

She could feel his eyes following her as she got out and walked around the front of the car and up toward the red door of the Lighthouse. Above the door it said: OFFICE. And there was another unlit tube of neon which said:

*NO / VACANCY.*

It had once been a fairly popular motel. That's what George Orson had told her as they were driving through Indiana or Iowa or one of those states. It wasn't exactly a *resort*, he'd said, but a pretty fancy place—"Back when there was a lake," he'd said, and she hadn't quite understood what he meant.

She'd said: "It sounds romantic." This was before she'd seen it. She'd had an image of one of those seaside sort of places that you read about in novels, where shy British people went and fell in love and had epiphanies.

"No, no," George Orson said. "Not exactly." He had been trying to warn her. "I wouldn't call it romantic. Not at this point," he'd said. He had explained that the lake—it was a reservoir, actually—had started to dry up because of the drought, all the greedy farmers, he said, they just keep watering and watering their government-subsidized crops, and before anyone knew it the lake was a tenth of what it had once been. "Then all of the tourist stuff began to dry up as well, naturally," George Orson said. "It's hard to do any fishing or waterskiing or swimming on a dry lake bed."

He had explained it well enough, but it wasn't until she looked down from the top of the hill that she understood.

He was serious. There wasn't a lake anymore. There was nothing but a bare valley—a crater that had once held water. A path led down to the "beach," and there

was a wooden dock extending out into an expanse of sand and high yellow prairie grass, various scrubby plants that she imagined would eventually turn into tumbleweeds. The remains of an old buoy lay on its side in the wind-blown dirt. She could see what had once been the other side of the lake, the opposite shore rising up about five miles or so across the empty basin.

Lucy turned back to watch as George Orson opened the trunk of the car and extracted the largest of their suitcases.

"Lucy?" he said, trying to make his voice cheerful and solicitous. "Shall we?"

She watched as he walked past the tower of the Lighthouse office and up the cement stairs that led to the old house.

# 3.

By the time the first rush of recklessness had begun to burn off, Miles was already nearing the Arctic Circle. He had been driving across Canada for days and days by that point, sleeping for a while in the car and then waking to go on again, heading northward along what highways he could find, a cluster of maps origami-ed in the passenger seat beside him. The names of the places he passed had become more and more fantastical—Destruction Bay, The Great Slave Lake, Ddhaw Ghro, Tombstone Mountain—and when he came at last upon Tsiigehtchic he sat in his idling car in front of the town's welcome sign, staring at the scramble of letters as if his eyesight might be faulty, some form of sleep-deprivation dyslexia. But no. According to one of the map books he'd bought, "Tsiigehtchic" was a Gwich'in word that meant "Mouth of the River of Iron." According to the book, he had now reached the confluence of the Mackenzie and the Arctic Red River.

**WELCOME TO TSIIGEHTCHIC!**

*Located on the site of a traditional Gwich'in fishing camp. In 1868 the Oblate Fathers started a missions here. By 1902 a trading post was located here. R.C.M.P.Constable Edgar "Spike" Millen; stationed at Tsiigehtchic was killed by the mad trapper Albert Johnson in the shoot-out of January 30, 1932 in the Rat River area.*

*The Gwich'in retain close ties to the land today. You can see net fishing year round as well as the traditional method of making dryfish and dry meat. In the winter, trappers are busy in the bush seeking valuable fur animals.*

**ENJOY YOUR VISIT TO OUR COMMUNITY!**

He mouthed the letters, and his chapped lips kept adhering to one another. *T-s-i-i-g-e-h-t-c-h-i-c,* he said, under his breath, and just then a cold thought began to unfold in the back of his mind.

*What am I doing?* he thought. *Why am I doing this?*

The drive had begun to feel more and more like an hallucination by that point. Somewhere on the way, the sun had begun to stop rising and setting; it appeared to move slightly to and fro across the sky, but he couldn't be sure. Along this part of the Dempster Highway, a silvery white powder was scattered on the dirt road. Calcium? The powder seemed to glow—but then again, in this queer sunlight, so did everything: the grass and the sky and even the dirt had a fluorescent quality, as if lit from within.

He was sitting there by the side of the road, his book open in front of him on the steering wheel, a pile of clothes in the backseat and the boxes of papers and notebooks and journals and letters he had collected over the years. He was wearing sunglasses, shivering a little, his patchy facial hair a worn yellow-brown, the color of a coffee stain. The CD player in his car was broken, and the radio played only a murky blend of static and distant, garbled voices. There was no cell phone reception, of course. An air freshener in the shape of a Christmas tree was hanging from the rear view mirror, spinning in the breath of the defroster.

Up ahead, not too far now, was the town of Inuvik; and the wide delta that led to the Arctic Ocean; and also—he hoped—his twin brother, Hayden.

# 4.

The man said, "Above the wrist? Or below the wrist?"

The man had a sleepy, almost affectless voice, the voice you might hear if you called a hotline for computer technical support. He looked at Ryan's father blandly.

"Ryan, I want you to tell your father to be reasonable," the man said, but Ryan didn't really say anything because he was crying silently. He and his father were bound to chairs at the kitchen table, and Ryan's father wasn't looking at either one of them. He was shuddering, and his long dark hair fell in a tent around his face. But when he looked up, he had a troublingly stubborn look in his eyes.

The man sighed. He carefully pushed the sleeve of Ryan's shirt up above his elbow and placed his finger on the small rounded bone at the edge of Ryan's wrist. It was called the *ulnar styloid*, Ryan remembered. Some biology class he had taken, once. He didn't know why that term came to him so easily.

*Above the wrist...* the man said to Ryan's father. *...or below the wrist?*

Ryan was trying to reach a disconnected state--a *zen* state, he thought--though the truth was that the more he tried to lift his mind out of his body, the more aware he was of the corporeal. He could feel himself trembling. He could feel the salt water trickling out of his nose and eyes, drying on his face. He could feel the duct tape that held him to the kitchen chair, the strips across his bare forearms, his chest, his calves and ankles.

He closed his eyes and tried to imagine his spirit lifting toward the ceiling. He

would drift out of the kitchen, where he and his father were pinned to the hard-backed chairs, past the cluttered construction of dirty dishes piled on the counter by the sink, the toaster with a bagel still peeping up out of it; he would waft through the archway and into the living room, where a couple of black T-shirted henchmen were carrying computer parts out of the bedrooms, dragging matted tails of electrical cording and cables along behind them. His spirit would follow them out the front door, past the white van they were tossing stuff into and on down his father's driveway, traveling the rural Michigan highway, the moonlight flickering through the branches of trees as his spirit gained velocity, the luminous road signs emerging out of the darkness as he swept up like an airplane and the patterns of house lights and roads and streams that speckled and crisscrossed the earth growing smaller. *Wooooooooooooooooooo*–like a balloon with the air let out of it, a siren, a wailing wind. Like a person screaming.

He squeezed his eyes, tightened his teeth against one another as his left hand was grasped and tilted. He was trying to think of something else.

Music? A landscape, a sunset? A beautiful girl's face?

"Dad," he could hear himself saying, through chattering teeth. "Dad, please be reasonable, please, please be--"

He would not think about the cutting device the man had shown them. It was just a length of wire, a very thin razor wire, with rubber handles attached to each end of it.

He wouldn't think about the way his father wouldn't meet his eyes.

He wouldn't think about his hand, the wire looped once around his wrist,

garrotted, the sharp wire tightening. Slicing smoothly through skin and muscle. There would be a hitch, a snag, when it reached the bone, but it would cut through that, too.