'PAGE-TURNING'
Karen Joy Fowler
author of *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*

GOODHOUSE

'POWERFUL'
New York Times

About the Book

GOODHOUSE.

An educational establishment with a difference.

Outside its walls lies danger.

But threat also lurks within.

To break out is to risk death.

To stay is worse.

Welcome to Goodhouse.

For boys with bad genes.

A bold and page-turning look into a plausible near-future – where genetic profiling is meant to prevent crime but instead becomes a tool for oppression. If, one day, we can see into our genetic make-up – both the good and the bad – places like Goodhouse could be just around the corner . . .

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GOODHOUSE

PEYTON MARSHALL

FOR MY PARENTS

The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.

—Audre Lorde

PART ONE

THE MASTER’S HOUSE

ONE

The day I committed my first crime I was dressed in civilian clothes—a wool suit and a wide, brightly patterned necktie. Many boys before me had worn these clothes. Goodhouse kept hundreds of donated items at the ready so that its students might feel comfortable going into the world without their uniforms. They wanted us to feel like everybody else, but I'd never seen civilian boys in suits. I flexed against the fabric of my coat. It was too small.

"I'm losing feeling in my hands," I whispered.

"Stand still," said Owen. He was my roommate, a stocky kid with black hair and a birthmark on his right cheek that looked like a cluster of freckles. He'd been out on a number of these and I considered him the expert, though today we would be separated. He was headed somewhere alone. He said it was an interview. "Nothing bad will happen as long as you act right," he said. "Do what you're told and don't make eye contact."

We were in the gymnasium waiting for permission to board buses and spend an afternoon with a host family in town. In principle, these Community Days were meant to prepare us for our eventual integration into society. I was seventeen and I'd never been inside a civilian home—I'd never eaten in a restaurant, never owned anything that didn't first belong to the school. But soon I would graduate. In a year I'd pick one of the professions available to me and I would step into a wider world. I had to be ready.

"I feel like I'm going to be sick," I said. "You think I could stay behind if I puked?"

“I’d report you,” Owen said.

I unbuttoned my wool jacket. We all stood at attention, shoulder to shoulder. It was unusually warm for May and the room smelled strongly of sweat and moth repellant. The polished floor was full of colored lines for different games that I’d never played and couldn’t name. Originally the gymnasium was part of a series of buildings that made up the Preston School of Industry. It had been founded in Ione, California, in 1894—just under two hundred years ago—and it had been a reformatory for regular boys. The gym was a beautiful remnant. Tall wooden windows lined its longest walls. They were rounded at the top, their uppermost panes of glass splayed like fans.

Over our heads the footsteps of proctors rang on the metal balconies. The proctors left dark silhouettes against the windows as they passed. Only our class leaders actually stood on the floor with us, circulating among us, keeping order. Unlike the proctors, who were forbidden to touch us, class leaders were free to use their fists.

“Just keep your mouth shut,” Owen said, “and look really grateful, no matter what they say. And don’t touch anything,” he said. “They hate that, and it’s hard to do when they have candy dishes and little glass elephants, and once, this kid had a plastic box full of ants that he said he was farming.”

I stared at Owen. “Farming?” I asked. “For food?”

“Who knows.” He shrugged. “It’s always a freak show, and they write detailed reports about you afterward, and staff pays a lot of attention to them.”

I felt a jolt of nervous energy. I still had nightmares about what had happened at my last school. I took thirty milligrams of monofacine every evening. It was supposed to help me sleep, help me forget.

“And don’t talk to the women,” Owen said. “Nobody likes that.”

“I wasn’t going to,” I said. I pulled off my jacket and plucked at my shirt, trying to circulate some air. Years ago, a Goodhouse boy named Ephram had attacked a civilian girl on a Community Day. He’d been strangled to death by her father. Even I—a recent transfer to Ione—knew the story. “I’m not going to end up like that Ephram kid,” I said.

“Then don’t look all sweaty and bug-eyed,” Owen said.

More boys were pulling off their jackets. One student a few yards from where we stood actually fainted in the heat. Some boys cheered and one called him a pussy. Proctors shouted at us to stand still.

“You want to know the real reason they strangled that Ephram kid?” Owen whispered, but I could tell his tone was playful.

“Never mind,” I said. “Forget it.”

“Because he touched their ant farm,” he said.

“Shut up,” I said, and Owen punched my arm to warn me that our class leaders were passing. We both went silent and still.

Class leaders had special uniforms. They wore the same denim pants we did, but their blue button-down shirts were a darker hue and the school crest on the front pocket was embroidered in gold. Headmaster Tanner called these boys his right hand—the hand of correction. At my last school they had been different, more constrained. Here, it seemed, there were no limits.

We had two leaders for our year. The first was named Creighton. He had ruddy skin, white-blond hair, and white eyebrows like albino caterpillars. He wasn’t very tall, but he was thick in the chest. No one had been able to depose him. Our second class leader was Davis, a lanky black kid who always had a sweet expression on his face. Owen had nicknamed him Diablo since he was friendly and solicitous, right until he punched you in the gut.

The only way to become a class leader was to beat one of them senseless. But there was always the danger that you

would fail and end up like Lowell, who was currently mopping the floor of the gymnasium, running into boys as if he didn't see them. There was a small but important dent in Lowell's forehead, and he often sang to himself—his voice flat and meandering, like he was speaking a different language.

I'd been at this school since January, but I'd been in the Goodhouse system since I was three years old. The first thing they did when you entered the system was change the name you were given at birth. I once believed that I'd recognize my original name, that I'd know when another boy was called by it—that it would sound some bell inside me, trigger some alarm. The school had called me James after St. James the Greater, an apostle who'd found God around the time he was run through with a sword. They'd said it was a name to grow into.

Goodhouse had come out of an idea—a program meant to map the genetic profile of prison populations. What the researchers had found was this: The worst inmates, the most impulsive, the most violent, the least empathetic, all shared certain biometric markers. But these were prisoners. They cost the state millions of dollars to warehouse every year. And they'd been children once. They had not always been beyond help. It was too late for adults, but young boys were different. They could be molded, instructed, taught. If intervention occurred at an early age, they could be salvaged.

And so, for the past four decades in America, genetic testing had been mandatory for the family of anyone who committed a violent felony. More and more people were being tested each year. More and more families were brought to the courthouse for a cheek swab—to be released if they were normal, to be registered if they were outside the age limit, to be immediately surrendered if they were

positive and male and under the age of six. That had been me.

I understood that I was part of a lucky percentile—the ones who were given a new life, the ones who could be remade from the inside out. And so I'd grown up reading only Goodhouse-approved books, practicing Goodhouse-approved meditations. I'd watched endless instructional videos showing us the lives we could potentially lead—orderly, right-thinking lives. Imagine busy, happy citizens taking great joy in painting houses, cleaning windows, installing water reclamation systems. "The wrong-thinking boy will seek to take advantage of your better self," the videos told us. "Vigilance is the only defense." Goodhouse encouraged us to think of ourselves as two people in one body. One person was fine and ordinary, while the other was filled with bad impulses. "Always question your motives," the school taught us. "Double-check an impulse. Know which boy you are talking to."

Owen said that Goodhouse treated all its students like budding schizophrenics. And though we joked about it, I was sincerely worried that I'd never experienced this duality. I knew myself to be only one person—and how good or how evil this person was, I didn't really know.

Overhead, the speakers crackled and Headmaster Robert Tanner walked out onto one of the balconies. He stopped in front of the safety railing and frowned at us. The microphone in his collar activated and I heard the faint suck of his breath. He wore his customary black suit. His skin was prematurely wrinkled, as if his body were sheathed in crumpled brown paper bags. His entourage stood behind him, his secretary and his personal security guard.

Tanner looked grim. His hair was graying at the temples, and it seemed to have worsened overnight.

“Good morning,” he said, his voice booming around us. The proctors stopped pacing. The whispering subsided.

“We find ourselves on the threshold of yet another Community Day,” he said. “I don’t have to remind you that it is a great honor to represent the school—to act as ambassadors, if you will. Please remember that these families are the building blocks of a society that has nurtured you—fed, clothed, and educated you with its tax dollars. You will greet them with humility and gratitude. They are your champions, and I expect every boy here to make us proud. That said”—he cleared his throat, a growling bark that was worse for the amplification—“some of you will be staying behind.”

I felt a surge of hope. As curious as I was about regular people, I didn’t want to go to their houses and be their guest. I’d been having nightmares all week and I was seeing things again—just little flashes of red out of the corner of my eye, or else I’d glimpse a friend from my old school standing in a group of boys. Then, when I looked again, he’d be gone. Sometimes I smelled phantom smoke, but the worst was the breath on the back of my neck, like someone was standing only an inch behind me, lingering until I was weak with fear, afraid to move, afraid it was the man I’d seen, the one with white hair, the one who’d taken off his mask. Not a mask. A balaclava. That’s what the police had called it. The word had been previously unknown to me, but now it stayed in my head. It conjured images of boys with blazing bodies and always—always—this man with his composed, almost bored expression. He was a civilian. He was one of them.

“I have just received word that a delivery of roofing tiles will arrive this morning. I know you are all eager to see your Founders’ Day pavilion finished.” Tanner forced a smile that made his paper-bag face look especially crumpled and sour. “It is,” he said, “for every one of us, a matter of pride that this important edifice be completed in

a timely manner, and so—I regret very much that some of you must stay behind to unload the truck."

The boys around me looked sullen. No one was excited about Founders' Day next month. Goodhouse would be fifty years old on June 15, and Ione was hosting the celebration. But so far, the event was synonymous with longer days and endless work details.

"South Dormitories," Tanner said, "you will return to your rooms and prepare for service. The rest of you, get on the buses."

The South Dormitory boys, who were among the oldest, exploded into protest as they pulled off their neckties and woolen coats. "Quietly," hissed Tanner. "Quietly! Get in your lines. I will not tolerate antics. You there, stand still." He gestured for several proctors to descend, and they jogged down from the balcony. Their steel-toed boots made the metal stair treads hum.

"I will not have chaos," Tanner shouted. "The rest of you, line up." But we were already in our lines, standing shoulder to shoulder with our roommates, organized by distance to our destination.

"Bus 1," a proctor bellowed. The line to our left shuffled forward. Some boys appeared to be holding hands, but I knew they were *palming*—sending messages through sign language, one hand making shapes into the palm of another. It was extremely complex, all but unlearnable unless mastered young. As a transfer I was considered unlucky. New roommates were randomly assigned on the first of every year. Students were always paired with like-standing students, but that was the only guideline. There were no reassignments, no preferences. I had been an unfortunate choice for Owen. I was unable to palm, so I'd condemned him to a semester of silence. He'd tried to teach me the alphabet, and when that was hopeless, he'd taught me *shorts*—gestures that communicated different

phrases and commands. There was a lot of profanity in the shorts. I caught on fast.

Creighton and Davis patrolled our lines. “Hands apart,” Creighton said. “Can’t have you ladies gossiping.” I felt a little surge of hatred, which I struggled to master. Class leaders couldn’t give demerits, but they were allowed to do whatever else they wanted; they could break your bones or assign you to an overnight work detail. Every class leader in the Goodhouse system was promised a Level 1 job after graduation. They ate the best food; they lived in private rooms; they could drive patrol vehicles within campus limits. At most schools they were appointed by the administration. At Ione, however, you could appoint yourself. All you had to do was step forward and announce that you wanted your chance.

Creighton and Davis had been my welcome there; they’d taken me into the bathroom and knocked me around. It had been a relatively mild beating, just a taste of what was possible. A proctor had stood watch to issue demerits if I fought back. It took everything I had to submit, not to feel cornered on the lawn at night with the building still on fire.

“What are you looking at?” asked Davis. “Eyes to the front.” He slapped me on the back of the head.

“Bus 2,” a proctor called. Our line shuffled forward. We walked outside and were directed to a yellow school bus with a magnetic Goodhouse logo affixed to its side—a *G* and an *H* intertwined. Underneath the logo was a small, simple line drawing of a swan. This was the symbol on all our delivery trucks, on all of our boxes of food and many of the products we used, on our toothbrushes and on our soap. For the past ten years, Goodhouse had been owned by Swann Industries, a private company that produced pharmaceuticals and—it seemed to me—everything else.

I hurried onto the bus and sat down, eagerly sliding my hand between the fold in the cushions. These buses were used by the public school system and sometimes we found

plastic buttons in the seats, found coins or brightly colored candy wrappers. This time, however, the seat was clean. As a boy in the system, I didn't possess anything, and I craved the experience of ownership. I coveted anything with beauty: a fluffy tuft of wheatgrass, a dead ladybug, an autumn leaf struck red or gold. I'd pick them up and fold them into a shirt cuff or a sock, and this always made me feel powerful.

Sometimes I start my story here. I say, Things turned out the way they did because I was too long in the habit of acquisition. But if I want to be truthful, I'll say that my story begins on a freezing night in January of that year. I lay on the icy lawn watching my dormitory burn. There were boys trapped inside, beating on the safety glass of the windows. Little stars of impact bloomed again and again as a spotlight swept lazily over the façade. Men in red balaclavas wandered the yard, checking to make sure that no one got out.

I have only to close my eyes and I'm back there, shivering on the grass, choking on smoke. The fire moans and hisses like a monster. It's still feeding on the building, on the bodies of my friends, and I can do nothing but cower and hope that when the men find me they will use a gun and not their boots and hands.

I'd assumed that it was the end. I never thought there would be more.

TWO

The bus lumbered down the main road, circling the old athletic field, which was currently being tilled and planted with vegetables. In the distance was the partially finished Founders' Day pavilion, its exposed beams and rounded shape giving it the look of a half-eaten turkey carcass. We passed the Proctors' Quarters—that cluster of gardens and homes where most of the staff lived. Some of the houses were older, brought in from Ione itself and positioned there, made into a neighborhood. Every structure had been painted gray with white trim. Red geraniums hung from window boxes, and from afar they looked like gashes in the siding, blood welling and then freezing in place. In one yard laundry dried on a line—empty shirt arms and trouser legs kicked and waved us on.

Nearer the gate, we passed the wooden kennel where Tanner kept his bluetick hounds. They were just for show now. There were better ways to track an escaped boy, but the hounds were a tradition at the Ione Goodhouse. They were supposed to be mascots of sorts—though we didn't have a sports team or anything we needed to rally against except ourselves. Tanner had cut their vocal cords, and as we drove past, the dogs lunged at the fence, their mouths opening and closing in a pantomime of agitation.

Our bus stopped at the main gate, taking its place in the line of buses waiting to be cleared. At my old school in La Pine, Oregon, the campus had been rural and isolated, not well protected. But since the attack, Goodhouses nationwide had been increasing and standardizing their

security. Now, instead of simply having guardhouses and fences, there were concrete barriers at every entrance, iris and facial scans for all staff members, embedded microchips for every student.

We pulled to the front of the line, and several guards scanned the bus, checking their handhelds to verify the passenger list. One guard stepped forward with a round mirror on the end of a long pole. He dipped it under the bus and walked along each side. A moment later another guard deactivated the electromagnetic barrier and waved us through the gate. Almost immediately, we entered open landscape. The summer droughts hadn't yet begun. There were still green patches and lots of jackrabbits moving away from the road, their splayed ears visible above the grass.

In a year I would graduate, and if I kept my status high, I might qualify for a job, a marriage license, an apartment—I might slip into civilian life, with its private spaces and things, so many things. I was waiting for my real life to start, and a student's status level at graduation controlled all his options and freedoms. I'd heard rumors of graduates who lived off the grid, who lived in the drought country, in the Midwestern towns that had been deserted in the middle of the twenty-first century. But the whole point of graduating was to begin something—not to hide, not to remain on the margins. Sometimes this seemed unfair, as if Goodhouse were a game that ended. But I'd had it explained to me like this—you achieved control or you did not. Without a deadline, students would never truly feel the sum of their choices.

I knew we were close to a town when we started passing billboards. One claimed, *Vacationland is for the whole family!* It featured children holding balloons and ice cream cones. Beyond this billboard was a tent city, a large one. I'd seen smaller ones in Oregon, but this city stretched to the horizon, and I smelled the unpleasant reek of raw sewage.

Some of the tents had walls and plastic windows, but most were just open-sided tarps tied to poles. A few men leaned against the fence, staring at the road. They all had beards, which were forbidden at school and which I'd rarely seen.

The bus downshifted as it pushed uphill, and the engine revved. Citizens who had been hunched over cookstoves now stood and watched our ascent. A pack of children surged toward the fence, shouting something. One woman who'd been draping wet laundry over the top of a tent turned to stare at us. I had the impression of disruption, a feeling of drawing unwanted attention.

I glanced at Owen, who just shrugged and picked at the dried yellow paint on his cuticles. Today he was interviewing for a scholarship to the San Francisco College of Art, meeting at the house of an alumnus, someone important—a man who'd endowed a building or two. Owen had been up late last night, unable to sleep, laboring over a commission for a proctor—a canvas of an icy mountain range. He charged a lot of credits for his work, and nobody knew how much money he'd saved. It was a special privilege to have art supplies in our room, and he'd forbidden me to touch them.

And then we were driving through a downtown, not Ione, but some other gold rush– style town with boxy wooden buildings, all painted different colors. Only a few civilians were out on the street, most of them women. One wore a skirt that ended above the knee, and all the boys stared. The ones on the opposite side of the bus stood up to get a better view.

"Sit down," a proctor shouted. "Everyone in his seat." Proctors stalked the aisles, and I noticed, for the first time, that they had real guns strapped to their sides. At school they wore Lewiston Volts—standard-issue tasers—bright red, the color of caution, of warning. Last week a boy had bitten off a part of his tongue when a proctor had used one to subdue him outside the cafeteria. Today, however, the

sight of their guns frightened me more. I grabbed Owen's hand and palmed, "Why?"

He didn't understand, and I didn't know the sign for "weapon."

"Is that normal?" I whispered. "With the pistols?"

"No talking," a proctor said. He pointed his handheld in my direction and scanned the chip in my belly. Then he checked the screen embedded in his device. I knew my picture would show up there to confirm that it was me. I glanced at Owen. He was furious. At the end of the day we shared each other's demerits, and Owen palmed a short that meant *fuck off.* I shut my mouth. I couldn't lose control like that. I couldn't lose control at all.

We drove to an upscale gated community called Meadowlands. There were no meadows in sight. Presumably, the development had obliterated its namesake. The bus stopped beside a gatehouse. Two guards stepped forward. Both were overweight and appeared to be stuffed into their brown coats and pants. One took our information into a little booth, and the other collected iris scans from the proctors. This guard was the first civilian I'd seen wearing a suit and tie. We had not been dressed to fit in, after all.

"This is a nice area," the guard said. "We won't tolerate any trouble."

"No, sir," we chorused.

They waved us through—no mirrors, no dogs—and on the other side was a real neighborhood, a park with a little stone path and two iron benches. Each home seemed gigantic to me, imposing, set on a slight rise at the end of a driveway, surrounded by a yard—a lake of synthetic lawn.

A proctor at the head of the bus called roommates forward and assigned them to various addresses. The bus traveled deeper into the neighborhood, stopping and starting. The seats around me emptied. Owen was dropped

off at an enormous estate. I watched him ascend a long, sloping driveway lined with trees. I was taken to a street where the houses were smaller and closer together. “James Goodhouse,” a proctor called. “Address 3715.” He pointed to a residence with a red front door. A little flagpole jutted from the front of the house. On it was a banner with the picture of a leggy bird carrying a sack in its beak. When I didn’t immediately rise, the proctor said, “Don’t make me drag you out.”

I walked down the aisle, and then I stood on the sidewalk listening to the bus retreat and turn a corner. It had been months since I’d been alone. At Ione, I was contained by the new security protocols, but at my old school I’d been good at sneaking out of the dormitory. I’d spent hours lying on the banks of the Deschutes, listening to the owls hunt, watching searchlights cross the school commons—beautiful beams of light, luminous tunnels, like gods come to earth.

I stepped up to the red door. There was a glass panel at the top and my reflection stared back at me. My skin was a light brown and my eyes were a bright, vivid green—a color that was evident even in the muted quality of the glass. I had grown enormously in the last year. By the time I’d transferred to Ione, I’d hit six feet, and I was grateful. It had bought me a little respect. Now I worked to make my face expressionless. I straightened the collar of my shirt, and then there was no point in putting it off any longer. I knocked and waited.

A teenage girl answered the door. “Yes?” she asked. Her long brown hair was braided into a glossy rope that draped over one shoulder. She was very thin, and a scar rose from the neckline of her sundress like a red, puffed worm. I lowered my gaze. I wasn’t sure if I should speak to her. But there was no one else.

“My name is James, ma’am.”

“Ma’am,” she repeated, then smiled as if I’d said something funny. “No one’s ever called me that before. Are

you saying my dress is too matronly?" She made a show of looking herself over.

"What? No, ma'am," I stammered. "I would never comment on your clothing."

"But you just did," she said.

I backed away. This was all going wrong.

"I'm kidding," she said. "It's a joke. Can't you tell?"

I didn't know what to do, so I stuck to the script. "My name is James Goodhouse," I said. "I'm here for a Community Day. I'm eager to be a respectful guest in your home. Please let me know if I should remove my shoes."

The girl's smile faltered. Something about my speech sobered her, though I couldn't imagine what, and this heightened my impression of being out of control.

"Aunt Muriel," the girl turned and hollered. "That boy is here."

"Not till Sunday." A woman stepped forward and opened the door wider. She was plump, and her flower-print dress was extremely colorful and slightly blurry, as if it were moving. Her short bangs had been swept to one side and artificially stiffened like the bill of a hat. "You're a day early," she said. "Did they change the date?" She looked into the yard as if checking for additional visitors.

"It's just me," I said.

"For heaven's sake," said the aunt. "Why can't anything work out?"

They led me down a hallway. The girl with the braid followed close behind.

"You're totally going to ruin Cousin Rachel's baby shower," she said. She spoke in a low voice, just loud enough for me to hear. I hurried to put some space between us, but she kept up. "Hey," she said. "My name's Bethany."

There was no Goodhouse equivalent for girls. The same markers in women were not predictive of future criminal behavior the way they were in boys and men. And as I

entered the house, as I walked into its inner recesses, I felt very aware that I had never, as far as I knew, stood this close to a girl my own age.

Bethany followed me into the living room. A dozen women clustered on couches and chairs. They stared at me, gaping openly, eyes moving from my stiff formal collar to my tie to the shiny gold buttons on my jacket. A pregnant woman was ensconced in a chair with bunches of blue balloons tied to its back. Colorful streamers cut across the white ceiling. The room was oddly familiar. I was sure I'd been in a room like this as a small child. I was sweating through my shirt. The tie seemed to tighten of its own accord. I was supposed to give the speech, and I struggled to keep my eyes open and my voice level. I realized I could skip the part about the shoes. Everyone was wearing them.

"My name is James Goodhouse and I am honored to be a guest in your home. I am happy to be of any assistance. Please do not hesitate to ask. I'm grateful for the opportunity to give back to the people of this community." I made myself look at them. The speech, which had seemed just another bland necessity at school, felt surprisingly humiliating to recite.

"Our tax dollars at work," one woman said. "Wars, roads, and manners."

"Very pretty," said the aunt. "Now, I think I do have a few small tasks that need doing." She led me into the kitchen.

It looked very different from the ones I'd labored in. There were no cameras, no molded plastic workstations. This kitchen was decorated like a living area. A large painting of a cityscape at night hung above an upholstered bench. Food like I had never seen dotted a polished stone countertop—a cake frosted to look like a basket of flowers; fresh fruit sliced and arranged in arcs of color, like a sunset.

Everything seemed preposterously small. Goodhouse staples came in fifty-gallon drums, but here was a jug of

milk I could lift with one hand, a mixer the size of a toy, a sink so shallow as to appear useless. And where was the sand tray? At school we scoured our dishes with sand first, but these people didn't seem to have a tray. It wasn't until I saw a stack of plates and a line of mugs that I felt a little calmer. These, at least, were the same size, and it steadied me. I was going to be okay. *These people are like us*, I thought. *It's just a different scale.*

"James?" the aunt said, testing out the name as if she was unsure it would work. I realized I'd been standing there with my mouth open.

"Yes, ma'am," I said. "Please excuse me. Your home is very interesting." I winced. This might sound critical. "Very beautiful," I corrected. But maybe that was worse. She might worry that I would touch or take something.

The woman frowned. "Please follow me," she said. The hem of her dress swayed as she led me through the kitchen door, down a few stairs, and into a large, fenced backyard. It abutted a row of other yards of similar proportions. A maple had been recently felled and the trunk cut into sections like vertebrae in a spinal column. The branches and leaves were missing.

"I'd like you to split logs," the aunt said. "You do that, right?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good." She went into the shed and returned carrying an ax. There was a moment of hesitation before she surrendered it. *Weapon*, I thought, and quickly corrected myself. *Tool*. At school we learned our thoughts were powerful. If it was in a mind, it was in a body, and soon it would be in the world for everyone to see.

"Split into eighths," she said. "You know how many that is? Eight pieces?"

I was confused. Did she think I wasn't a native speaker? I did have a slight accent, a touch of rural Oregon. "The whole pile?" I asked.

“Whatever you can do.” She hurried into the house, locked the door, and spoke through the open kitchen window. “Stack them next to the shed.”

I glanced at the other yards. They were all deserted, but manicured. A red plastic car, only large enough to hold a child, lay on its side, the roof bleached pink by the sun. Ornamental sage grew in clumps along the fence, and I crushed a leaf between my fingers, rubbing its scent on my hands. The maple was newly cut. The wood still had a golden hue and there was no sign of disease, no apparent reason for its removal. I knelt beside the tree and counted back seventeen rings from its outer edge. My finger stopped on a narrow ring. There had been a drought the summer I was born.

I took a section of trunk and made this my chopping base. I rolled it near the shed, then removed the hated jacket and necktie. I stretched my back, reached over my head. Holding the ax in two hands, I imagined this was my house, my yard, my tree. It took several strokes to warm up and find a rhythm. But once I did, I felt relief to be outside, doing something I was good at. I knew when to relax into the swing, when to tense and when to exhale. I knew to go slow, to pace myself. It was like one of the tasks at school where work had no ending, only an endless middle.

I continued for a while, humming under my breath, and then, since nobody seemed to object, I sang a little louder. As I worked, shade ebbed across the yard. I lost track of time, and my mind was finally quiet, my body working, a melody surrounding and protecting me. I knew mostly religious hymns. At my old school I’d sung in the choir, and I missed the music.

I heard the kitchen door open and I went silent. Bethany was walking down the stairs carrying two cups of dark liquid. “Thought you’d be thirsty,” she said. Her feet were bare and her toenails were painted an astonishing candy-pink color. I quickly dropped the ax, not wanting to frighten

her. “They’re drinking Bloody Marys and playing bingo,” she said. “Totally moronic. Rachel’s lost like two babies, and I bet this one will flush, too. They all go at five months. Aunt says it’s God’s will and that some children are too pure to be born, but I know it’s farm runoff in the water. That’s why I drink root beer and nothing else.” She seemed to shimmer in the sunlight. Her brown hair had red highlights that had been invisible indoors. “Here.” She handed me a cup and I was surprised to feel real glass. *Weapon*, I thought.

“I don’t really want kids,” she said. “But I do believe in adoption. It’s the right thing and a lot of people think it’s wrong to adopt out of the country and I definitely agree, since it’s racist if you don’t want an American baby just because it’s too brown or on drugs or whatever. Your voice is beautiful, by the way,” she said. “I was listening to you just now.”

“I thought I was alone,” I said.

“I had my window open”—she shrugged—“so technically, you were.”

I didn’t know what to say. It had been months since I’d sung in front of anyone, and now the thought of an audience made me surprisingly nervous. I took a sip of the root beer and almost gagged. It didn’t taste like food.

“Let’s stand in the shade,” Bethany said. She grabbed my arm and tugged me toward the shed, then rubbed the spot where she’d gripped me as if trying to erase the contact. Her touch was electric and startling. It made my whole arm tingle. “I read all the literature your school sent,” she said. “We’re supposed to evaluate your cleanliness, which struck me as bizarre. Wouldn’t the school know how clean you were? You’re hardly likely to get dirty coming over here. I felt like they were all fake questions.” I was so preoccupied with her lightly freckled shoulders and the thick, angry-looking scar on her chest that I didn’t immediately realize she’d gone silent.

“Excuse me?” I asked. I pretended to take a sip of the soda, but kept my lips tightly closed. I didn’t know where to look or what to say, so I stared at a small jeweled barrette that twinkled above her ear. The crystals were a bright, clear blue.

“Can I tell you a secret?” she asked.

“You probably shouldn’t,” I said.

“I hacked Auntie’s calendar,” she said. “I shifted the dates for Community Day so she wouldn’t know you were coming.”

“Why?” I said. I glanced at the other yards to make sure we were still alone.

“They were going to send me to church while you were here,” she said. “Make me help out with the charity suppers, only I’m not allowed to do anything strenuous, so I just fold napkins or sneak into the priest’s office and read his letters. He’s in love with his neighbor’s wife, coveting her and all that. I read it.” She stared right at me, the sort of unflinching look I associated with birds. “Everybody treats me like a glass trinket,” she said. “I get so bored. What are you really thinking?”

I shook my head as if I didn’t understand. I was only ever thinking about the right thing to say—the thing that would show me in the best light. This wasn’t the same as having thoughts.

“Come on,” she said. “I know you’re thinking something.”

“You shouldn’t break into other people’s offices and read their letters,” I said.

She rolled her eyes. “Stop that.”

“And also,” I said, “it’s wrong to share pilfered information.”

“Pilfered?” She laughed. “What does that even mean?”

“Stolen,” I said. I didn’t really think that this was a trap, but I couldn’t take a chance. At school, if you failed to speak up against wrong-thinking you were considered no better than an accomplice.

“Cut it out,” she said. “We might only have a few minutes and I want to know everything about you. I’m moving to campus soon. I’ll be living with my dad. I’m going to be doing lots of programming and coding—very dry, very dull. Do you think we can meet secretly?”

“No,” I said.

“Dad wanted to keep me here,” she said, “but I made myself *unwelcome*. That’s Auntie’s word.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Don’t be,” she said. “I consider it a personal triumph. I’m very goal-oriented, and getting kicked out of Meadowlands has been objective number one. Now Dad has to *take responsibility or else*. Those are Auntie’s words, too.”

I nodded, but I didn’t quite follow. I was looking at the stone patio and the plentiful trees. I was sure that if I lived in a house like this, I wouldn’t want to leave. “You don’t like it here?” I asked.

“ ‘All oppression creates a state of war,’ ” she said. “That’s a quote. And perhaps it’s not explicitly in reference to girls entombed in suburban homes. And perhaps you think that I’m a little dramatic, but I won’t trivialize my experience.”

She frowned, her expression determined and a little mutinous, as if she expected me to challenge her. “I should get back to work,” I said. I tried to return the root beer.

“No, no,” she said. “I’ll shut up. I just talk too much. Tell me what you really think about things.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“Tell me the worst thing you’ve ever done,” she said.

I stared at her barrette. The blue crystals were the same color as the lights on the civilian police cars.

“Okay, forget that,” she said, seeing the look on my face. “Do you have a pet? I hear they do that—give you animals to take care of.”

“At my last school I had a goat.”

For some reason this made her giggle. “And?”

“She liked to eat mops. We’d leave them to dry on the back porch and she’d eat the cottony parts. She ate a shirt once, too, but it wasn’t mine.”

“Sounds like she was a bad influence,” said Bethany.

“But a clever thief,” I said. “Not that I value that in a friend. Not a friend, but you know, a goat.” I wiped sweat off my upper lip. “You make me nervous.”

“Dad says nervous people die young.” She touched the scar on her chest. “I’m supposed to stay calm.”

“Are you sick?” I asked.

“If anyone tries to argue with me, all I have to say is, You’re upsetting me, and they have to be quiet. Except lately that hasn’t worked,” she said. “I think I’ve overused it. Or else they want me to keel over dead. Do you consider yourself a maniac?”

“No,” I said.

“But that’s just what a maniac would say.” And I must have looked worried, because she started to laugh. “You don’t know when I’m joking,” she said. She took a step closer. A drop of condensation ran down the side of the root beer glass. It rolled over my finger and she reached out to collect the droplet before it fell.

A surge of laughter rose up from inside the house. Bethany stood so close to me now that I felt the heat radiating off her. My gaze darted to check the kitchen door to make sure no one was watching. My body language was guilty. *Only the appearance of sin is needed*, the school said. *Animals live moment to moment as they follow their desires. You must ask yourself: Am I an animal?*

I stepped back, and an instant later the kitchen door squeaked open. Bethany darted away. “Don’t tell,” she whispered.

The aunt had brought me a bottle of water, but paused, seeing a glass already in my hand. Her eyes narrowed. “Where is she?” she asked.

“Behind the shed,” I answered.

I was allowed to come inside and eat a piece of cake. Bethany was sent to her room. She marched upstairs with loud, angry-sounding footsteps.

“Walk, please,” called the aunt. I pulled on my jacket and tie, and then the aunt sat me in the living room and began bringing me plates of food. There were little sandwiches with cucumbers and puréed meat, bowls of berries and ice cream, fresh vegetables and white cheese flecked with herbs. The reward for my good behavior was so swift, so delicious, that for a moment the world felt ordered and right. I started smiling and couldn’t stop. The food was incredible. I ate everything, and the ladies took notice. “All boys can eat at that age,” one said. “Mine were like that.”

“He has a hollow leg,” another said. “Isn’t that right, honey?” She looked so expectant, so resolute, that I nodded. “That’s right,” she said.

I’d never heard of hollow legs, but a boy at school had a plastic leg that looked like a hockey stick poking out of his pants.

“Wish I’d had a boy,” said the aunt. “They’re so useful.”

“You have a son-in-law,” said Rachel. One hand was draped protectively over her belly while the other dipped a carrot stick into a glass of champagne.

“Of course,” said the aunt, “a charming young man.” She looked around the room, nodding and showing off a too-bright smile. Her stiff bill of hair vibrated slightly.

Balls of crumpled wrapping paper littered the floor. The balloons tied to the chairback had drooped, slackening their strings. “May I read a magazine?” I asked. There were some stacked on the coffee table, all quickpaper editions that looked and felt like old-fashioned paper but held rotating downloaded content.

The aunt told me to help myself, and I sank into my chair and went through them—page by beautiful page. I’d been