



I enter the lobby of Claire Nightingale's apartment building, here to tell her I have murdered her only son. As always, the marble foyer is hushed and dim, almost sepulchral, and, as always, two doormen stand watch over the evening shift. The one who opens the door for me is named Victor. He recognizes my face—of course he does, he's worked here for years—and he says, "They starving you at that college? I can see your ribs, buddy."

"Hunger strike," I say, trying on a smile, but my voice comes out too loudly and echoes clumsily around the hollow space. My mouth still feels new, these lips, this meaty tongue. I cough to cover my mistake and walk toward the elevator at the back of the lobby. The second doorman looks up from his copy of the *Post*. Our eyes meet briefly, and he looks down again, uninterested.

"Ms. Nightingale just got in," Victor calls after me. "She'll be happy to see you. She's always talking about you."

I want to tell him that I already know she's upstairs, that I saw her step out of her taxi fifteen minutes ago





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from my hiding spot across Central Park West. Instead I just give him a wave and press the elevator button. I sat on a park bench for hours, waiting for Claire to return from wherever she was—holed up in her Chelsea office, suffering through some hopeless date, alone at the movies—all the while holding myself tightly against the November cold. When a cab finally pulled up to the building and I saw Claire get out, her slight, familiar outline backlit by the lobby's glow, I suppressed the urge to run across the street and grab her right there on the sidewalk. I had to remind myself about the doormen and the neighbors and the dog walkers, about strangers heading for the subway entrance on the corner or tourists who'd walked the wrong way after leaving the Museum of Natural History. This was a private matter; there was no need for anyone else to get involved.

From my bench I watched her hand Victor a leather bag, laugh along with something he said, touch his shoulder. Even at her lowest, she can always pull herself together for these brief encounters, these rote, mannerly interactions. There is always decorum. There is always propriety. I lived alongside Claire and her son, Luke, for fourteen years, and I know that trusting any particular Claire to hang around for too long is always a mistake. Luke never liked to admit this, to himself or anyone else, so I used to say it to his face: You're not dumb, just incurably naïve. As I sat on the bench, Victor opened the door for Claire and pulled it shut after her. Behind my back, Central Park shivered along with me, bare branches and spindly bushes rasping in the wind. I stood up and





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stamped feeling back into my legs, still amazed at the brittleness of my new body.

But don't mistake this for a complaint. I can now pick a coffee cup off the counter and carry it over to the table on the other side of the room. I can shake a man's hand. I can drive a car. I can press my palm onto a square of wet cement and leave a mark. I have a voice that can be heard by anyone who cares to listen. I am here, in the world, in the flesh, a body moving in space. And, of course, Claire can no longer ignore me. She never liked how much time Luke spent alone with me; even when we were children she suspected that our friendship was the face of something dark and hidden. But tonight she will be forced to listen to what I have to say. It's something for which I've waited a long time—fourteen years—and part of me wants to jab at the elevator button like a maniac, to sprint up the three flights to her apartment in one breath, to yell and scream and bang my head against the marble lobby walls.

But I don't. I stand with my hands clasped behind my back, my body rigid and still, my frenzy contained. Above my head, floor numbers light up in reverse. In the brass doors, my reflection is murky and distorted, as though submerged in a pool of dirty water. Outside on the street, someone shouts, a car door slams. The second doorman shakes his newspaper. I wait and watch the numbers tumble downward.

The day I met Luke, I was alone in the playground when I heard someone call my name. I turned around and his





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face was there in front of mine. He was six years old then. His skin was pale, his features delicate and precise, just like his mother's. His left eye was yellow-flecked green, the right brown, as if, instead of melding, his parents' genes had been split evenly, an eye for each. Later, I liked to remind him that he came looking for me first. I didn't ask for any of it.

"Hi," he said. "I'm Luke. Want to play a game?"

He explained the rules: "The dinosaurs try to eat us, but we hide and use these"—he waved a neon-orange water gun—"to shoot them instead. Get it, Daniel?"

I nodded slowly. Daniel? It was true, that was my name. This was how things were at first: Luke said it and that made it so. He looked at me, not quite satisfied. "You need a laser pistol too. Here." I felt something cold and heavy weigh down my hand. I looked at my gun. It was dull silver metal, double-barreled and snub-nosed, a scope mounted atop the barrels. "You aim through that," Luke said, pointing at the scope.

We were in the playground across from the Metropolitan Museum. It was November then, too, and cold. We stood in a sandpit in the shadow of a toy brick pyramid, fifteen feet tall at its peak and dotted with footholds to help children scale its sloped sides. I watched as two older boys fought their way to the top, clawing at the gritty bricks and each other until one slipped, ripping a hole in the knee of his khakis and sliding down to the base. Luke winced, and the boy cried, clutching his knee while his rival peered down at him from the top of the pyramid. I couldn't help laughing at the boy's





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scrunched-up face, such an obvious exaggeration. The theatrics of a loser.

“Stop laughing,” Luke told me. “It’s not funny.” He waved me toward two tire swings, where a little girl spun in lazy circles, humming to herself. She pinned us with a pair of watery eyes and said, “I was leaving anyway,” before she hopped off and disappeared behind a family of concrete turtles. We got down in the cold dirt and squeezed under the tires. We lay there on our stomachs, a pair of snipers propping up our guns in the desert sand. I looked around while we waited. Plump babysitters pushed strollers and held the hands of toddlers in bulky parkas. Girls in pale blue skirts shared cigarettes and eyed the boys jostling one another out by the bus stop in their maroon blazers. I didn’t see any dinosaurs.

“There!” Luke whispered, pointing toward the museum. “A *Tyrannosaurus rex*. Be very quiet and don’t shoot until I say.”

I followed his finger. At first I saw nothing except the glare of the sun on the glass wall of the museum, but gradually a two-story outline took shape and filled in on the lawn in front of the wall. Two giant legs rippled with sinewy muscle and ended in tri-clawed feet. Tiny, almost dainty arms hung tight against a massive torso. A triangular head opened its mouth to display rows of fist-sized teeth. Old white scars marred brown, pebbled skin, and one fresh-looking red wound splashed across a thigh like war paint.

“See him?”





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I nodded. The tyrannosaurus lurched toward the playground and the earth shuddered under our stomachs. Its shadow dwarfed the trees, and I could see the reflection of its spiny back receding on the glass wall as it stalked across the road between the museum and the playground, hunched forward, its black eyes sweeping the space at its feet. A wailing police car sped between its legs as it stepped over the playground's fence. I checked my vision through the scope, finding the creature in the crosshairs.

"Go!" Luke shouted, and we rolled out from under the swings, scrambled to our feet, and ran toward a chain-metal bridge. The tyrannosaurus spotted us from the edge of the playground and began moving faster, dipping its head low, showing us its teeth. Wrist-thick ropes of saliva webbed the space between its two rows of incisors, and a chunk of flesh dislodged itself and tumbled wetly to the sand. We were almost at the bridge when I heard her voice, strident, insistent, scaling upward like a warped record: "Luuuke!"

Her name fit. Claire Nightingale was small-boned and birdlike, full of sharp, quick movements. She stood at the far end of the playground, the setting sun flush in her face, her body bisected by shadow. She fluttered her hands at us. "Time to go." Luke didn't move, and I glanced over my shoulder: the tyrannosaurus was nowhere to be found. Claire's hands were now on her hips. "Luke!" She wore a navy pantsuit and black flats, and was coatless despite the bite of the early-winter afternoon. She stamped her foot, pointed at the ground in front of her. "Come here this instant."





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Luke sighed, looked at me, shrugged. My gun disappeared as he walked toward his mother. Halfway there he stopped and turned back to me. “Come on. You don’t want to stay here by yourself, do you?”

As soon as Luke was within reach, Claire kissed his cheek and grabbed his wrist, hard. “I lost track of time. We’re late.”

“Daniel’s going to come with us,” Luke said. “He’s my new friend.”

I nodded at Claire, but she didn’t give me more than a glance. “Is that so?”

“I won’t make any trouble,” I said.

Claire smiled, a private thing. “I suppose that’s fine.”

Luke stuffed the water gun in his pocket and took my hand, making himself a bridge between his mother and me as we walked onto Fifth Avenue. A second police car and then an ambulance screamed past us, parting the downtown traffic with their urgent authority. I followed their course over my shoulder and saw them pull to a halt a few blocks south, where a small crowd had gathered on the sidewalk across from the museum, but then Luke dragged me on and I didn’t look back again.

“I told you not to roll around in that filthy sand.” Claire glanced down at the grit streaking her son’s sweat-shirt. “You could get a disease.”

“How?”

“Anything that lives in the sand, if it gets inside you it will live there too. I’m trying to keep you safe, Luke.” He nodded, but I could tell he didn’t understand. “I mean living things you can’t see. They’re everywhere. They’re





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all over you and you can't even feel them. And us, people, we're vulnerable to even the smallest. Our skin is permeable. Do you know what that means?" "Porous," I said, but she continued as though she hadn't heard me. "It means we're dotted with holes. Cheesecloth. Sieves. And then these things get inside us and mingle with what's ours until we can't tell the difference between the two." She kept on like this the whole way. I tried to sort through her speech, but I didn't know what was important and what could be thrown away.

The Nightingale apartment was on 106th Street, across Fifth Avenue from the Conservatory Garden, which was almost never crowded, not even in the spring when flamboyant tulips and roses splattered its lawns. In winter, the garden was reduced to an arrangement of sharp-cornered hedges, an homage to discipline and order. Benches nestled hidden in dense folds of brambles; sheltered corners offered up a wealth of shadows. Even that first time, I felt a strong, simple appreciation for the garden as the three of us passed by its gates and crossed the street to their apartment building.

The elevator deposited us on the penthouse floor, where the doors opened directly into the apartment's plush but cramped space. Over Luke's shoulder, in the living room, a massive wooden armoire abutted a mirrored liquor cabinet, which in turn crowded a low glass table cluttered with bamboo baskets. In the foyer, a watercolor landscape looked down upon a wicker rocking chair. In this rocking chair Luke's father sat, ankles crossed and hands behind his head, stretched out to his





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full length. The air in the apartment was close and heavy. I trailed behind Luke and Claire, unsure of my place in any of this.

James Tomasi sat up straight. “I believe you said four-thirty.”

Claire flicked her head toward Luke and me. “Your son was busy making friends at the playground. It was all I could do to drag him away.”

“I’m sure you had nothing to do with it.” He winked at Luke with half of his face, like a mime. “Isn’t that right, chief?” Luke put his finger in his mouth and looked at his mother. “All I’m saying is somehow I managed to escape the office and get here on time. It would have been nice if you had attempted to do the same.”

“The sacrifices you make. I’m lucky to be married to a hero like you.”

James turned his head to the side and snorted like a horse. I studied him from my spot behind Luke. He was tall and rangy, long-fingered and loose-limbed. Tufts of wiry black hair sprouted from his knuckles. He wore a blue- and white-striped Oxford shirt, the top button open above the knot of his loosened tie. Over a once-broken nose two dark brown eyes retreated deep into their sockets. He had given Luke one of these eyes, but there were few other similarities between father and son; Luke’s features were concise, while everything about James was elongated and roughly cut. Though tense, Luke’s father looked more than a little resigned, as if the outcome of whatever battle he was fighting had already been decided. He gestured at the briefcase resting beside





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the wicker chair. “I brought everything.” His eyes flickered over to Luke and me, and then back to Claire. “I don’t feel like there’s much either of us should say right now.”

“Your altruism is breathtaking.” Claire took off her suit jacket and hung it on a hook near the entrance, and I saw for the first time how thin her arms were, how her skin was almost translucent, blue veins vivid as tattoos against the white skin. She squatted in front of her son. “Luke, your father and I have some things we need to talk about in private. Why don’t you and your new friend go to your room for just a little bit. Can you do that for me?”

Inside the bedroom, the last thin bands of sunlight slid through slits in the drawn bamboo shades. Luke spun a giant freestanding globe, and let his fingers graze across oceans and continents smeared into one unbroken stream of color. An antique four-poster bed stood against one wall and a meticulously detailed dollhouse was wedged into a corner. Luke saw me looking at the dollhouse and said apologetically, “It’s for girls, but my mother says there’s nowhere else to put it.”

Inside the miniature rooms, porcelain dolls with painted faces and tiny clothes took tea and played chess. Each time I looked into the house, the dolls seemed to hold slightly different positions than before, yet I could never catch them in motion. Luke hopped onto a stuffed leather chair and kicked off his boat shoes. His feet didn’t touch the floor, but he’d fashioned a footrest out of several old hardcover mystery novels. His bare toes





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worried the cover of the top one as he announced: “My father doesn’t sleep here anymore but he still comes home for dinner sometimes. On Mondays and Thursdays, I think. My mother keeps changing the days.”

I didn’t know what to say. “And tonight?”

Luke frowned. “I asked my mother and she said they’re on strike in Delphi, so it’s anyone’s guess. Do you know what that means?”

I wanted to say, *It means your father probably isn’t going to stay for dinner*, but I couldn’t explain how I knew that, so I just shrugged. Movement caught the corner of my eye, and I spun to face the dollhouse. “What is it?” Luke said. The figurines had moved, I was sure of it. A woman hung by her feet from a chandelier, her little pink evening dress billowing out toward her head; two men lay facedown on the floor in the parlor, their hands crossed behind their backs as though bound. “Oh, they always do that,” Luke said. He slid off the chair and took a step toward the house. I stepped behind him, and the house loomed large in its corner, and then I took another step and Luke’s bedroom and all its objects fell away. I stepped onto the porch—white-painted wood, it gave with a creak—and into the foyer, where Luke was already waiting for me. The smells of sea salt and pine drifted in through the open windows; a grandfather clock kept the time.

“Where are we?” I said.

“Newport,” Luke said. “Rhode Island. My grandmother’s house. Want to meet her?”

In the dining room, the woman still hung from the





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chandelier. Her porcelain head swiveled to fix us, and her upside-down mouth moved, but nothing came out. “I guess she’s not talking today.” The woman’s feet unhooked from the chandelier’s iron arms, and she crashed to the floor. “Well,” Luke said. “Another time, maybe.” In an adjacent nursery sat a crib, navy blue with white trim. A baby lay swaddled in blankets, its blank face unblinkingly regarding us. “That’s my mother,” Luke said. “They didn’t make any more after her.” Dangling over baby Claire was a mobile of stars and quarter-moons. Bright light wiped away any scenery on the other side of the windows.

“Luke?”

Suddenly the walls and floors and ceilings flew apart, and James stood in the doorway of the Fifth Avenue bedroom. “Are you playing with that creepy old thing again?”

“I was just showing it to Daniel,” Luke said, his face flushed and damp.

I wasn’t sure what I should say, so I kept my mouth shut. James looked in my direction, and then back at Luke. “It’s just that we might not be seeing as much of each other as we’re used to. What you need to understand is that it’s not because I want it to be that way.”

Luke paused for a moment, then said, “Who does?”

“What?”

“Who wants it to be that way?”

James tugged at the knot of his tie. “Nobody does, Luke. That’s just what’s going to happen.”

Dustlike quiet settled over the room, and Luke hung





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back, letting the dead space sag between them. I knew that each had disappointed the other, but I didn't know how or why. I wanted to speak up now, to reach out and pinch James's cheek or ruffle his hair, to slap Luke on the backside of his head and tell him to snap out of it, but I found myself unable to say or do anything.

James put on a fake smile. "Hey, cheer up, chief. It's not the end of the world. Things won't be that different."

*You don't have to lie*, I wanted to say.

Luke shook his head. "They're different now," he said.

Claire's voice suddenly echoed through the apartment: "You guys okay in there?"

"No, the roof caved in, we're all crushed to death," James yelled back. "Christ," he muttered under his breath, and then he kissed Luke's forehead and left the room wiping his son's sweat from his lips. Luke and I waited a moment before sneaking down the hall after him. From the doorway to the foyer, I saw him say something low and seemingly tender to Claire. He put his hand on her elbow but she jerked it away and walked into the kitchen. He stood alone in the foyer for a moment, and then he picked up his briefcase, and without another word he made his escape.

