

ELEANOR AT THE TOP OF THE WORLD

by Jason Gurley

PROLOGUE

ONE

For all of her life, Eleanor has been falling.

Her life ends and begins again on a gloomy morning in August. She is fourteen. In the years since she has dreamed of the day again and again. The clarity of the dream always surprises her. The bitter taste of her panic. The tingle of sweat bursting all over her scalp. The hard, cold, gray water. Blackness blooming across her vision.

The dream almost never deviates from its prescribed order.

She stands.

She falls.

She cries out.

She wakes.

She comes out of the dream to find herself weightless, suspended in that breathless moment before the sounds of the

world puncture her bubble. The creak of her father moving about upstairs. The sputter of the neighbor's car cranking in the cold. The endless thrum of Oregon rain. Every sound amplifies, sucks her back to Earth with a rush.

She learns to treasure the odd dreamless night.

#

The beach in Anchor Bend is the edge of the world. From it, cast into the always-gray ocean, is a long pier hammered smooth by the tides. It juts away from the gravelly beach, buckles this way and that, and ends where the sea floor drops fast into nothingness. Its heavy wooden beams are slick, softened in places from years of saturation. Eleanor walks the pier, the damp wood cool and squishy beneath her toes. Once she imagined that she had giant hands, and could wring the ocean from the wooden planks.

She tilts her bicycle into the shaky stone beach. Steps over the low rusted chain that blocks the pier, its dented tin STAY OUT sign swaying on the breeze. She leans against the wooden handrails, gone greenish in the sea air. None of the tall lamps still works. There are nails pounded everywhere into the lamp posts. The gulls land here and there anyway, undeterred.

The boat is small and lashed to the end of the pier. Its paint has cracked like parched skin, the bright yellow long

faded to a dim ochre. Eleanor has never seen the boat's owner, but it must have one. Sometimes she and Jack and Stacy arrive at the beach to find the boat lashed to the opposite side of the pier, where a section of the handrail has collapsed into the ocean. One time the boat wasn't there at all, and Jack discovered it grounded a quarter-mile up the beach, with rocks piled in its belly to anchor it to the shore.

In all the years after her fall, Eleanor never forgets the boat. It is, in a way, the vehicle of her destruction. She often wonders, as an adult, if the little boat is still tied up there at the end of the world. She hopes that it is.

#

On that particular August morning, Eleanor plucks at the rough rope that holds the boat to the pier. Jack and Stacy have already climbed aboard. It is Eleanor's turn to serve as the deckhand. She pulls at the stubborn lashing. When she has it, she says, Got it, and Jack whips the rope into the boat before Eleanor has fully let go. The rope saws viciously into her palm. Blood wells up like tiny beads in the bright groove it leaves behind. But there is no time to cry out. The boat is already bobbing away from the pier.

She gives her hand to Jack, who pulls her aboard. She sits down hard beside Stacy. Jack is looking at his hand, streaked

with Eleanor's blood. His wounded expression lifts her like a kite, and he blots her palm with his shirt, and kisses her hand while Stacy looks away.

It is a moment that Eleanor will keep forever. She would much prefer to dream this moment, this isolated small rush of happiness in an endless loop.

But her dreams never listen to her. In them, she always falls.

#

Do you think they're actually saying things? Real things.

The seagulls?

Stacy nods.

I think it's pretty clear what they're saying, Jack says.

What is it?

Listen real close.

Eleanor and Stacy make a show of tilting their heads upward. The sky is choked with birds.

We never should have given them our lunches, Stacy mutters.

I can't tell what they're saying, Eleanor says.

Don't you hear it? Jack asks.

I give up, I give up, Stacy says.

Jack cracks that killer smile. They're saying, Where's dinner? Gotta take a crap. Where's dinner? Gotta take a --

Stacy slugs him in the shoulder.

#

Eleanor sifts through these recalled moments every night in her dream. Her sleep is a lonely theater, her memory its projectionist, her aching head its only paying customer.

#

The boat cuts a string of white across the calm, unbroken water. Jack rows lazily. The fog has pulled thin like cotton. The gray water catches the sunlight, turns orange and yellow.

Huffnagle rises up behind Jack, a baleful heap of broken rock. There's hardly anything island-like about it, Eleanor thinks. Perhaps if it were a hundred feet taller, or the sea a hundred feet lower, the island would be a picnicker's paradise. But it is just a buckled heft of rock, long ago ejected from the Oregon coast by some seismic hissyfit. Its shore is narrow and littered with dull boulders and tidal detritus. A scrawl of sandy gravel traces the cliff's base, tracing a path through scrubs of withered brush and rock. Huffnagle is an island only because there's nothing else to call it.

Huffnagle's reverse side is a sheer wall of rock easily seventy feet high, its surface sketched with fissures and shelves of crumbling rock. Its history is blind to them, and so each time they row to its shore, they invent stories more

complex and exciting than the ones before. In Stacy's fictions, it is a popular place for tourists to summer, where men wear bowlers and women twist parasols in their fingers, and on spread blankets they drink from china cups and paint lovely watercolors of the land and sea. There's no place for blankets here, Jack always says. No place for a parasol. Smugglers, maybe. Or kidnappers. Or whalers. Evil whalers.

Evil whalers with pretty pink parasols, Eleanor suggests.

In shiny pink rubber boots, Stacy jeers.

But after today Huffnagle will have a new story to tell.

#

Jack discovered the island first. He and his father had been watching the Olympics together. Gymnastics interested him, a little, but he was truly captivated by the high-divers who vaulted and twisted and speared into the water. The talking heads on the television observed that diving from such heights, before so many spectators, required a measure of courage and focus greater than the average human was equipped with.

Jack's father snorted at that. I did twice that height when I was, oh, about your age, he said.

Twice! Jack said. Were you scared?

Only until I jumped, his father said. Do you know the island you can see from the beach?

They went on a Sunday morning, just after Jack's mother had left for church. His father left the car on Argus Road, and as they trudged across the pebbled beach, he said, Don't you tell your mother I brought you here.

Jack nodded.

What does Uncle Sonny call me?

The Knife!

You ever wonder why?

Jack shook his head.

Incurious boy, his father muttered. Well, this is why.

Jack watched his father untie a little yellow boat from the pier. His father let him row for awhile, and then took over. At the island, as they climbed, his father said, We would dive here, me and a couple of the boys. Your uncle Sonny, he never jumped. Too scared, mostly. He was always a nervous kid. We gave him a lot of shit, but we never really wanted him to jump. Good thing, too. You know how he is now.

Did he have the braces then?

Not until a few years later. Anyway. He would sit on the edge and cheer us on, right over there. Sometimes we'd run and leap right over his head. Scared the hell out of him, but we could hear him laughing all the way down.

Jack walked up to the edge of the cliff with his father.

Why did they call you the Knife?

His father sat down and chucked a piece of rock out into space. Jack tried to trace its path all the way to the water, but lost it.

I was a pretty good diver when I was your age. The other guys, they'd cannonball over the edge, just fly out there like pinwheels. You don't want to land on your belly or your back from this high up, that's for damn sure. Me, I cut the sea so clean she just closed right up behind me. Stitched herself right on back together. No splash. Just clean.

Jack shuffled around behind his father while he talked.

Thing is, he went on, you gotta push off hard. Real, real hard. Because if you don't, you won't clear the rocks at the bottom. You definitely don't want to hit those rocks at sixty miles an hour. None of us ever did. Chuck came close once.

Jack had stripped to the waist while his father was talking. Dad! he said, and when his father looked, Jack had taken a few steps back, and was running for the edge. His father's heart dropped as fast and as far as Jack himself.

Then Jack surfaced, a good distance out, and Jack's father slapped his oar-like hands together and shouted, Jack the Knife!

#

A few days later, Jack rowed the boat to the island with

Eleanor and Stacy inside. He led them to the top of the cliff. Showed them where to sit. Said, Okay, watch. Eleanor looked back and saw Jack kicking his shoes off. She watched until he removed his shirt, then looked away, her face reddening.

A moment later he flew through the air like a big ungainly bird. Eleanor gasped.

Jack the Knife! he hollered when he came up, bobbing in the ocean thirty yards out, both fists pumped over his head.

Eleanor held her shirt away from her chest so Jack wouldn't notice that her heart had almost punched clean through her skin.

Whatever, Stacy muttered. I saw a splash.

TWO

The last day of Eleanor's first life is August fourth. It is a Sunday, nearly one year since Jack first rowed the girls to the island, since he dived proudly from Huffnagle's crown. Since Eleanor began to fall in love with Jack.

The sun bakes their cheeks and noses. Jack paddles the dinghy westward. The receding tides capture the boat and draw them slowly nearer the island. He relaxes, tipping the oars up. Water sloshes in the bottom of the boat, trickles down the lifted oars. The boat is not as watertight as it once was, but it lets the sea in so slowly that none of them worries about it. Jack says he will fix it someday, but he never does. They have rowed to Huffnagle so many times, and so often in worse conditions than these, that they know well the boat's limitations. Soon they will reach the shore, and the wooden hull

will dry and expand again in the late morning sun. By the time the morning has worn away into afternoon, the children will be useless and glowing and tired, and they will coast back to land on the returning tides.

Jack dips the oars back into the water every so often, maintaining an undemanding pace. Eleanor and Stacy sit sideways, their backs pressed together. They hook their knees over the sides of the boat and drag their toes in the ocean. Their wake is stirred now and then by fish nipping at the bubbles they have stirred up.

Stacy's back is knotted and tense. Eleanor can feel it, but doesn't much care. She doesn't mind the sun, crisping her skin. Doesn't feel the rope burn that has furrowed her palm. Its sting is gone, and in its place a nervous warmth where he briefly kissed her hand.

She liked that his hands were rough.

It isn't so bad today, Stacy mutters.

None of them have spoken for twenty minutes. None of them has anything to say back. Stacy is right. For most of the last week, Anchor Bend has been thumped about by a determined summer storm. It is gone now, the chill of the mornings finally erased. The gray sky plunges upward into blue. The sun has returned, a shimmering white blot that sizzles away the last of the marine

layer.

Still too warm, Jack opines. He tucks his arms behind his head and leans into his hands.

Whatever, Stacy says.

Eleanor smiles to herself. At fifteen, Jack is glorious, all bluster and bravado. She rests her head on Stacy's narrow shoulder and watches Jack through squinted eyes. His eyes shut tight. His choppy, sawdust-colored hair, his sharp forehead. His too-large ears. He is a bony boy, but a wiry one, with long thin muscles beneath his pale skin. By this time tomorrow, he will be pink from this day beneath the sun. By this time next summer, he will have grown three inches, and will show the first signs of settling into this awkward, oversized frame he lives in.

She has known him for two years. His family came to Anchor Bend from Juneau, by way of Vancouver. Their southern migration occurred against his will, and he swore that the icy north seas still ran in his veins. Eleanor admired his brashness, though she privately thought it was a little too proudly-worn. She closes her eyes and imagines him five years from now. Thinks about the kiss. Imagines herself beside him then. Her face warms in the sun, disguising the blush she feels rising in her cheeks.

The sun forks through a hank of clouds. The gashed, cottony edges are soaked in gold.

This is more like it, she says softly.

Stacy looks over her shoulder. What?

But Eleanor and Jack both have their eyes closed, faces upturned plant-like to the sun.

Oh, Stacy says.

#

Once last summer, as Stacy packed away the remains of their cliffside picnic, Jack captured Eleanor by the wrist and guided her to the cliff's edge. Stacy felt them move away in her peripheral vision, her cheeks burning at this quiet exclusion. When Jack was certain they were far enough away, he turned his back to Stacy and leaned close to Eleanor.

Kiddo, he whispered -- he enjoyed reminding her that he was an entire year older -- Kiddo, you can't go around looking at a man like that. You can't hold him responsible for what he might -- might do.

Eleanor looked over Jack's shoulder at Stacy, who worked with her back to them. Although Jack sounded as if he had been reading one of her mother's romance novels, she felt her heart send up a flare and hoped it didn't show in her face. Her breath pounded in her ears, and then Jack stepped back, and with two quick strides, was gone.

She watched him launch into the sky, all knees and elbows,

and just before he disappeared from sight, all of that chaos resolved itself into an imperfect but well-intentioned dive. She listened, but did not hear a splash. From so high you sometimes couldn't. But then his voice carried up from far below.

Jack the Knife, baby!

It was the first time she realized that if she looked at him just so, he would do almost anything for her. It would be years before she understood that it wasn't the look at all. It was just her.

#

Eleanor holds her breath and tumbles over the side of the boat. Jack is not far behind, after he drops the oars into the hull. He half-stands, reaching for the rope. Eleanor kicks at the boat, and Jack loses his balance. He pushes off with his feet, trying to turn a fall into a cannonball. Stacy squeals and throws up her hands at the splash. Ellie! she cries.

Jack comes up and shakes his head like a dog. Stace, throw me the rope.

Stacy picks the rope up gingerly. It's all wet, she complains. She limply tosses the waterlogged rope in Jack's direction. It falls far short, and Jack swims a few feet to pluck it out of the water.

Eleanor floats alongside the boat while Jack tugs it to

shore. For as long as she can, she keeps her feet away from the bottom, but the bottom rises up quickly beneath her. She stands reluctantly and slogs through the remaining water, splashing as much as she can, to Stacy's chagrin.

Far enough, Jack says, after yanking the boat out of the water. He plops backward onto the gritty beach. Only now does Stacy stand, clutching her Strawberry Shortcake bicycle basket, and carefully climb onto land.

What's for lunch today? Jack says.

Stacy tucks the basket under one arm and opens it. This is her contribution to their summer ritual. She has carefully wrapped three sandwiches, two in cellophane, one crisply folded in wax paper. The third looks like a Christmas present, Eleanor notices. It is even tied up with white twine.

I bet I know which one is mine, Jack says, grinning up at her and shielding his eyes from the sun.

Eleanor narrows her eyes at his too-smug attitude. Then she sees Stacy's embarrassed smile, and decides she'd like to push them both into the ocean.

It's your favorite, Stacy says. Plus I know how much plastic wrap gives you the willies.

Your favorite, Eleanor thinks. Bitch.

Roast beef and swiss? Jack says brightly.

Stacy's smile goes flat. I thought -- but -- I thought it was peanut butter. With honey.

Eleanor cheers silently at the awkward moment, and even pats her hands together in a little clap. Her palm stings as if punctured. She had forgotten the rope burn. She clenches her hand into a fist, but that only hurts more. She's tired of watching the two of them go back and forth now.

How about we dive first and eat later, Eleanor suggests.

Stacy wheels around as if she has forgotten Eleanor was there. I was going to -- she starts, then she shakes her head, takes a deep breath. Sets her shoulders as if righting herself. Yes, Stacy says. Okay. Let's swim first.

Jack jumps up. Hey, he says to Stacy. Roast beef and swiss sounds really good.

Stacy looks away and nods.

Jack sighs, then looks at Eleanor, who shakes him off. He trots up the beach ahead of the girls, then doubles back. He overturns the boat so the hull will dry. A half-gallon of water surges into the gravelly sand and vanishes. Then he is gone again, stripping off his shirt as he runs up the path to the cliff.

Stacy tugs at her jeans, resolutely avoiding Eleanor's eyes. Her one-piece bathing suit snaps against her skin beneath

her trousers. She begins to unbutton her puffy short-sleeved top, and Eleanor sees that Stacy is trying not to cry.

Hey, she says. See you back here in a few, okay?

Stacy doesn't look up. Sure. Okay.

Eleanor watches Stacy gather up her clothes and the bicycle basket. Her friend plods across the beach to a path that curves around to the back side of the island, to the watching rock, a large, flat slab of granite in a narrow cove. Before Stacy is out of sight, Eleanor calls after her.

Hey, Stace!

Stacy stops and looks back forlornly. Eleanor runs to her. She kisses the smaller girl's cheek and tips their foreheads together. Stacy's eyes fill up at this act of tenderness.

He's only a boy, Eleanor says. Okay?

Stacy nods, trying not to cry.

Okay?

Okay, Stacy says.

Eleanor hugs her, bicycle basket and all. I'll see you at the rock, okay?

Jack is waiting at the top when Eleanor climbs up. Hey, he says.

She's never going to jump, Eleanor says.

Jack claps Eleanor on the shoulder. It is a casual gesture,

but it almost explodes her heart.

Nah, he says. You wouldn't either.

What do you mean?

Well, you know, Jack says. Probably because of her sister.

Eleanor frowns. She doesn't realize that she has slowly been leaning back against Jack's arm until her head bumps his chin. Her heart has not exploded after all. She feels it fluttering, like it has grown little honeybee wings. But it will explode. Any second now, unless Jack moves away.

He doesn't.

Stacy doesn't have a sister, Eleanor says. She can hear the quaver in her voice, and hopes he doesn't.

Guess again, kiddo, Jack answers.

I never met her.

Well, Jack says. No. I guess you wouldn't have.

What's that supposed to mean?

He rests his hand on her shoulder. From here they can look down and see the watching rock. Stacy is busily unpacking the bicycle basket. Eleanor marvels at how much she manages to fit inside of it. She sees a plastic Thermos, which Stacy uses to hold paper napkins in place. There are the sandwiches. And some small plastic containers.

You ever notice how old her folks are? Jack asks.

Pretty old, I guess. So?

So... Stacy isn't an only kid. Yeah, okay. I mean, she is now. But I kind of get the idea that her parents were sort of... well, you know. Done having kids. And then Stacy came along. But she had a big sister. Like real big, ten years older or something.

Eleanor lifts her head. She died?

Jack looks down at her seriously. The hand on her shoulder is now around her. Each of them is pretending not to notice.

What happened? Eleanor asks.

He shrugs. I don't know. She fell. I know that much. Stacy didn't tell me much more. I had to calm her down after she told me.

He pauses, then says thoughtfully, That girl sure can work herself up.

Eleanor's heart doesn't explode. It stops altogether. It had never occurred to her that her two friends might talk when she wasn't around. She looks down at Stacy, small and pale and alone on the watching rock, her perfect little picnic and her lonely folded pile of clothing, her ruffled pink one-piece. She has a handful of stones, and tosses them one by one into the water.

She looks dreadfully small.

Poor kid, Eleanor says, unaware that she has adopted Jack's manner.

Don't tell her I told you, Jack says. Okay?

She shakes her head.

Jack dips his mouth close to her ear. She shivers. Her heart hums faster. She tucks her face down so he won't notice the warmth creeping into her skin. Just you and me up here, kiddo, he says. Who's first?

It is their own ritual, this decision. He always offers it to her, and she almost always lets him dive first. He'll cheer her on from far below, and she'll stand briefly alone at the top of the world, slow her breathing, jump into the ocean. Then they'll swim over to the watching rock, and Stacy will announce whose dive was better, and then they'll swim for awhile, and then they'll eat, and then they'll sprawl on the rock and dry in the sun, and then, finally, they'll go home.

Today she wants to be in the water first, to look up at him. To watch him fall fast and sharp and smooth into the sea beside her. To feel him tug at her toes before he surfaces next to her and shakes the water from his hair.

So she says, Me, okay.

If Eleanor had known then that this would be the last thing she would say to Jack -- to anybody -- for so very long, then

perhaps she would have said something more urgent and important. Maybe she would have said something worthy of her mother's romance novels. What if she had kissed him? And fiercely whispered I love you, dummy, before she jumped and ruined everything.

#

There is one moment when the thread of the dream is lost. Her sleep skips a beat. Her memories stretch and pull like spun sugar. She is the only camera operator on an enormous movie set. She cannot cover every angle by herself. It is inevitable that she will miss something.

She believes that this is why she has the dream nearly every night. There is something urgent that she has forgotten. Something buried in this memory that she has failed to uncover.

What is lost in narrative is compensated for by precise, tiny details that she can never forget. The sun, which at the moment of her dive retreats into a hedge of clouds. The pall cast over the island by its removal. The sudden nervous flutter of Jack's heart -- how could she have missed this then? She did not even notice it until she had left him, and her own heart stayed behind. The sudden absence of sound, as though the audio track of her memory has become corrupted. The loose gravel

crunchless beneath her feet as she removes her sandals and places them beside the edge of the cliff.

And there she is.

In the dream Eleanor watches over and over as her younger self walks to the brink of the cliff. She sees her own nervousness, wrapped up in an almost theatrical show of confidence. She tosses her red hair deliberately, just for him.

At fourteen she has leapt from Huffnagle twice before. This dive, she assures herself, will be her best yet. The first was a clumsy cannonball, her second a wreck of overcompensation, a near backflop.

She watches this beautiful, fragile girl take position at the edge.

It doesn't matter what is going to happen next. This moment belongs entirely to her.

#

Eleanor fairly shines. For a moment, defiant, proud. She can feel Jack's gaze. His mouth has fallen open at the sight of her. He cannot seem to close it.

Her arms, as if independent of her body, sweep slowly upward, outward.

The angle of the dream changes here sometimes, and she sees

herself from far below the cliff. Her body framed against the bleached-bone sky, a perfect calligraphed form. Every line of her shape has purpose. She is graceful. Musical.

In this moment, Eleanor is as perfect as she will ever be.

#

She dives.

As her muscles strain and lift and she is carried out into empty space, she thinks Jack the Knife, Jack the Knife.

Here, the Eleanor who is dreaming experiences a sour turn in her gut. Sometimes the nausea is powerful enough to rip her from the dream, coughing. But only sometimes.

She knows what will come next. She sees clearly the moment that it all goes to hell, as if something inside her younger self has realized all at once that she is not a feather, not a swan, not a perfectly-tuned instrument. She is once again a fourteen-year-old girl. Some tumbler deep within her shifts the wrong way, too far, too fast, and all of her poise and confidence is revoked by a surge of panic. The flicker of grace in her silhouette is gone, as if it never had been.

Both Eleanors -- Eleanor the dreamer, Eleanor the cliff-diver -- think the very same thing.

Jack the Knife. Jack the Knife. Jack

the

Jack the Jack Jack

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Jack JACK

#

Eleanor falls. Not like a swan or a feather, but like a sack of stones, terrible and relentless.

For a shimmering moment everything goes viciously clear: The bright sweat that breaks across her brow. Every hair on her head suspended like an aura, crisp and glowing like angora. In this moment of suspension, Eleanor is able to observe her younger self through the dream's high-magnification lens, and this is a gift she will never give back. Even in her terror, she is stunned by how lovely this version of herself was. She is captivated by the lush green of her eyes, deeper than anything she has ever seen. In this moment she sees every knot of color, every wash of pigment, that creates this particular green. Noticing this leaves her breathless.

Her younger self feels this, too. Something almost serene. The stir of a breeze against her cheek, startlingly soft, like the wingtips of a seagull.

#

A seagull.

Where's dinner? Gotta take a --

#

She plummets.

She is sickened to relive this moment, but the dream never allows her to look away. Her thin arms tear at the sky and find instead the cliff wall, to which she falls far too closely. The violence of this contact breaks three of her fingers. Her bones, sparrow-like, crack as if sculpted from ice. The price of this half-second of confusion are the pins she will carry in her left arm for the rest of her life.

There is no time to cry out. There is barely time to breathe.

When she lands, she lands so hard.

Her body, so slight, falls against the gray water and the scud of rocks beneath the cliff. Sometimes Eleanor vomits in her sleep, so brutal is this moment to relive, even in a dream.

She watches herself disappear into the sea, the only evidence of her intrusion a bloom of blood in the place where she has gone missing. She remembers that awful last splinter of consciousness. The scream she could not release from her lungs before the sea charged in. The bitter tang of brine and salt. Spectacular pain, and a blackness so complete that she felt as if she had been erased.

#

The sea and the rocks slowed her fall only a little, but it is enough.

Stacy is nearest. She swims harder than she ever has in her life, pink ruffles and pale skin. She throws herself into the waves, beneath them. The water stings her eyes. She does not have to look far. Eleanor is right there, sinking in an inky flower. Stacy kicks and pulls and struggles. They surface in a wave that pushes them against the rocks.

Jack comes crashing out of the sky and into the water behind Stacy. Jack the Hammer. Jack the Wrecking Ball.

He throws an arm around Eleanor's middle. Hauls her into the cove while Stacy kicks behind him. A rippling slick of blood stirs into the water around them.

Get the boat, Jack says.

It's too heavy, Stacy answers.

Stacy, he says.

He lifts Eleanor out of the water and runs behind Stacy along the path. Eleanor's arms hang at strange angles, and he is unaware of his own fear. There is a job to be done, and he must do it quickly. Stacy has overturned the boat when he reaches the shore, and she helps him lift Eleanor into the bottom. There is more blood than he can believe.

In the next twenty minutes Jack will row harder than he ever has. The boat will let in water, which will turn pink and then darken even more. Stacy will hold Eleanor's head between her knees. Jack will not look at Eleanor. He will struggle mightily against the sea and its currents, fighting back the world with every ferocious pull of the oars, like a husband who screams at every red light as his pregnant wife begins labor in the back seat.

The only sound is that of the sea, which carries on as it always does, and Jack's labored breath. He rows so hard in the home stretch that he overshoots the pier and grounds the boat against the beach. The force of the landing seems to rock Stacy from her bravery, and she begins to cry. Jack runs across the beach to Argus Road, waving his arms and shouting like a wild man. Magically, the first driver along stops and comes tearing across the beach with Jack.

Eleanor knows all of this only from the telling. She has left all of these things behind, and in some new darkness never stops falling.

#

For a little while the world goes on without her.

Eleanor misses her mother's birthday, not that anybody was celebrating. She misses her first kiss, the one Jack gives to

Stacy instead. The one that should have been hers, and would have been if not for her goddamned accident. There are no more storms that summer, only perfect blue days, and she sees none of them.

The first thing Eleanor sees when she wakes is her cast, and what Stacy has written on it in purple Sharpie.

J kissed me! I miss you. Wake up. -S

When she wakes, the world has changed.

Rather, Eleanor has changed, and neither of the two will ever be the same again.

THREE

The mind is a stupid and a wonderful thing. Stupid because, well, that's just the way it is. Wonderful, though, because there are invisible walls that nobody ever tells you about. Emotional trip wires that, once tripped, send your mind into safe places. One of them is tripped only by pain. Not papercut, but massive, mind-splitting, I'd-ask-you-to-kill-me-if-only-I-could-think-straight pain.

Traumatize the brain enough, in other words, and it will give you the finger and mercifully switch itself off.

#

On that August morning, Eleanor hits the water and keeps right on going. The wire trips, her mind goes blank, and just like that, the laws of everything cease to matter. She is unconscious in the world she has left behind, but here --

wherever here is -- Eleanor is engaged and confused.

Her fall is quite literal, but the mechanics of it have changed somehow.

For a moment Eleanor feels as light as a wisp of tissue paper. She is no longer the weight of a fourteen-year-old girl. The speed of her fall seems to have decreased, and then it decreases more and more, gradually, until she wonders if she might just hang here, suspended in this strange, quiet, colorless void of a place. Her hair floats around her face as if underwater. She can move her arms. She lifts one hand to touch her face.

The physics are all wrong. She feels as if she is moving her hand through gelatin.

She blinks, and that changes everything.

In a moment she becomes an anvil, a bowling ball, a satellite in a collapsed orbit, falling with such immediate and blinding speed that air rushes over and past her nose and mouth so furiously that she cannot catch her breath. She gasps but nothing happens. Eleanor panics. Then a very long moment without breathing goes by, and Eleanor stops trying.

She doesn't black out. She can feel no swimmer's burn in her lungs.

She's just fine.

Well, she thinks to herself. That's something.

#

Eleanor falls for a very, very long time.

She falls for so long that she grows accustomed to the sensation, and turns her attention to her location. She tries to look over her shoulder. She doesn't expect to see Huffnagle behind her, and she's correct. The great gray rock is nowhere to be seen. She looks down, and there is no sea beneath her. The clouds have been ripped away like parachutes. Gone is the gentle rumble of the Pacific surf. Gone, the distant bellow of ships. Gone, her two friends.

This last fact is most worrisome to Eleanor. Stacy and Jack will not be able to find her. Eleanor doesn't even know where she is.

She turns a bit and rolls over in mid-fall. This draws her attention, and she discovers quite easily that she can control pitch and yaw by leaning this direction or that. Falling backwards now, she stares up at absolutely nothing. Nothing behind her, nothing below, nothing before. Everywhere around her it is exactly the same. Complete, dumb nothing.

Her hair tickles her skin, stirred up by some invisible wind. This sensation of movement gives her hope. She is going somewhere, at least.

She tries to relax. There is little else to do.

#

Colors begin to flicker just beyond her reach, dim and unfocused, endless paint chips scuttling by at surprising speed. She watches them curiously, and they become brighter and more vivid.

Wherever Eleanor has gotten herself to, it is pressure-chamber silent. Her senses cast about witlessly, dumbed by the absence of input around her. There are no smells to be smelled, no sounds to be heard. She can feel only the slight updraft of her fall, see only the ripple of colors that now accompany her.

And so she tenses up when she hears the prick of voices in her ear. Small voices, thousands of them.

Is this death?

She doesn't think so. Her father is a lapsed Baptist. Her mother is a distracted Catholic who has spent more time on the moon than she has spent at mass. But Eleanor, always so curious, knows something of heaven and its various incarnations. She thinks hard, but cannot remember a single religion that imagines heaven to be a bottomless well.

Perhaps hell.

She imagines thousands of people tumbling through the same space she is, isolated in their dark and lonely pneumatic tubes.

Each of them interrupted from whatever they had just been doing. Sorting the mail. Shopping. Nodding off at their desks. Turning over in bed, distractedly wondering if they've somehow rolled right off the edge -- but my, isn't this a long way to the floor?

She is amused by this. Perhaps the Christians have the whole concept of the rapture backwards. Maybe at the end, the deserving are not launched into the sky like intergalactic missiles, but sucked into black holes like this one.

Perhaps Eleanor is a part of some black hole now, slowly chewing galaxies, sucking down nebulae.

She giggles aloud.

No sound comes.

She feels her vocal cords vibrate, but there is no production of sound. This is strange, but she is not terribly surprised.

But the voice that whispers in her ear?

That surprises her.

#

Many times in her life, she will be asked the same question.

What was it like?

One day she will stop trying to explain it. Like a dream, she will say, and this as an answer is passable, but awful in its inadequacy. Her father will ask her this question one day, on a lonely morning after her recovery, while her mother lies upstairs, haunting their home with her detachment. Eleanor will try very hard to answer. It will be unbearable to her that even for him she cannot put words to the experience.

Like a dream.

Eventually she will stop answering the question.

But Jack never asked her.

By the time she is sixteen, and Jack seventeen, she is creeping out of the house after her parents have fallen into the disrepair of their sleep together and into his bedroom over his grandmother's garage. On one particular night Eleanor will cross the room, listening to his measured breathing, and slip into bed beside him. Though she is sparrow-boned, the mattress shifts just so beneath her weight, and he stirs. Her eyes are streaked with red and damp. She has just woken from a dream of this very fall. Her own bed, six blocks away, is empty and soaked with sweat. On this night she folds into his tired arms. He touches her eyelids closed, and she cries quietly at this gentleness.

Tell me? he says. And she does.

He will listen quietly, gray eyes solemn in the dark. She

rests her cheek in the crook of his neck. His heartbeat telegraphs through a vein there, and she drifts into sleep midsentence, lulled by this rhythm. He smooths her hair and says something, and she startles awake.

What? she will ask.

He asks again. Will you always look?

She drifts again, sure that she has answered him, but it doesn't matter that she hasn't. He can tell.

Many years later, when the roads behind her outnumber the roads left to travel, it will occur to Eleanor that a lifetime is a very long time to spend asking just one question. But on that particular night, she is untroubled. She rests in his arms, and for the first time since the fall, she will not dream.

But that is ahead of her. Now, something has changed.

#

The colors, like phosphorous, have a thready luster now. Striations of light gently tug the colors towards and away from each other, like curtains on the morning breeze. The pulse reminds her of a night many millions of years before, when she was a child, unable to sleep in her cavernous room. Her bed was a road that led to no place at all. She had climbed down to the cold wooden floor, and in her bare feet and cotton nightgown had

tottered to the door, ajar as usual, and had followed a thin blue glow reflected in the hallway. The light led her to her father, sitting properly on the couch in his nice pants and button-down shirt, staring blankly through the television. The changing picture set the gold in his belt buckle afire. She had stood there for some time before he noticed her, suddenly ejected from his daze. Oh, Ellie, he said to her. Again? And he shook his head, and patted the cushion beside him. She climbed onto the couch. Her red hair was pressed flat to one side of her head and haloed wildly on the other like a soft solar flare. Her father had put his arm around her, and together they had watched a National Geographic special about Antarctica. Eleanor clasped her little hands together at the sight of translucent blue glaciers shot through with the flickering dance of trapped meltwater.

Just like this, she thinks now.

She begins to reach out, but she seems to have no mass. Her arm flits like a hummingbird's wing. Every movement seems intensely amplified, so focused that even the twitch of a finger seems uncontrollable. She is afraid that any move she makes will disrupt the world of this new rabbit hole she has tumbled into. And perhaps not this one only, but also the world she seems to have left behind.

She is a child hiding in her mother's closet, standing in one pair of high heels among a soldier's row of them, standing up inside a dress on a hanger so that it falls about her, obscuring her; standing so still she dares not breathe, listening to the clomp of her father on the stairs. Every cry of Where's Ellie? makes her want to giggle, but she remains as motionless as she can.

She wills her body as still as a body in motion can be.

#

Time, that straight and patient line, has contorted itself into a looping scribble around her. She should worry, but doesn't. Instead, she imagines herself beneath the surface of some vast sea -- where she actually might be, she thinks, back in that world of atoms and star stuff she has left behind -- and that ever stir of her muscles cause enormous, drowning waves somewhere far above her. Eleanor makes a concentrated effort to relax her body. After a time, her tightened muscles slacken like cut ropes. She wills herself not to blink. She does absolutely nothing. She gives in to the fall.

#

One thousand years pass.

That's when she hears the voice. It has no sound, to be true, but at its utterance every color that swims around her

flares and deepens and dances. The line that she has traced through this strange space trembles like a plucked fiddle string. She cannot hear a single thing, but feels everything.

hello

Her heartbeat triples. The voice is in her head. It races through the valleys between every ridge in her fingerprints. It reverses the flow of her blood. Her eyelashes vibrate as quick as cricket wings.

She cannot imagine how one answers a voice like this. A lifetime passes languorously as she processes this new development. Ten thousand children are born and grow and birth new babies and all of them die and pass into history before she wonders if she has imagined the voice. Perhaps she fell past another lost and tumbling person and simply failed to see them, and caught only their greeting before they were whipped away by a steep updraft, tossed about in her own velocitous wake.

More time passes, or doesn't.

Around her the slur of colors slow dramatically, until they are like a bedsheet being fluffed at two frames per second. The colors contract, pinching inward, swallowing themselves; then they snap free, and go spinning like wheels. The colors collide with her and explode like raw pigment. Her mind thrills -- in this new chaos she sees colors she does not recognize. The

colors separate and fall away like sea spray back onto the ocean, absorbed once more into the spectral curtain. It all happens so quickly that she is uncertain it ever happened at all.

So that is what she says in response.

Did you see that?

She cannot feel her own voice. Her vocal cords refuse to trill her words.

But she waits.

The reply is slow to arrive, but she has learned patience.

i did

She flinches at the nearness of it. Was that a warm breath on the back of her neck?

She turns herself in mid-fall, like a seal twisting about in its pool. But behind her there is of course nothing but more color.

Already this conversation is the most slowly-paced she has ever participated in. She is mission control; the voice belongs to an astronaut slowly circling the dark side of Mars. She has nothing but time, and spends it contemplating her feelings. She is not afraid. If she were predisposed to fright, she thinks, then she probably would have startled herself to death when she realized that she had somehow lost Oregon altogether.

#

Eleanor has one million questions to ask. Each question takes one million years. She hopes there is no bottom to her fall. This hope takes one million years to hope. She stops hoping, and asks another question.

She will ask only difficult questions. She presupposes the intelligence of the voice's owner. She opens her mouth, prepared to initiate some great exchange of knowledge. But what comes out is:

I've never kissed a boy.

this is what concerns you about death

I am pretty sure I'm not dying.

no

No, she answers.

She still cannot feel her vocal cords. She wonders if the owner of the voice can read her mind. Wondering this ticks away another million years. Thinking is still faster than thinking and speaking.

She thinks, If I were dying, I don't think I would be someplace like this.

She is heard, because the voice answers:

where then

Wyoming, she thinks.

wyoming is heaven to you

My grandma Eleanor is buried in Jackson Hole. My mother loves it there. She always says she wants to be buried there when she dies, even though her parents live in Boston. Daddy says we can put him anywhere. He always says you can just put his hat and coat on and stand him out with the trash, like Lou Grant. Daddy doesn't wear hats, though. I went to Jackson Hole when I was ten. My mother showed me Grandma Eleanor's grave. I was named after her. I never met her. She was an Olympic swimmer. A good one. I liked Jackson Hole.

She is fairly sure entire universes have been born in the time it took to churn that thought out. She asks her next question quickly.

Does this mean I will go to heaven when I die?

what makes you think that

I said Wyoming. You asked if I thought of that as heaven. So you must know I'll go to heaven when I die.

why do you think I have this answer

Because. You haven't asked me why I haven't asked who you are.

and why is that

Because, Eleanor thinks, you already know I have figured out who you are.

#

The silence that follows is the longest one yet.

As it unravels, Eleanor discovers something delightful. The colors that have clotted around her are liquid now. She cautiously stretches her fingers and hands as wide as she can. The tips of her fingers cut long, parting rivulets into the colors, which are cool and buttery like well-moistened clay. She feels, quite gradually, the slowing of her descent.

She experiments.

Gently grazing the colors with her fingers creates but a soft hiccup in her velocity. Thrusting her fingers deeply into the colors causes them to part about her like silt churned into mudslides. Her fall slows perceptibly. She removes her fingers from the colors. She accelerates once more.

The voice returns.

who do you say that I am

Eleanor plunges her fingers deeply into the colors, and slows her fall. She pushes palm-deep, then to her wrists and arms, nearly to her elbows. She slows, slows, to nearly a complete stop, weightless for the first time. Her euphoria nearly distracts her from the conversation.

Finally she thinks, You are god. At least, I'm fairly sure of it.

Her bones suddenly feel like lead, and she knows immediately that the conversation is over.

#

She feels like a guest being thrown out of the party for insulting the host. Her body is dragged down at sudden, enormous speed. She flails her arms uselessly; her fingers knife through the colors like water now. The pulse of light moves so rapidly now that the colors blur into one guttural band of white. Eleanor is desperate to stop her fall, shoves her arms and shoulders into the colors, tries bracing her feet against them, but she falls only ever faster. She feels as heavy as granite.

I have more questions! she thinks fiercely.

She is afraid.

There comes the brush of lips against the skin of her cheek, and then she comes to a startling stop.