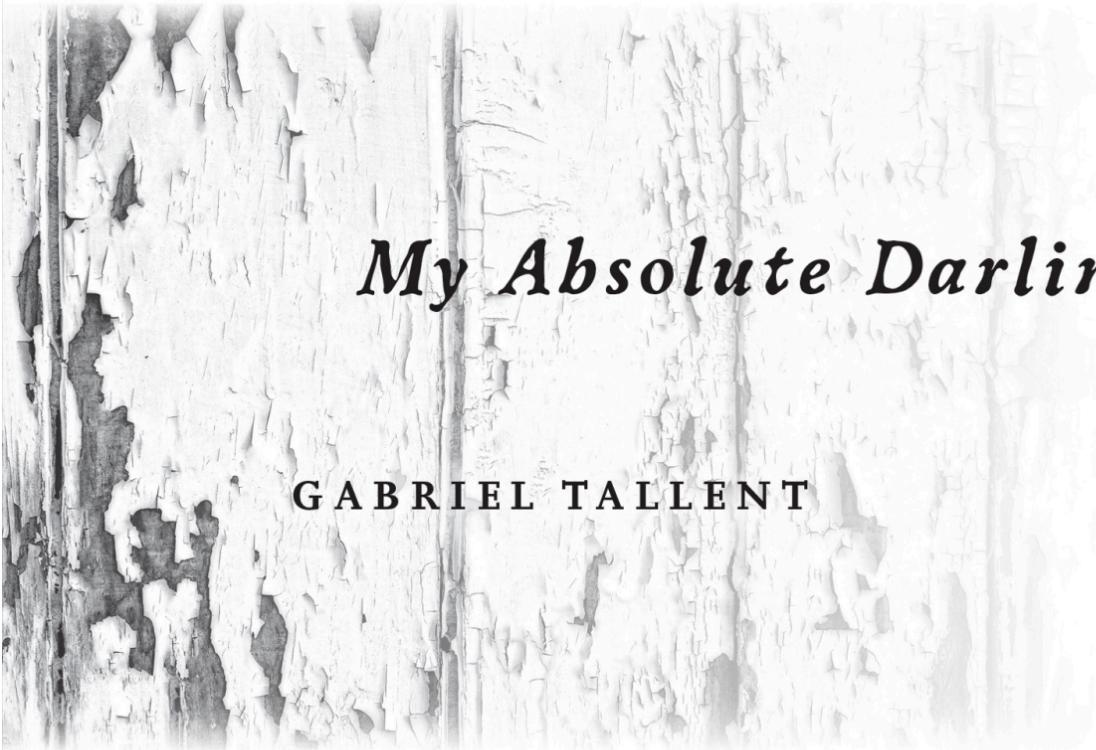


*My
Absolute
Darling*

A NOVEL

*Gabriel
Tallent*



My Absolute Darling

GABRIEL TALLENT

RIVERHEAD BOOKS • NEW YORK • 2017



RIVERHEAD BOOKS

An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC

375 Hudson Street

New York, New York 10014



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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Tallent, Gabriel, author.

Title: My absolute darling : a novel / Gabriel Tallent.

Description: New York : Riverhead Books, 2017.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017013020 (print) | LCCN 2017028202 (ebook) | ISBN 9780735211193 (ebook) | ISBN 9780735211179 (hardcover)

Subjects: LCSH: Teenage girls—Fiction.

BISAC: FICTION / Literary. | FICTION / Action & Adventure. | FICTION / Coming of Age. | GSAFD: Bildungsromans.

Classification: LCC PS3620.A536 (ebook) | LCC PS3620.A536 M9 2017 (print) | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017013020>

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for Gloria and Elizabeth

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One

The old house hunkers on its hill, all peeling white paint, bay windows, and spindled wooden railings overgrown with climbing roses and poison oak. Rose runners have prized off clapboards that now hang snarled in the canes. The gravel drive is littered with spent casings caked in verdigris. Martin Alveston gets out of the truck and does not look back at Turtle sitting in the cab but walks up the porch, his jungle boots sounding hollowly on the boards, a big man in flannel and Levi's opening the sliding glass doors. Turtle waits, listening to the engine's ticking, and then she follows him.

In the living room, one window is boarded over, sheet metal and half-inch plywood bolted to the frame and covered in rifle targets. The bullet clustering is so tight it looks like someone put a ten-gauge right up to them and blew the centers out; the slugs glint in their ragged pits like water at the bottom of wells.

Her daddy opens a can of Bush's beans on the old stove and strikes a match on his thumb to light the burner, which gutters and comes slowly to life, burning orange against the dark redwood walls, the unvarnished cabinets, the grease-stained rat traps.

The back door off the kitchen has no lock, only holes for the knob and deadlock, and Martin kicks it open and steps out onto the unfinished back deck, the unboarded joists alive with fence lizards and twined with blackberries through which rise horsetails and pig mint, soft with its strange peach fuzz and sour reek. Standing wide-legged on the joists, Martin takes the skillet from where he hung it on the sprung clapboards for the raccoons to lick clean. He cranks the spigot open with a rusted crescent wrench and blasts the cast iron with water, ripping up handfuls of horsetail to scrub at problem places. Then he comes in and sets it on the burner and the water hisses and spits. He opens the lightless olive-green refrigerator and takes out two steaks wrapped in brown butcher paper and draws his Daniel Winkler belt knife and wipes it across the thigh of his Levi's and sticks each steak with the point and flips them one by one onto the skillet.

Turtle hops onto the kitchen counter—grainy redwood boards, nails encircled by old hammer prints. She picks up a Sig Sauer from among the discarded cans and slivers back the slide to see the brass seated in the chamber. She levels the gun and turns around to see how he takes this, and he stands leaning one big hand against the cabinets and smiles in a tired way without looking up.

When she was six, he had her put on a life jacket for cushion, told her not to touch the hot ejected casings, and started her on a bolt-action Ruger .22, sitting at the kitchen table and bracing the gun on a rolled-up towel. Grandpa must've heard the shots on his way back from the liquor store because he came in wearing jeans and a terry-cloth bathrobe and leather slippers with little leather tassels, and he stood in the doorway and said, "Goddamn it, Marty." Daddy was sitting in a chair beside Turtle reading Hume's *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, and he turned the book upside down on his thigh to keep his place and said, "Go to your room, kibble," and Turtle walked creakingly up the stairs, unrailed and without risers, plank treads cut from a redwood burl, old-growth stringers cracked and torqued with their poor curing, their twisting drawing the nails from the treads, exposed and strained almost to shearing, the men silent below her, Grandpa watching her, Martin touching the gilt lettering on the spine of his book with the pad of his forefinger. But even upstairs, lying on her plywood bed with the army surplus bag pulled over herself, she could hear them, Grandpa saying, "Goddamn it, Martin, this is no way to raise a little girl," and Daddy not saying anything for a long time and then saying, "This is my house, remember that, Daniel."

They eat the steaks in near silence, the tall glasses of water silting layers of sand to their bottoms. A deck of cards sits on the table between them and the box shows a jester. One side of his face is twisted into a manic grin, the other sags away in a frown. When she is done, she pushes her plate forward and her father watches her.

She is tall for fourteen, coltishly built, with long legs and arms, wide but slender hips and shoulders, her neck long and corded. Her eyes are her most striking feature, blue, almond-shaped in a face that is too lean, with wide, sharp cheekbones, and her crooked, toothy mouth—an ugly face, she knows, and an unusual one. Her hair is thick and blond, bleached in streaks by the sun. Her skin is constellated with copper-brown freckles. Her palms, the undersides of her forearms, the insides of her thighs show tangles of blue veins.

Martin says, "Go get your vocabulary list, kibble."

She retrieves her blue notebook from her backpack and opens the page to this week's vocabulary exercises, carefully copied from the blackboard.

He places his hand on the notebook, draws it across the table toward himself. He begins to read through the list. “Conspicuous,” he says, and looks at her. “Castigate.” In this way he goes down the list. Then he says, “Here it is. Number one. ‘The *blank* enjoyed working with children.’” He turns the book around and slides it across the table toward her. She reads:

1. The _____ enjoyed working with children.

She reads through the list, cracking the knuckles of her toes against the floorboards. Daddy looks at her, but she doesn’t know the answer. She says, “‘Suspect,’ maybe it’s ‘suspect.’” Daddy raises his eyebrows and she pencils in

1. The suspect enjoyed working with children.

He drags the book across the table and looks at it. “Well, now,” he says, “look here at number two.” He slides the book back to her. She looks at number two.

2. I _____ we will arrive late to the party.

She listens to him breathing through his broken nose, his every breath unbearable to her because she *loves* him. She attends to his face, its every detail, thinking, you bitch, you can do this, you bitch.

“Look,” he says, “look,” and he takes her pencil and with two deft strokes strikes out *suspect* and writes in *pediatrician*. Then he slides the book over to her and he says, “Kibble, what’s number two? We just went over this. It’s right there.”

She looks at the page, which is the thing of absolute least importance in that room, her mind filled with his impatience. He breaks the pencil in two, sets both pieces in front of the notebook. She stoops over the page, thinking, stupid, stupid, stupid, and shitty at everything. He rakes his fingernails across his stubble. “Okay.” Stooped in exhaustion and drawing a finger through the scum of blood on his plate. “Okay, all right,” he says, and throws the notebook backhanded across the living room. “Okay, all right, that’s enough for tonight, that’s enough—what’s wrong with you?” Then, shaking his head: “No, that’s all right, no, that’s enough.” Turtle sits silently, her hair straggled around her face, and he cocks his jaw open and off to the left like he’s testing the joint.

He reaches out and places the Sig Sauer in front of her. Then he draws the deck of cards across the table, drops it into his other hand. He walks to the blocked window, stands in front of the bullet-riddled targets, shucks off the deck's case, draws the jack of spades, and holds it beside his eye, showing her the front, the back, the card in profile. Turtle sits with her hands flat on the table looking at the gun. He says, "Don't be a little bitch, kibble." He stands perfectly still. "You're being a little bitch. Are you trying to be a little bitch, kibble?"

Turtle rises, squares her stance, levels the front sight with her right eye. She knows the sight is level when the edge appears as thin as a razor—if the gun tips up, she gets a telltale sheen off the sight's top surface. She revises that edge into a thin, bare line, thinking, careful, careful, girl. In profile, the card makes a target as thick as a thumbnail. She eases the play out of the 4.4-pound trigger, inhales, exhales to the natural slackening of her breath, and rolls on those 4.4 pounds. She fires. The top half of the card flutters down in a maple-seed spiral. Turtle stands unmoving except for quivers that chase themselves down her arms. He shakes his head, smiling a little and trying to hide it, touching his lips dryly with his thumb. Then he draws another card and holds it up for her.

"Don't be a little bitch, kibble," he says, and waits. When she doesn't move, he says, "Goddamn it, kibble."

She checks the hammer with her thumb. There is a way it feels to hold the gun right and Turtle dredges through that feeling for any wrongness, the edge of her notch sight covering his face, the sight's glowing green tritium bead of a size with his eye. For a suspended moment, her aim following her attention, his blue eye crests the thin, flat horizon of the front sight. Her guts lurch and drop like a hooked fish going to weeds and she does not move, all the slack out of the trigger, thinking, shit, shit, thinking, do not look at him, do not look at him. If he sees her across those sights, he makes no expression. Deliberately, she matches the sights to the quaking, unfocused card. She exhales to the natural slackening of her breath and fires. The card doesn't move. She's missed. She can see the mark on the target board, a handsbreath from him. She decocks the hammer and lowers the gun. Sweat is lacy and bright in her eyelashes.

"Try aiming," he says.

She stands perfectly still.

"Are you going to try again or what is this?"

Turtle locks back the hammer and brings the gun from hip to dominant eye, the sights level, coequal slots of light between the front sight and the notch, the tip so steady you could balance a coin upright on the front post. The card in contrast moves ever so slightly up and down. A bare tremor

answers to his heartbeat. She thinks, do not look at him, do not look at his face. Look at your front sight, look at the top edge of your front sight. In the silence after the gunshot, Turtle relaxes the trigger until it clicks. Martin turns the unharmed card over in his hand and makes a show of inspecting it. He says, "That's just exactly what I thought," and tosses the card to the floorboards, walks back to the table, sits down opposite her, picks up a book he'd set open and facedown on the table, and leans over it. On the boarded-up window behind him, the bullet holes make a cluster you could cover with a quarter.

She stands watching him for three heartbeats. She pops the magazine, ejects the round from the chamber, and catches it in her hand, locks the slide back, and sets the gun, magazine, and shell on the table beside her dirty plate. The shell rolls a broad arc with a marbly sound. He wets a finger and turns the page. She stands waiting for him to look up at her, but he does not look up, and she thinks, is this all? She goes upstairs to her room, dark with unvarnished wood paneling, the creepers of poison oak reaching through the sashes and the frame of the western window.

That night Turtle waits on her plywood platform, under the green military sleeping bag and wool blankets, listening to the rats gnawing on the dirty dishes in the kitchen. Sometimes she can hear the *clack clack clack* of a rat squatting on a stack of plates and scratching its neck. She can hear Martin pace from room to room. On wall pegs, her Lewis Machine & Tool AR-10, her Noveske AR-15, and her Remington 870 twelve-gauge pump-action shotgun. Each answers a different philosophy of use. Her clothes are folded carefully on her shelves, her socks stowed in a steamer trunk at the foot of the bed. Once, she left a blanket unfolded and he burned it in the yard, saying, "Only animals ruin their homes, kibble, only *animals* ruin their fucking homes."

• • •

IN THE MORNING, Martin comes out of his room belting on his Levi's, and Turtle opens the fridge and takes out a carton of eggs and a beer. She throws him the beer. He seats the cap on the counter's edge, bangs it off, stands drinking. His flannel hangs open around his chest. His abdominal muscles move with his drinking. Turtle knocks the eggs against the countertop, and holding them aloft in her fist, purses open the crack and drops the contents into her mouth, discarding shells into the five-gallon compost bucket.

"You don't have to walk me," she says, cuffing at her mouth.

"I know it," he says.

"You don't have to," she says.

"I know I don't have to," he says.

He walks her down to the bus, father and daughter following ruts beside the rattlesnake-grass median. On either side, the thorny, unblooming rosettes of bull thistles. Martin holds the beer to his chest, buttoning his flannel with his other hand. They wait together at the gravel pullout lined with devil's pokers and the dormant bulbs of naked lady lilies. California poppies nest in the gravel. Turtle can smell the rotting seaweed on the beach below them and the fertile stink of the estuary twenty yards away. In Buckhorn Bay, the water is pale green with white scrim around the sea stacks. The ocean shades to pale blue farther out, and the color matches the sky exactly, no horizon line and no clouds.

"Look at that, kibble," Martin says.

"You don't have to wait," she says.

"Looking at something like that, good for your soul. You look and you think, goddamn. To study it is to approach truth. You're living at the edge of the world and you think that teaches you something about life, to look out at it. And years go by, with you thinking that. You know what I mean?"

"Yes, Daddy."

"Years go by, with you thinking that it's a kind of important existential work you're doing, to hold back the darkness in the act of beholding. Then one day, you realize that you don't know what the hell you're looking at. It's irreducibly strange and it is unlike anything except itself and all that brooding was nothing but vanity, every thought you ever had missed the inexplicableness of the thing, its vastness and its uncaring. You've been looking at the ocean for years and you thought it meant something, but it meant *nothing*."

"You don't have to come down here, Daddy."

"God, I love that dyke," Martin says. "She likes me, too. You can see it in her eyes. Watch. Real affection."

The bus gasps as it rounds the foot of Buckhorn Hill. Martin smiles roguishly and raises his beer in salute to the bus driver, enormous in her Carhartt overalls and logger boots. She stares back at him unamused. Turtle climbs onto the bus and turns down the aisle. The bus driver looks at Martin and he stands beaming in the driveway, a beer held over his heart, shaking his head, and he says, "You're a hell of a woman, Margery. Hell of a woman." Margery closes the rubber-skirted doors and the bus lurches to a start. Looking through the window, Turtle can see Martin raise his hand in farewell. She drops into an open seat. Elise turns around and puts her chin on the seat back and says, "Your dad is, like—so *cool*." Turtle looks out the window.

In second period, Anna paces back and forth in front of the class with her black hair gathered into a wet ponytail. A wetsuit hangs behind her desk, dripping into a plastic bin. They are correcting spelling tests and Turtle hunches over her paper, clicking her pen open and closed with her index finger, practicing a trigger pull with no rightward or leftward pressure at all. The girls have thin, weak voices, and when she can, Turtle turns around in her chair to lip-read them.

“Julia,” Anna says to Turtle, “can you please spell and define ‘synecdoche’ for the class? Then please read us your sentence?”

Even though they are correcting the tests, and even though she has another girl’s test right in front of her, a girl Turtle admires in a sideways-looking and finger-chewing way, even though the word *synecdoche* is spelled out in the other girl’s neat script and glittery gel-ink pen, Turtle can’t do it. She begins, “S-I-N . . .” and then pauses, unable to find her way through this maze. She repeats, “S-I-N . . .”

Anna says gently, “Well, Julia—that’s a hard one, it’s *synecdoche*, S-Y-N-E-C-D-O-C-H-E, *synecdoche*. Would anyone like to tell us what it means?”

Rilke, this other, far prettier girl, raises her hand, forming an excited O with her pink lips. “Synecdoche: a figure of speech in which the part is made to represent the whole; ‘the crown is displeased.’” She and Turtle have traded tests, so Rilke recites this from memory, without looking at Turtle’s page, because Turtle’s page is blank except for the first line: 1. Suspect. *Believe. I suspect we will arrive late to the party.* Turtle does not know what it means, when the part is made to represent the whole. That doesn’t make any sense to her, nor does she know what it means, *the crown is displeased*.

“Very good,” Anna says. “Another one of our Greek roots, the same as—”

“Oh!” And Rilke’s hand shoots up. “Sympathetic.”

Turtle sits on the blue plastic chair, chewing on her knuckles, stinking of the silt from Slaughterhouse Creek, wearing a ragged T-shirt and Levi’s rolled up to show her calves, pale and swatched with dry skin. Under one fingernail, a rusty grime of synthetic motor oil. Her fingers have its prehistoric smell. She likes to massage the lubricant into the steel with her bare hands. Rilke is applying her lip gloss, having already gone down Turtle’s test with a neat little x beside each empty line, and Turtle thinks, look at this slut. Just look at this slut. Outside, the windswept field is spotted with puddles, the flooded ditch cut from the ash-colored clay, and beyond that, the forest’s edge. Turtle could walk into those woods and never be found. She has promised Martin that she will never, not again.

“Julia,” Anna says. “Julia?”

Turtle turns slowly around to look at her and waits, listening.

Anna, very gently, says, “Julia, if you could pay attention, please.”

Turtle nods.

“Thank you,” Anna says.

When the bell rings for lunch, all of the students stand up at once and Anna walks down the aisle and puts two fingers on Turtle’s desk and, smiling, holds up one finger to indicate that she needs a moment. Turtle watches the other students leave.

“So,” Anna says. She sits down on a desk and Turtle, quiet and watchful, attentive to faces, can read almost everything in her; Anna is looking Turtle up and down and thinking, I like this girl, and weighing how to make this work. It is unreasonably strange to Turtle, who hates Anna, has never given Anna any reason to like her, does not like herself. Turtle thinks, you whore.

“So,” Anna says again, “how did you feel about that one?” Her face becomes gently questioning—biting her lip, allowing her eyebrows to climb up, wet strands of hair escaping her pony tail. She says, “Julia?” To Turtle’s north-coast ears, Anna has an accent, cool and affected. Turtle has never been south of the Navarro River, and never north of the Mattole.

“Yeah?” Turtle says. She has allowed the silence to go on too long.

“How did you feel about that one?”

“Not that good,” Turtle says.

Anna says, “Well, did you get any of the definitions?”

Turtle does not know what Anna wants from her. No, she hadn’t, and Anna must know that she hadn’t. There is only one answer to any of Anna’s questions, which is that Turtle is useless.

“No,” Turtle says, “I didn’t get any of the definitions. Or, I got the first. ‘I suspect we will arrive late to the party.’”

“Why do you think that is?” Anna says.

Turtle shakes her head—it’s beyond saying and she won’t be bullied into saying something else.

“What if,” Anna says, “you stayed in, some lunchtime, and we made flash cards together?”

“I *do* study,” Turtle says. “I don’t know if that would help.”

“Is there something you think would help?” Anna does this, asking questions, pretending to make a safe space, but there is no safe space.

“I’m not sure,” Turtle says. “I go over all the words with my daddy—” And here, Turtle sees Anna hesitate and she knows that she has made a mistake, because other Mendocino girls don’t use the word *daddy*. Mostly, they call their parents by their first name, or else Dad. Turtle goes on. “We go over them, and I think what I need is just to go over them myself a little more.”

“So just, put a little more time into it, is what you’re saying?”

“Yes,” Turtle says.

“So how do you study with your dad?” Anna says.

Turtle hesitates. She cannot sidestep the question, but she thinks, careful, careful.

“Well, we go over the words together,” Turtle says.

“For how long?” Anna says.

Turtle works at one finger with her hand, cracks the knuckle, looks up, frowning, and says, “I don’t know—an hour?”

Turtle is lying. It’s there in Anna’s face, the recognition.

“Is that true?” Anna says. “You’re studying an hour every night?”

“Well,” Turtle says.

Anna watches her.

“Most nights,” Turtle says. She has to protect the way she cleans the guns in front of the fire while Martin waits reading by the fireplace with the firelight escaping onto their faces and escaping out into the room and then being dragged hard back across the floor to the coals.

Anna says, “We’re going to need to talk it over with Martin.”

Turtle says, “Wait. I can spell ‘synecdoche.’”

“Julia, we need to talk to your dad,” Anna says.

Turtle says, “S-I-N,” and then stops, knowing that it’s wrong, that she is wrong, and she cannot for the life of her remember what comes after that. Anna is looking at her very coolly, interrogatively, and Turtle looks back, thinking, you bitch. She knows that if she protests more, if she says anything more, she will give something away.

“Okay,” Turtle says, “okay.”

After school, Turtle goes to the office and sits on a bench. The bench faces the front desk, and beyond the front desk, the administrative assistant’s desk and a short hallway to the green-painted door of the principal’s office. Behind that door, Anna is saying, “God love her, Dave, but that girl needs help, real and substantive help, more help than I can give her. I have thirty students in that class, for crying out loud.” Turtle sits cracking her knuckles, the receptionist giving her quick, uncomfortable glances over her computer. Turtle is hard of hearing, but Anna is talking in a flustered, raised voice, saying, “You think I want to talk to that man? Listen, listen—misogyny, isolation, watchfulness. Those are three *big* red flags. I’d like her to see a counselor, Dave. She’s a pariah, and if she goes on to high school without us addressing that, she will fall *further behind*. We can chase down that gap now—yes, I know we’ve been trying—but we’ve got to *keep* trying. And if there is something wrong—” Turtle’s guts clench. Christ, she thinks.

The receptionist racks a stack of papers sharply on the desk and walks down the hall to the door, Principal Green saying something and Anna flustered, “No one wants that? Why does no one want that? There are *options* is all I’m saying— Well. No. Nothing. All I’m—” And the receptionist stands at the door and knocks and slips her head into the room, saying, “Julia is here. Waiting for her dad.”

There is a hush. The receptionist walks back to her desk. Martin pushes the door open, looks once at Turtle, and walks to the counter. The receptionist gives him a hard look. “You can just . . .” she says, motioning with the papers that he can go right in. Turtle rises and goes after him, past the desk and down the hall, and he knocks once and pushes the door open.

“Come in, come in,” Principal Green says. He is an enormous man, pink-faced, with large, soft pink hands. His fat hangs down and fills up his pleated khaki trousers. Martin closes the door and stands in front of it, as tall as the door itself, almost as broad. His loose flannel shirt is partly unbuttoned and shows his clavicles. His thick, long brown hair is in a ponytail. His keys have begun to cut their way out of his pocket, leaving patches of white threads. If Turtle hadn’t known, she could have told that Martin had the gun just from the way he wore his flannel, just from the way he took his seat, but neither Principal Green nor Anna thinks of it; they do not even know such things are possible, and Turtle wonders if there are things that she is blind to that other people can see, and what those things might be.

Principal Green picks up a bowl of Hershey’s Kisses and holds it first to Martin, who shows his palm to decline, and then to Turtle, who doesn’t move. “So, how has your day been so far?” he asks, setting the bowl back on his desk.

“Oh,” Martin says, “I’ve been better.” Turtle thinks, that is wrong, that is the wrong way, but how could you know better, you’re just a bitch.

“And, Julia, how have you been?”

“I’m good,” Turtle says.

“Ah yes, well, I bet this is a little stressful,” Principal Green says.

“So?” Martin says, gesturing him on.

“Let’s talk about it, shall we?” Principal Green says. The new teachers go by their first names, but Principal Green is a generation older, maybe two. “Since we last spoke, Julia has continued to struggle in her classes and we’re concerned about her. Part of the problem is her grades. Her reading comprehension is not where it could be. She struggles on tests. But for us, the problem—more than any question of her aptitude—is her sense of, well, perhaps her sense that the school may not be welcoming, and we do believe

that she needs a certain level of comfort, a certain level of *belonging* before she can begin to thrive in school. This is the problem as we see it.”

Anna says, “I have been working with Julia quite a bit, and I think that —”

Martin interrupts her, leans forward in his seat, clasps his hands. He says, “She will make the work up.”

Turtle stifles her surprise, looking over at Martin, thinking, what are you doing? What she wants is for Martin to look right at Anna, and she knows he can do it—look right at her, and make her feel good about this whole thing.

Anna says, “Julia seems to have particular trouble with girls. We were thinking—perhaps she might be willing to see Maya, our counselor. A lot of our students find talking to someone very grounding. We believe Julia might gain from having a friendly face here at the school, somebody she can confide in—”

Martin says, “You can’t make Julia’s graduation contingent on her seeing a counselor. So what can we do to make sure she graduates?” He looks at Principal Green. A kind of rising horror is on Turtle, and she quells it, because perhaps she doesn’t understand, and perhaps Martin does. She thinks, what are you doing, Daddy?

Anna says, “Martin, I think there’s been a misunderstanding. Julia will not be held back. Since we no longer have the budget for summer school, and since any continuation school is very limited, all students are promoted into high school. But if she leaves middle school without robust friendships and with her current study skills and level of reading, poor grades will affect her high school curriculum and subsequently her college opportunities. Which is why it is important to continue addressing these questions *now*, in April, while there is still time left in the school year. It is strictly an issue of Julia’s welfare, and we think that a weekly meeting with somebody she can talk to should be a part of any solution.”

Martin leans forward and his chair creaks. He makes eye contact with Principal Green, presents his hands as if asking, if there are no consequences, what the hell are we doing here?

Principal Green looks at Anna. Martin looks at her as if wondering why she is being looked at. Then he looks quickly away, engaging Principal Green’s attention. Martin thinks Principal Green is in charge and that Principal Green is the nut he can crack. To Martin, Anna seems both too bothersome and too powerless. Turtle doesn’t know why he thinks this. In all of these conversations, she’s never known Principal Green to be anything but unimpressed with Martin. She can see it, how solid he is. He has, Turtle knows, a squinty-eyed son with Down syndrome and he has

been principal here for well over twenty years, and Martin is not talking his language. Nothing Martin can say will convince Principal Green of anything. This meeting is all about being polite and showing that Turtle is engaged, showing that Martin is also engaged with Turtle's teachers, and Martin isn't doing it right, isn't saying the right things, is trying to bully Principal Green like he's tried to bully Principal Green before.

"Martin," Anna says, "I am very committed to working with Julia and doing *whatever* is necessary to prepare her for high school, but there are limits to what I can do when Julia is disengaged here at school, unfocused."

"Mr. Green," Martin says, as if going argument and counterargument with Anna. Principal Green frowns deeply, swinging a little side to side in his chair, hands clasped over his enormous belly. "Julia's success is not contingent upon special attention or upon therapeutic intervention. It's not so complicated. Her schoolwork is boring. We live in exciting and terrible times. The world is at war in the Middle East. Atmospheric carbon approaches four hundred ppm. We are in the middle of the sixth great extinction. In the next decade, we will be over Hubbert's Peak. We may be over it even now, or we may continue with the present course of fracking, which represents a different but no less serious risk to the water table. And for all your efforts, our children might as well believe their tap water arrives by magic. They do not know that there is an aquifer beneath their town, or that it is dangerously depleted, or that we have no plan for how to supply the town with water *after* its depletion. Most of them do not know that five of the last six years have been the hottest on record. I imagine that your students might be interested in that. I imagine they might be interested in their future. Instead, my child is taking spelling tests. In *eighth* grade. Are you puzzled that her mind is elsewhere?"

Turtle is looking at him and trying to see him as Principal Green and Anna see him, and she hates what she sees.

Principal Green looks as if he has heard this objection before, put more forcefully, from others. He says, "Well, Marty. That's not quite true. Our students have their last spelling test in fifth grade. Eighth graders learn vocabulary words with Greek and Latin etymology, all of which are useful in preparing students to understand and articulate the phenomena you describe."

Martin stares at Principal Green.

Principal Green says, "Though, it is true that they are required to spell the words correctly."

Martin leans forward and the Colt 1911 prints against his flannel at the small of his back, and despite how cool his face is, the movement expresses his physical power and menace. It is clear, watching Principal Green and

Martin across from each other, that they may even be of a weight, but where Principal Green is spilling hugely off his chair, Martin is solid as a wall. Turtle knows that this meeting is about showing a willingness to address their concerns. Martin doesn't seem to know it. "I think," Martin says, "that we should allow Julia to navigate her own relationships with her peers, and her own relationship to her schoolwork, in whatever way is best for her. You cannot dictate that a girl be an extrovert. You cannot dictate that she see a therapist, and you cannot pathologize her boredom and disenfranchisement with a tedious curriculum. In her place, you or I would be bored and disenfranchised. So I will not tell her—nor will I permit anyone to tell her—that she needs special attention. I hear your concerns about the rigors of high school, but I cannot help but think that such rigors can only be a profitable contrast from this mind-numbing gauntlet of spelling tests and plotless children's books. She will rise to whatever challenges the coming year brings. However, I am cognizant of your concerns and I can commit right now to finding more time to help Julia study and to teaching her the study skills you believe she may lack. I can find more time for that, every night and on weekends."

Principal Green turns to Turtle and says, "Julia, what do you think of all this? Would you like to meet with Maya?"

Turtle sits frozen, one hand grasped by the other, right on the cusp of cracking a knuckle, mouth open, and she looks from her daddy to Anna. She wants to put Anna at her ease, but can't contradict Martin. Everybody watches her. She says, "Anna is really helpful, and I don't think I do a good job of letting her help." Everyone in the room seems surprised. "I think," Turtle says, "that I need to work a little harder, and let Anna help a little more, listen to her more, maybe. But I don't want to see anybody."

When they are done, her daddy rises and opens the door for Turtle and they walk to the truck together and get in and sit in silence on the bench seat. Martin puts his hand on the ignition and seems to think about something, looking to the side window. Then he says, "Is this the sum of your ambition? To be an illiterate little slit?"

He starts the truck and they pull away, out of the parking lot, Turtle repeating the words *illiterate little slit*. His meaning comes to her all at once like something lodged up in a can glopping free. She leaves parts of herself unnamed and unexamined, and then he will name them, and she will see herself clearly in his words and hate herself. He shifts gears with quiet, forceful anger. She hates herself, hates that unfinished and unchinked gap. They go up the gravel drive and he parks in front of the porch and shuts the truck off. They climb the porch steps together and Daddy walks to the kitchen and takes a beer from the fridge and knocks it

open on the counter's edge. He sits down at the table and chisels at a stain with his thumbnail. Turtle gets down on her knees and puts her hands on the faded indigo of his Levi's and says, "I'm sorry, Daddy." She slips two fingers through the white distressed threads, laying the side of her face against the inside of his thigh. He sits looking away from her, holding his beer encircled by thumb and forefinger, and she thinks desperately about what she can do, a slitted little girl, slitted and illiterate.

He says, "I don't even know what to say. I don't know what to tell you. Humanity is killing itself—slowly, ruinously, collectively *shit*ting in its bathwater, shit

ting on the world just because they cannot conceive that the world exists. That fat man and that bitch, they don't understand. They make up hoops for you to jump through and they want you to think that *that's* the world; that the world is made up of hoops. But the world isn't, and you must never, ever think it is. The world is Buckhorn Bay and Slaughterhouse Gulch. That is the world, and that school is just—shadows, distractions. Never forget that. But you have to pay attention. If you stumble, they will take you away from me. So what do I tell you . . . ? That school is nothing, and still, you have to play along?" He looks at her, gauging her intelligence. Then he reaches out, takes hold of her by the jaw, and says, "What goes on in that little head of yours?" He turns her head this way and that, looking into her intently. Finally, he says, "Do you know this, kibble? Do you know what you mean to me? You save my life every morning that you get up and out of bed. I hear your little footsteps padding down your stairwell and I think, that's my girl, that's what I'm living for." He is silent for a moment. She shakes her head, her heart creaking with anger.

That night, she waits silently, listening, touching the cold blade of her pocketknife to her face. She opens and closes it silently, tripping the liner lock with her thumb and lowering the lock into place to keep it from clicking. She can hear him pace from room to room. Turtle pares crescents from her fingernails. When he stops, she stops. He is silent down in the living room. Slowly, quietly, she folds the knife closed. She cracks the knuckles of her toes with the heel of her other foot. He comes up the stairs and lifts her up and she drapes her hands around his neck and he carries her down the stairs and through the darkened living room to his bedroom, where the moon-cast shadows of the alder leaves come in and out of focus on the drywall, the leaves themselves the darkest waxen green against the window glass, the rust-black floorboards with cracks like hatchet wounds, the unfinished commissure of the redwood and the drywall a black seam opening into the unplumbed foundation where the great old-growth beams exhale their scent like black tea, like creek stones and tobacco. He lays her

down, fingertips dimpling her thighs, her ribs opening and closing, each swale shadowed, each ridge immaculate white. She thinks, do it, I want you to do it. She lies expecting it at any moment, looking out the window at the small, green, new-forming alder cones and thinking, this is me, her thoughts gelled and bloody marrow within the piping of her hollow thighbones and the coupled, gently curving bones of her forearms. He crouches over her and in husky tones of awe, he says, "Goddamn, kibble, goddamn." He puts his hands on the shallow horns of her hip bones, on her stomach, on her face. She stares unblinking. He says, "Goddamn," and runs his scarred fingertips through the tangle of her hair, and then he turns her over and she lies facedown and waits for him, and in the waiting she by turns wants and does not want. His touch brings her skin to life, and she holds it all within the private theater of her mind, where anything is permitted, their two shadows cast across the sheet and knit together. He runs his hand up her leg and cups her butt in his hand and he says, "Goddamn, goddamn," and he walks his lips up the knobs of her spine, kissing each, waiting on each, his breathing choked with emotion, saying, "Goddamn," her legs parted to show a gap admitting to the black of her guts and he takes this for her truth, she knows. He lifts her hair in handfuls and lays it over the pillow to expose the nape of her neck and he says, "Goddamn," his voice a rasp, teasing the small stray hairs with his fingers. Her throat lies against the pillow, filled with papery wet leaves, like she is a cold seep in autumn, the wintry water sieving through them, peppery and pine-tasting, oak leaves and the green taste of field grass. He believes her body to be something that he understands, and, treacherously, it is.

When he is asleep, she rises and walks through the house alone, holding her engorged pussy to catch the unspooling warmth. She crouches in the bathtub, looking at the copper fixtures, ladling the cold water onto herself, the coarse spiderweb texture of his spunk among her fingers clinging even under the running water and seeming only to thicken. She stands at the porcelain sink, washing her hands, and they are her father's eyes in the mirror. She finishes washing, cranks the copper finial, looks into that chinked, white-threaded blue, the black pupil dilating and contracting of its own.