



SHORT STORY NIGHT

RACHEL VOGEL

"VISITORS"

FEATURING INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR!

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Visitors

Rachel Vogel

It's not that Carolanne is tired of her daughter, but after ten days in hotel rooms and a rental car smelling of other people's lives, she's ready to fly home to Phoenix in the morning. She and Juliette are huddled outside the Duke University admissions building, waiting for a campus tour, their last one. The slate roof and patch stonework suggest an English manor house, prompting Carolanne to say, "You probably need royal connections to get into this place."

"You're the one who wants me to go to a school like this," Juliette retorts, though they compiled her college list together. Lately, she projects onto Carolanne any desire she deems insufficiently altruistic.

Their trip began well enough. They sipped lattes and browsed through logo merchandise at university bookstores. At Brown, they laughed over a pair of flannel boxers that said *Smarty Pants* across the bottom. Glimmers of earlier times, before Juliette reflexively pushed back against everything Carolanne said. Such as after the divorce, when Juliette briefly joined a Girl Scout troop, and though Carolanne botched the cookie-sales spreadsheet as well as the tomahawk craft project, her mere proximity comforted Juliette and made her proud. But a few days into this college trip, Juliette had grown restless and withdrawn. She began trailing behind during campus tours, acting like her presence was a big favor, and punching endlessly at her phone, as she's doing now. Her thumbs flit around the glassy screen

like fireflies, black nail polish chipped away in spots. Whom is she texting all the time?

Carolanne studies the crowd around them, mostly other high school juniors with their parents. Everyone's breath makes clouds in the unseasonably cold spring air. She recognizes a couple and their son—the boy's forest-green Deerfield Lacrosse cap, the mother's neat blonde bob—from the tour at Georgetown. She touches her own dark mess of curls and circles back to Juliette's words, feeling defensive. Carolanne's parents had only been able to afford a community college, and though she manages a law office and does more than okay, she wants Juliette to experience the things she missed: the ivy-covered brick, the Socratic professors, the national network of successful alums who can offer advice, even a job. With any luck, one day Juliette could be one of the lawyers.

A compact girl with a Patagonia backpack emerges from the admissions building and silences the crowd with a mighty voice. She and five others behind her, all staring out with the serenity of the anointed, will give the campus tours. The student guides introduce themselves. One, a sophomore from Arkansas, says she thanks her parents every day for sending her to Duke. Then the visitors are instructed to follow whomever they wish. As at most of the schools Carolanne and Juliette have toured, people gravitate to the more charismatic guides, resulting in awkwardly lopsided groups.

"You'd think these colleges, with all their liberalism, could come up with a fairer process," Carolanne says to Juliette, who flashes a brief but genuine smile.

"I like when you side with the underdogs, Mom."

It bothers Carolanne to feel flattered by her daughter's approval.

Given Juliette's apathy, Carolanne has been left to pick their tour guides. She's debating between the ringleader with the Patagonia backpack and the sophomore from Arkansas when Juliette takes off after a slender young man with shoulder-length black hair. Pleased by Juliette's enthusiasm, Carolanne hurries to catch up.

A large group has gathered around the boy, whose black leather jacket and heavy growth of stubble draw Carolanne's suspicion. But it's his pale gray skin that sets her on edge, as if he rarely ventures outdoors because he's too busy reading, too intellectual to bother with the actual

world. Acne scars on his face hint at outgrown adolescent despair. He's older now. Maybe he took time off. Juliette is already talking about a gap year, possibly trekking in Central America. *We'll see*, Carolanne has told her, wary of deferring the future, not to mention safety concerns. She hopes that her ex-husband, John, doesn't encourage Juliette.

The guide reintroduces himself as Dale, a senior from Grand Rapids, Michigan, majoring in Latin American Studies with a concentration in revolutionary ideologies.

"They actually let kids major in that?" Carolanne whispers, struck anew by the range and impracticality of academic inquiry. But Juliette just turns a rigid back and pushes her way to the front of the group.

Dale's T-shirt, visible beneath his jacket, says *Sandino* superimposed over a shadowy figure wielding a rifle. It's doubtful that Juliette knows who Sandino is, but she has a radar for leftist causes, which feed her growing need for purpose, a need she expresses in ways that transcend her rejection of Carolanne. Juliette hand scrawls existential quotes taken from books she read for school and pins them on the bulletin board in her room alongside images of hungry children from developing countries, rap lyric printouts, and, incongruously, clippings of fashion models. From *Moby Dick*, "Such is the endlessness, yea, the intolerableness of all earthly effort." From *Ecclesiastes*, feminized, "What profit hath a woman of all her labor which she taketh under the sun?" The thickening bramble of her daughter's mind fills Carolanne with a mix of pride and fear. She's glad Juliette has the luxury of indulging abstractions, but the potential consequences worry her. One day, Juliette will need to earn a living without complaint.

The group begins moving like a slow herd. The gray sky gives way to blue, casting a frigid brightness on the sprawling campus. Gothic buildings soar above clusters of budding crepe myrtle. Crushed stone paths yield to grassy plazas, where athletic-looking students chat and laugh with a preternatural energy. Pale, wiry Dale evinces no such pep. He speaks softly and answers questions neutrally, making little effort to sell the school. He is handsome, in his Zen-rocker way, though it embarrasses Carolanne to notice. It also surprises her, because she favors a muscular, ruddy type, like John. The first time she felt attracted to John he was playing pickup basketball at the annual law-firm retreat.

He was new to the firm, still ten years away from starting his own. His quads bulged in sweaty Nike shorts.

At a physical sciences building, Dale launches into a recitation of Newton's laws, inexplicably riffing about objects traveling for eternity in equal and opposite directions. How on earth did he get this job? At a biomedical engineering building, he ticks off a list of undergraduate research opportunities, growing animated about gene expression analysis studies. Then he lowers his voice and says, "GMOs are infiltrating the world food supply," as if carrots and sorghum have intent. The remark hangs in the air, gathering frost, but at the front of the pack Juliette nods her head. Carolanne suppresses her annoyance, remembers the adage, "If you're not a liberal at twenty-five, you have no heart." Did Churchill say it?

At the athletic center, the Deerfield Lacrosse father, a dapper man with silvery hair, wants to talk about Duke's famous basketball culture.

"To be honest," Dale says, "it makes no sense to me."

The man persists. He's heard that students don blue face paint and camp out in tents for weeks to get tickets to the Chapel Hill games.

Dale's eyes harden. "Sorry, man, but when you think about the rural poverty just inches outside our bubble, it's hard to get worked up about an orange ball and four-hundred-dollar gym shoes."

The Deerfield Lacrosse father stiffens and turns to his wife, whose thin eyebrows shoot up. Their son crosses his arms, hulky and menacing in his letterman jacket. There's no way Dale's tours have been vetted by the school. What if he isn't a Duke student at all but an impostor who's managed to crash the scene? Carolanne dismisses the preposterous thought, yet it buzzes in her mind as the group begins moving again and Juliette breaks off to catch up with him.

At the next stop, a housing quad, Dale makes a joke about the coed bathrooms and everybody chuckles politely. When he invites questions, only Juliette raises her hand.

"Is it true what they say on College Confidential about the party scene?"

"No comment," Dale replies, smirking. He and Juliette laugh.

As the tour loops back to the admissions building, Juliette and Dale walk ahead of the rest. Juliette's long limbs and auburn hair flow with energy, her clingy jeans counterbalancing the chunky combat boots she insists on wearing all the time. The jeans had cost a small fortune.

When Carolanne bought them for her last year, Juliette impulsively hugged her, and they'd topped off their shopping day with ice cream. Now, in plain view of everyone, Juliette and Dale are bumping shoulders, holding their cell phones out and laughing at each other's screens. The Deerfield Lacrosse family looks indignant.

When the tour officially ends, Juliette joins the small group that sticks around to ask Dale more questions. Dale doesn't look at Juliette, but Carolanne senses his awareness of her presence, feels a tension between them. She wants to give Juliette space, but it's past one and she's hungry. So, after a few minutes she taps Juliette's sleeve and mouths, "I'm ready for lunch. Let's go."

Juliette wipes her sleeve and keeps her eyes on Dale, but after more nudging, she reluctantly breaks away. She walks briskly ahead of Carolanne, as if leaving had been her idea.

The prior summer, Juliette spent six weeks in France on an immersion program. Her first day back she slept for eighteen hours. The second morning, Carolanne woke to the scent of coffee and followed it into the kitchen, where Juliette, wearing a tank top and panties, stood over the stove stirring a saucepan with a wooden spoon. Her body had changed. She was neither thinner nor fatter, but somehow her flesh had shifted in ways that made her unfamiliar. The Keurig machine hissed and steamed.

"Since when do you drink coffee?" Carolanne had asked.

"In France, children drink coffee and wine."

"This isn't France." The Spode creamer was out on the counter. "Why are you using the good china?"

"What are we saving it for?"

"That's not the point."

"It's for this milk I'm heating."

Carolanne eyed the saucepan. "What's wrong with the microwave?"

"Americans are all about speed and convenience," Juliette scoffed.

"Hot milk makes a mess. Clean it up as soon as you're done."

"It's skim milk. How messy can it get? Americans are such hypocrites. It's all non-fat this and Diet Coke that, then everybody pigs out on fast

food. Have you noticed how much thinner people in Europe are?" But Juliette's darting eyes told Carolanne that she wasn't wholly comfortable playing the brat, that she was trying the role on like a new dress.

Often, Carolanne sees glimpses of the caring, responsible adult she feels certain Juliette will become. Juliette volunteers at a women's shelter downtown and recently came home with a letter from her supervisor thanking her for helping a child whose mother had been arrested. Apparently, Juliette had commandeered the facility's modest kitchen and baked cookies with the girl, supplying all the ingredients with her own babysitting money. No doubt this college trip is just a temporary setback.

After the tour, they walk to a commercial street near campus where Juliette suggests a barbecue place recommended as authentic, though she's vague about her source. The restaurant has sawdust on the floor and a menu chalked on an oversize blackboard. Juliette orders hush puppies but only nibbles at the burnt ends. She focuses on her phone, thumbs flying, occasionally laughing out loud.

"Who are you texting with?" Carolanne asks.

"Different people."

Juliette doesn't look up, and Carolanne doesn't press her. She can hear John's disapproval. *Stop coddling her*, he would say, had said more than once during their marriage. Carolanne wants to be firm, but parenting is an art, not a science, and John's do-as-I-say style only alienates Juliette, like that time Carolanne caught her shoplifting at CVS and tried to understand her motivations, but John called it bullshit and grounded Juliette for a month. After that, things were never the same, but John refused to try family therapy, just as he'd refused marriage counseling. He saw therapy as something weak people resorted to. He preferred bucking up to exposing vulnerability. Or maybe he just couldn't be bothered. After all, he'd been able to walk away, content to see Juliette only on weekends.

"How can anything be so cute?" Juliette is holding out her phone, which shows a golden retriever puppy wearing an Easter bonnet. A black ribbon encircles its neck, Marie Antoinette style. Moments like this remind Carolanne of how young Juliette still is, how easy to

please at times. But then Juliette puckers her face and adds, "The dog we could have had." She'll never let Carolanne live down her failure to adopt a family dog. Carolanne had meant to, especially because Juliette had begged so persistently, but things were always too busy, and then the divorce.

"Very cute," Carolanne says of the puppy, opting to ignore Juliette's barb.

"Claire Huntsuckle posted it."

"Who?"

"Maddy Huntsuckle's sister, Claire. She's a freshman here. We've been texting. I might try to see her later."

"Do I know Maddy?"

"Yes, Carolanne. She was my biology lab partner last semester? Jesus."

Although Carolanne doesn't remember the girl, she nods to imply otherwise, adding, "Watch your tone."

They pause to get oriented outside the restaurant. From the corner of her eye, Carolanne notices a figure approach. She glimpses black leather.

"Juliette?"

"Oh, hey, Dale." Juliette tucks strands of hair behind her ear, her nervous gesture. She is flushed. After an awkward pause, she motions toward Carolanne. "This is my mom."

"I remember you," Dale says. "You hid at the back of the pack." He spreads his arms and sings the line, "Leader of the pack," from the old Shangri-Las song, then laughs at his own joke. Weird, but he has a decent baritone.

"We just ate at The Shack," Juliette tells him. "The hush puppies were amazing."

"Right? I never lie."

This disorients Carolanne, who feels mildly betrayed. She examines Dale's face for signs of age. He has dark, fringed lashes, like mink fur.

"Listen," he says, pulling a crumpled sheet of paper from his pocket. "I'm heading to this lecture." He thrusts the paper at Juliette, who holds it out for Carolanne to see. It's a flyer for a talk called *From Led Zeppelin to Pussy Riot: Political Zeitgeists through the Lens of Rock Music*. "It's free to the public, if you're interested. You can walk over there with me." He makes a point of speaking to both of them.

"Can we go?" Juliette pleads.

"It's a great way to get to know the school." Now he's selling.

"Mom, why don't I go while you check into the hotel. We don't have anything else going on this afternoon. I'll Uber over and meet you right after."

"Or, I can drop her," Dale offers.

Carolanne raises her eyebrows but holds her tongue.

"It's perfectly safe," he adds. "There'll be tons of students. It's right near the housing quad we saw on the tour."

The sun straddles the sky, and the air feels warmer. The street hums with people going in and out of shops. Carolanne hates to disappoint Juliette on their last day.

"Please, Mom?"

Next to The Shack is a coffee shop called Grind It Out. Carolanne pats her purse. "Have book, will travel. I'll wait for you in there."

Juliette throws her arms around Carolanne and kisses her lightly on the cheek.

"But text me as soon as it ends," Carolanne admonishes.

"Promise," Juliette calls back, but she's already disappearing into the leafy green of the campus.

Grind It Out bustles with students. Open laptops dot the tables and a sweet undertone of cinnamon warms the air. Carolanne eyes a domed plate of pastries but settles on chamomile tea and tries not to feel forlorn. A lawyer at the firm has raved about her newly empty nest, its exhilarating freedom. Will Carolanne feel free when Juliette leaves? She's created an online-dating profile but hasn't launched it. She used a five-year-old photo and worries that it's fraudulent. But if she posts a current picture, will anyone bite?

She finds a table against the wall and pulls out her book. Nearby hangs a bulletin board plastered with flyers, many with tear-off tabs along the bottom. Housesitting. Babysitting. Dog walking. Tutoring. Companionship. *Companionship*? This sounds sinister, but Carolanne tries to visualize students reading poetry to elderly people, like in that movie where the Cameron Diaz character reads Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art" to the blind professor.

She checks her watch. A half-hour has passed. She hesitates, then pulls out her phone and types:

—How's the lecture so far?

No response.

She calls the office to check in but feels like a nuisance, having planned too well for her own absence.

She picks up her phone again. Still no response from Juliette. Then she uses the airline app to check them in for their morning flight. The thought of returning home buoys her.

A week after Juliette returned from France, when she still hadn't done her laundry, Carolanne decided to do it for her. It was a scorching Sunday in August. Juliette had gone with friends to a municipal swimming pool. Hesitating only briefly, Carolanne opened Juliette's bedroom door and waded into the sea of clothing, toiletries, wrappers, magazines, and shoes that covered every inch of the carpeting.

She gathered an armful of dirty clothes and pressed them to her nose, inhaling her daughter's smell, a blend of benzoyl peroxide, sweat, and a sweet shampoo oddly redolent of cardamom. Carolanne knows this scent by heart, can recall it at will, so her maternal antennae perked up at a new odor mixed in, a musky, gritty smell dragged back from the streets of Paris like an organic souvenir.

After starting the first load, she reentered Juliette's room intending only to collect the rest of the laundry, but she decided to make the bed. In the sheets, she found a thumbed copy of *Ten Days That Shook the World*. It startled her. At Juliette's age, she was reading *Love Story*. So when the bed was done she found herself picking through the strewn clothing and sundries, like a beach detectorist sweeping for metal in the sand.

She found a silver earring with a dangling cross, a matchbook from Chez Moune, and a five-euro banknote inked with a grocery list in Juliette's hand: *pain, framboises, Gauloises*. Since when did Juliette smoke? Each discovery flicked Carolanne's soul like a shock of static electricity. Images of Juliette flashed in her mind. Men whistling at Juliette on the Champs-Élysées. Juliette sunbathing in the Bois de

Boulogne wearing that outrageously skimpy bikini they'd argued about at Macy's. Juliette slathering lotion on her firm body, glowing with a capacity for joy so alien to Carolanne.

To prove her noble intentions, Carolanne dragged in the vacuum cleaner. As she shoved its nozzle under the bed skirt, it sucked up against a bulky object. She turned the power off, got on her knees, and peeked under the bed. There, flanked by a pencil stub and a dust bunny, lay a box of Trojans, shiny and new in unbroken cellophane. She drew in a quick, sharp breath but took solace in the packaging's virgin condition.

Carolanne was dusting the nightstand when she heard the front door, then the voices of Juliette and her friends, home earlier than expected. She scrambled to collect her cleaning supplies, but just as she closed the bedroom door behind her, Juliette came around the corner and they both froze. Carolanne started to explain, but Juliette wouldn't make eye contact. That night, a handwritten sign appeared on Juliette's door, affixed with Scotch tape: *Keep Out*.

Two hours have passed since Juliette went off with Dale. Carolanne texts her again.

—Is the lecture over?

No response.

Carolanne begins sending question marks.

—??

—??

—??

Usually, the vibrations catch Juliette's attention, but more time passes.

Finally, Juliette responds.

—b right there

So casual. Carolanne is pissed.

Twenty minutes later, Juliette shows up alone and breathless, with messy hair and shining eyes.

"O-M-G, I love this school."

"You've been gone nearly three hours," Carolanne says icily.

"I know, I'm really sorry. It was so fun."

Her contrition softens Carolanne, but only a little.

"What, exactly, was the lecture about?"

"He talked a lot about Marx."

"What was the professor's name?"

"I forget."

"Was he young? Old?"

"In the middle, I'd say."

"But it was definitely a man?"

"What is this, the Inquisition?"

"Were you with Dale the whole time?"

"Mostly, and I bumped into Claire."

"Who?"

"Claire Huntsuckle. Maddy's sister?" As if Carolanne is feeble-minded.

"Why didn't Dale walk you back?"

"Jesus, it wasn't a date. And I'm not a child. Why can't you leave me alone?"

"Believe me, I'd like nothing better."

The hotel resembles an antebellum mansion with ersatz Greek columns supporting a generous porte cochère. The bellhop wears a Confederate-style uniform that irritates Carolanne. Must the South be so Southern?

The registration clerk is a pimple-faced child. He ogles Juliette while Carolanne hunts for her wallet in the dark vortex of her purse. Carolanne is used to men's eyes sliding past her then landing on her daughter, but today it feels like crap. Juliette, tapping at her phone, notices none of it.

Their room smells faintly of mildew. Carolanne dumps her bags and takes a long, steamy shower. When she emerges, wrapped in a white towel, the navy drapes and double beds look less shabby.

Juliette lies on the near bed watching an *I Love Lucy* rerun on the television. Her denim-clad legs run nearly the length of the coverlet. Her socks are bunched at her ankles, the combat boots discarded. For months after the divorce, they would huddle together in Carolanne's

king bed watching television. The memory makes Carolanne feel reconnected with Juliette. Ever since France, Carolanne has avoided touching her daughter, who recoils, but a pang of tenderness impels her toward the bed. Clutching the towel to her chest, she reaches her free hand out and strokes Juliette's hair.

"Mmmm, Mommy," Juliette murmurs as Lucy romps onscreen in a tubful of grapes.

For dinner, they eat fried chicken in the hotel restaurant, a dim nook off the main lobby. As Carolanne is signing for the bill, Juliette waves her phone.

"Claire Huntsuckle just invited me to a party." She sounds positively triumphant.

"But our flight's at 8 a.m."

"So? I won't stay out late. Claire's super nice, and I love this school. You're always telling me to gather as much information as possible so I can make good decisions."

An odor of cooked oil permeates the air. Carolanne experiences a rare moment of almost wishing that she and John were still married, because it's so hard having to make all the decisions alone.

Juliette keeps pushing, and while Carolanne stakes out a "no" position, she secretly sympathizes with her daughter. Of course Juliette wants to have fun. All teenagers want to have fun. The two argue back and forth all the way up the elevator, down the hall, and into the room, where Carolanne's resolve finally weakens. If she loosens the reins now, when the risks are relatively low, it might keep Juliette from doing something irrevocably stupid later on.

"But I'm driving you there and picking you up," she adds, doubt already creeping in.

"No problem," Juliette says. Then she changes into black jeans and loads her eyelashes up with mascara.

In the car, they fight about the pickup time. Carolanne says 10 p.m. but

Juliette insists the party will just be starting then.

"Then why am I dropping you now?"

"Because we want to hang out first."

Pale moonlight shrouds the freshman dormitories when Carolanne pulls the rental car over at a central rotary on a stretch of manicured acreage called East Campus.

"I'd like to meet Claire before I leave."

Minutes later, a rail-thin girl approaches the car and crouches to peer in. She's pretty, with light eyes and a dark pixie haircut. A diamond chip sparkles in her nose.

Juliette rolls down her window. "Hey, Claire."

"Hey, girl." Claire leans her head in. The tip of a tattoo peeks out above her collar. "Hey, Juliette's mom."

Carolanne tells her they have an early flight, so Juliette can't stay out too late.

"I get it," Claire says. Her confidence is unnerving.

Juliette gets out of the car, and the two girls disappear into a red brick building.

The negotiating begins at 10:15 p.m.

-I'm coming now.

-not yet

-Yes yet. I'm tired.

-will uber

-No.

-why

-It's not safe.

-claire can ride with me

-I'm done arguing. Our flight's in ten hours.

-how bout 12

-No.

-11:45

-No.

-11:30 pleaz

-No.

—then 11 pleeeeeeazz??

Carolanne wearily agrees, and when Juliette texts back a row of heart emojis, it feels like the right decision. But at 10:45 p.m., as Carolanne is preparing to return to East Campus, Juliette texts again.

—come to Frank's on Main near where we ate lunch maybe ten doors down

—Are you serious?

No response.

Carolanne drives slowly on the dark rural roads, bumping over railroad tracks. Skunk stink drifts through the vents. Frank's glows like a beacon, the only open establishment for miles. Carolanne pulls up to the curb but keeps the engine running. A deep patio fronts the restaurant, set off by an iron railing. Two thickly muscled men guard the entry.

Young people jam the patio, most holding bottles of beer. Despite the cold, girls wear slip dresses or midriff tops paired with tiny shorts. The boys wear jeans and T-shirts, though a few have on khakis and button-downs. One boy is vomiting into a trash can. They must all have fake IDs. How else could they get in? With a jolt, Carolanne understands that Juliette must have a fake ID, too.

A brouhaha breaks out by the trash can. One of the muscled men is confronting the vomiting boy, who argues back between retches. Then the muscled man grips the boy's arm and pulls him through the crowd. The boy is yelling, but the blaring country music drowns out his words.

What disturbs Carolanne more than the fake ID is the imagined moment of its acquisition. A deserted schoolyard, a seedy middleman, the handoff of document for babysitting cash. Suddenly suspicious, Carolanne scans the crowd for Dale. She remembers how he recited Newton's first law and shivers at the thought of objects persisting in uniform motion until disturbed by a physical force.

She pulls out her phone and texts Juliette, bracing for a repeat performance of the afternoon's disappearing act. She cringes at the thought of calling John in California to confess catastrophe, of hearing his new children scamper in the background while he rebukes her poor judgment. His wife would lift her nose out of her stock report just long

enough to pile on. So when Juliette responds immediately, Carolanne floods with relief. Within minutes, Juliette tumbles into the car.

"It was so fun," she slurs, fumbling with the seatbelt. "Did I tell you how much I love this school? I love Claire, too. And I love you, Mommy." She smells of beer, but Carolanne couldn't care less. They just need to get through the next eight hours.

Fully clothed, Juliette flops onto her bed and falls asleep instantly, but Carolanne tosses restlessly in hers. The LED numbers on the bedside clock cast a green glow. Night sounds come to life: the air conditioner's labored drone, the whir of traffic outside the window, laughter in the hallway followed by a slammed door. Carolanne slips out of her bed and locates Juliette's backpack in the darkness. The shame she feels does not stop her from rooting around for Juliette's wallet. She finds it in an outside pouch and shines her phone flashlight on the contents. The fake ID, tucked behind her real one, has Juliette's photo but a different name: Tiffany Rambo. Tiffany is twenty-one years old.

Carolanne wakes to a pinging sound. The clock shows 12:33 a.m. She picks up her phone. A red bubble floats on the green messaging app. Who would be texting her at this hour? She touches it.

-wazzup?

It's from Juliette's number.

Carolanne glances at the other bed but can't make out any definite forms. She gets out of her own bed and aims her phone flashlight in the darkness. Gingerly, she touches the mound of Juliette's bedding. Then she presses harder. Juliette's not there, but the bed has been staged to make it look as though she is. A ball of dread forms in Carolanne's gut.

She calls Juliette's phone, but it goes straight to voicemail. Then she texts and waits for a response. Nothing.

She goes into the bathroom and turns on the light, squinting in the brightness. She rips open the shower curtain, hoping to find Juliette curled in the white ceramic of the tub.

She returns to the room and switches on the overhead light. She checks the bed again. Then she gets down on her knees, lifts the bed skirt, and flashes her phone underneath. She half knows this is crazy, but only half. Her heart pounds wildly.

She calls Juliette again. It goes straight to voicemail.

She texts question marks. Nothing.

She puts on the warmup suit and sneakers she has laid out for their flight and grabs her room key and purse. She walks up and down the hallway of their floor, peeking in wall niches and listening for the elevator. Then she takes the stairs down two at a time, willing herself to keep calm. Teenagers pull all sorts of dumb stunts, and nothing terrible comes of them.

The lobby looks abandoned, the stacked chairs in the dining nook looming like sentries. The public restrooms smell powerfully of Lysol but are silent and empty. The pimpled boy at the front desk is still on duty. Good. He'll remember Juliette.

"I'm looking for my daughter." Carolanne forces herself to sound upbeat. Admitting that she's lost her child, especially to this bleary-eyed youth, feels unbearable.

"Yup, I remember that one." He laughs stupidly. "Don't worry, she'll turn up."

Carolanne drives the rental car back to Frank's, but the entire street has gone dark. No drunken kids, no muscled men. It's a shock. Somehow, she had expected the evening to rewind like video footage. Now, she feels unmoored and deeply frightened. Should she call John? The prospect brings vomit to the back of her throat.

Shaking, she drives to East Campus. The sight of students near the rotary fills her with hope. She pulls the car over and searches for Juliette's face in the crowd. But her daughter is not among these students, who soon scatter and disappear.

Blue lights flash. A white Chevy sedan with *Campus Police* painted on the side pulls up behind Carolanne's rental car. Two men occupy the front, their faces visible in the glare of a street lamp. The driver has a handlebar mustache and fat, rosy cheeks. He opens his door and lumbers out, a black uniform strained across his belly. A gun gleams in a leather holster by his hip.

"Can we help you, ma'am?" His metal name tag says *H. Cobb*.

"I'm looking for my daughter. We're visiting. She was with a friend here earlier, but her cell phone must be dead because I can't reach her."

Officer Cobb studies Carolanne's face. "Thursday night's a party night, ma'am. The kids come straggling in about now. We can wait with you a spell, if you like."

Carolanne nods.

"We'll just be in our car then, ma'am. You come get us if you need anything."

She wishes he'd stop calling her "ma'am." It makes her feel old. She settles into her car and watches for Juliette among the kids trickling in. She tries Juliette's phone every five minutes and avoids thinking about John.

By 2:00 a.m. East Campus is dead. The patrol car door opens again and Officer Cobb reemerges.

"You say your daughter was with a friend, ma'am?"

"Yes, Claire Huntsuckle. I think she lives in there." Carolanne points to the brick building where Claire and Juliette disappeared earlier.

"Do you have her cell phone number?"

"No, but can't you get her number from the university? You must have access to a directory."

"Please, ma'am, try to stay calm."

Now the second officer gets out of the car. He's slimmer than Officer Cobb, with a blond crew cut. He stands by his open door and scans the darkness beyond the buildings.

"What did you say the friend's name was again?" Officer Cobb asks.

"Claire Huntsuckle. Please, you've got to get her number."

"Hold on, then, ma'am. And please, stay calm."

She is calm, goddammit.

Officer Cobb confers with his partner, then they both disappear into the patrol car. Ten minutes later, Officer Cobb rolls down his window.

"We got it, ma'am! We got the girl's number." Carolanne tenses.

"Officer Ford here's going to give her a holler."

Minutes later, Claire comes out of her dormitory wearing flannel pajamas and Uggs. Her eyes are smudged with makeup, but her gaze is clear. She hasn't seen Juliette since Carolanne picked her up at Frank's,

she says. She stayed another hour then came back alone because she has an early class. She reaches over and takes Carolanne's phone from her hand. "I'll text myself so we have each other's numbers." She performs the promised operation and then, sphinx-like, hands Carolanne back her phone. "I'll call if I hear anything."

Carolanne cannot process the idea of Claire leaving. "Can you try her from your phone?"

Claire hesitates.

"Just in case," Carolanne urges.

"Sure."

"Put it on speaker. Please."

But Claire's call, like all of Carolanne's, goes straight to voicemail. Juliette's recorded voice sounds foreign in the open night air. Carolanne feels herself crumbling and panics when Claire turns to leave.

"Wait! What about Dale? Did Juliette say anything to you about a boy named Dale? He was our tour guide. They spent time together this afternoon. She was with him at the lecture. She said they ran into you. Did you see him?"

Claire shakes her head. "I'm so sorry this happened." When she finally walks back to her building, her shrinking form is like a snapped filament of hope.

"Who's Dale, ma'am?" Officer Cobb's voice startles Carolanne. He's staring at her with a hand on his holster. The thin officer stands by the car, his thumbs hooked in his pockets. He has a gun, too, and a shiny billy club. Both officers wear thick leather boots. "Do you have a last name for him, ma'am?"

"He's a student here. A senior, I think. He gave us a tour today." She's rambling. "He never said his last name."

"A student, ma'am?"

"Yes." How stupid can he be? Of course, Dale's a student. Of course he is.

"Well, ma'am, we can try contacting the admissions office, but it'll have to be tomorrow. They're closed tonight. Did your daughter say anything else? Does she know any other people here?"

"No, she doesn't know anyone. We're visitors. We're flying home in the morning."

Officer Cobb glances behind him, and the way he and his partner exchange looks sends Carolanne into a frenzy. They're closing down

for the night. They're skeptical. She begins to scream.

"Where's my daughter? Where's my daughter?"

"Please, ma'am . . ." But Officer Cobb's effort to calm Carolanne only makes her more hysterical. She screams louder, over and over.

Where's my daughter? Where's my daughter? Help me find my fucking daughter!

The words fly out of her mouth, rising desperately up into the black velvet of the night.

Appearing distressed, Officer Cobb returns to the patrol car.

Carolanne looks at the sky. Through her tears, the stars blur together in a gushing spray of brilliance. She searches for movement, an unstoppable light. As from across the universe, she hears Officer Cobb, his voice stern but not unkind.

"Ma'am, I suggest you go back to the hotel and check your room once more. If your daughter's still not there, call the Durham Police. This is out of our jurisdiction."

The pimple-faced boy greets Carolanne with cheer, but she walks past him without a word. The elevator groans up the shaft and delivers her into the harsh glare of the hallway. She walks slowly to the room, key poised, and pauses outside the door. Images of Juliette flash in her mind. Juliette letting her baby teeth rot in a glass of root beer for a fifth-grade science project. Juliette singeing two inches off her hair at the Girl Scout bonfire. Juliette getting into a car with a stranger.

The room is dark, but fearing finality, Carolanne doesn't turn on the light. She creeps toward the beds, touching the wall for guidance. She stumbles on a bulky object and nearly falls, so she fishes her cell phone from her purse and turns the flashlight on. It illuminates the floor, where Juliette's combat boots are lying in a welcome jumble. Her pulse races. She goes to Juliette's bed and aims the phone, still dreading what she may not find. But there her daughter lies, long-limbed and unmolested in the soft white mess of the bedsheets, her breathing like a lyric over the rhythmic hum of the digital clock. Carolanne holds the light steady on Juliette's face. It doesn't wake her. Juliette's skin glows, she is at peace, girl eclipsing woman for a little while longer.