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Center

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Center

Susan only half believes she's visiting the home of her newly married brother. She has a queasy, unreal feeling left over from the plane ride: New York to Los Angeles, nonstop, a feeling of distances covered too quickly. On the plane she'd studied the back of the in-flight magazine—the states mapped out like different regions of the brain, the flight trajectories swooping and swirling electric pulses. She'd been surprised at the number of connections leading in and out of her childhood home in Cedar Rapids.

It didn't help Susan's sense of reality that the wedding, in her experience, was still just an image on the invite. The card had shown black-and-white photos of her brother and his fiancée pulling faces and kissing. She'd found the display of beauty and quirkiness annoying. And her annoyance made her feel like the bitter older sister, so she'd taken the invite off the refrigerator where she'd placed it as a reminder. She'd then lost the invitation, actually. She'd somehow managed to schedule an important part of her doctoral exams on the same day as the wedding.

Yet Susan now stands at her brother's front door, in a pocket of shade amid the bright L.A. sunlight, on a porch with a swing and other convincing realistic details like half-dead pansies in terracotta pots. The door is cracked, and her brother, Alex, is rummaging around the car for the house keys he's dropped between the seats. Susan pushes the door open. She could call out to her brother, say, "Hey, it's open," but she'd rather be a spy. She'd rather check things out, make them her own.

It happens right away:

Inside the front room is a familiar slanted block of sun across a shaggy carpet, and pothos, hanging plants with their tropical twining leaves, like living wigs of long green hair. Here are the nubby cinderblock walls, although one is now painted a yellow ocher and seems to vibrate as if pregnant or alive. Susan is thirty-five, four years older than her brother, and she thinks, "No," this is not his house, it's hers, the one she inhabited for that brief time without him, when she was the center of the universe.

Bubbles of romantically edited memory form:

She sits on the carpet inside the patch of sunlight and is spotlighted underwater. Dust motes float like sea monkeys in the beam and the carpet is a jumble of aqueous worms.

But Alex, who has graciously picked her up at the airport, who is disconcertingly excited to see her, comes bounding through the door. “Oops,” he says. He’s a monstrously large child with orange leather bowling shoes and one sparkly earring. He shakes his keys in front of Susan’s face. He skips to the kitchen and destroys, as usual, Susan’s romantic visions of herself—they rise, tremble, and pop.

The kitchen is very clearly not their old home. It’s too California—the cabinets are white and sleek, not that old butterscotch brown with the faux rustic hardware. There is a chrome dishwasher, refrigerator, and range. And Susan remembers that her brother’s new wife Melinda is a “fancy cook person,” as her mother called her. A gastronomist, with a blog and a personal consulting business. She is a yoga-doing-take-care-of-yourself-in-order-to-spread-good-vibes-across-the-universe person, Susan thinks. Enlightened bourgeoisie. Little jars of herbs line the countertop. As if for more evidence, her brother opens the refrigerator, which blooms into an exotic jungle of leafy greens, fruit as large as heads, blocks of cheese, and expensive blue and green glass bottles.

Susan thinks of her small Brooklyn apartment, meals of one pre-cooked sausage, coffee, and gummy bears. She thinks about her brother’s old refrigerator, full of beer and half-eaten bags of french fries—oh, how they bonded over their bad health habits.

Alex now sticks his hand into the green mass and pulls on something beige and full of twisted appendages, something that grows larger as it emerges from the leaves. “It’s a root baby,” he cries and drops it suddenly on the counter. He takes a few steps back and laughs, at first forced, then real.

Susan has her choices—she can laugh along with her brother and bond over the sudden weirdness. An ironically random message from the universe?

Instead she takes the laugh and tries to unravel it.

She thinks the laugh is partly for her sake, a way to say, “Don’t worry, older sister, I haven’t been domesticated either,” and she doesn’t like the pity.

She thinks the laugh might carry a tinge of self-congratulation—a satisfaction that his unfamiliarity with root vegetables is proof he’s still

antiestablishment, still a struggling artist, even if fully funded by his wife.

She thinks the laugh comes from a fear they're no longer neck and neck, a fear that he's fallen behind. She's still out there in the real wilds—not those of a suburban refrigerator but, like Baudelaire or Basquiat (Alex's heroes), those of a real city.

But Alex doesn't seem to be thinking anything. He bounces around the kitchen, working a fancy espresso machine, and tells her about all of his projects: he wants to fill in the swimming pool with soil and grow a huge urban garden, because that would be so anti-L.A.; he'll sell his car if Melinda lets him and turn the garage into his studio. He'll get a bus pass and become the flaneur of public transit, "because how else do you see real people?" He laughs at himself, and Susan hears that large portion of humility and grace, an excitement that stretches far back and bubbles up from their childhood, a time when having a new toy, something magnificent all to himself, meant he wanted to share it with her.

She sits on the carpet inside the square of sunlight beamed through the living room window. He buzzes at her edges, watches her carefully, and leaps into her beam of light. She plants her hand in the middle of his chest and shoves hard.

She moves to the kitchen table and wills herself into the tip of a crayon. She makes water with blue and yellow waves, but she can see through the door that baby Alex has already forgotten he's been shoved. He's trying to take her sea monkeys and capture them in a glass jar. He dances and leaps in and out of the beam, scattering the dust motes everywhere.

Susan draws a storm.

Alex swipes the glass through the air and covers it, quick, with the metal lid. She hates how her brother wants to see everything she sees and then copy it. She knows their mother will always give him more encouragement for his efforts because he will always be younger, like the little engine that could, the one who is always trying to catch up.

Until now, that is.

Susan focuses. She tries to center herself in the present, at the kitchen table, while her brother flits around the kitchen offering "coffee, water, wine?" Her eyes land on a row of her brother's photographs hung along the ocher wall.

They're images of cow eyeballs with the long nerve still attached. Her brother collected the eyeballs at butcher shops, placed them on copper emulsion plates, and let the images develop from the eyes' juices. *Eyes*

so potent that even though the nerves were severed they left an impression, leaked out rings of orange and green phosphorescence—left a chemical spill.

They're fossil eyes, Susan thinks, poisonous and trapped in their old ways of seeing.

When she'd first seen them, she'd dismissed the photos for being weird for the sake of weirdness. But she'd seen them alongside older images. The ones in which Alex had pierced his collarbones, draped a Superman cape from the piercings, and photographed himself looking like an ambivalent golden boy—the blood from the piercings still trickling down his chest. "Oh, the martyrdom of the white male," she'd teased him. He'd laughed a little and said something about being in art school and what was he supposed to do? He couldn't exactly make empowering art about his vagina.

But now by themselves the eye prints are different. Beautiful, actually, like flying over salt flats and marshes; the cornea is an island in a swirling salt sea.

Susan tries to remember the theory behind them. She drifts off when her brother explains his theories, which usually seem a painful reminder of how she once sounded, and maybe still sounds—strivingly pretentious in a way they both thought would impress their father. Their beloved father who was gentle and kind, but who spent a large portion of their childhood grading papers, sealed in a bubble of seriousness.

Looking at the eye prints, she thinks she should say something, give a compliment. In fact, had she ever complimented Alex's work?

Alex comes to join Susan at the dining room table, proudly carrying a tiny cup of espresso on a saucer. As he sits down, Susan notices a Native American dream catcher hung on the wall behind him, probably not authentic—the kind of white-person appropriation you can find at any gas station in the Southwest. She smiles wickedly and says, "That must be Melinda's."

Her brother turns his head to look at the dream catcher and then smiles back at her.

"You know Melinda's a little nervous around you," he says.

And Susan, caught off guard, doesn't believe it.

Susan is in no way better looking than Melinda, nor is she in any measurable way more accomplished. Susan has lofty-sounding goals; she wants to be a poet-scholar. She wants to travel and give readings, to finally find a volumizer that will allow her to flip off witty comments as she flips her wild mane of poetess hair. Susan wants to pass the theory phase of her orals, to fucking finally understand Derrida's semes,

Freud's overdetermination. (She's nailed Barthes, however, and will probably end up reading about his starry open texts for comfort, after she obtains her PhD and is living in a homeless shelter.)

Melinda, on the other hand has a job, a house, and her brother.

And speaking of the yogi, Melinda suddenly appears in the frame of the small arched door, slipping off her shoes, placing her yoga mat under a low bench. She deposits her keys with a jangle, as if to clear off Susan's bad energy, into a scalloped metal bowl.

Melinda, Susan thinks, has the power of those people who don't announce themselves, upon whom your gaze happens accidentally, so you're struck by their self-containment, by the way they don't need you to exist. Susan wonders where Melinda found her internal ruler because she doesn't seem to measure her actions against others'. It's a ruler that's implanted in her spine—her posture is stick straight.

She moves toward Susan. She hugs her warmly, looks her in the eyes, and, smiling, says, "I'm so happy you get to visit us. How long can you stay?" And as quickly as she asks this, she separates and returns to her business about the house, as if Susan has created nary a ripple in the smooth surface of their lives.

"I'm just staying one night," Susan says, watching, wondering how her brother ended up with someone so weird, or, more accurately, so unlike either herself or her mother.

And her mother, Susan thinks, as she watches Melinda glide around the furniture, her mother has donated more than the kitchen table, where she sits this very moment. The kitchen table with the familiar scratches. She hovers her hands over it now as if guiding a planchette along a Ouija board. Items like the old sewing machine, the rocking chair, items that would normally be donated to an oldest daughter, are emerging in the room like large rocks in the shallows. Her eyes bump up against them, and they make jarring, unattached thoughts.

Susan presses her hands firmly against the top of the table. She tries to center herself. To be centered like Melinda, but instead remembers her hands running over her mother's stomach as it grew thicker and harder, became occupied with her brother. Her mother's radical change happened when she was four. It must have become clear then that her mother was a separate person, not Susan's constant background, her soft cushion with breasts. Her blanket, or a bigger version that she could fit snugly inside.

Her mother is bursting. Susan puts her hand on her stomach. She feels the new heat of her skin and knows that ground shifts, that flesh splits—and although inside her mother’s belly she knows that her brother is really only as big as her head, she understands volcanoes and earthquakes and that the earth is attached to a string, suspended and spinning.

Or, her mother is lying in bed, sweaty and a little sick, and Susan wants to help, but the mother is the unhelped helper. The primary source. She leaves the drinks Susan brings untouched on the bed stand.

Melinda opens the refrigerator. She takes out a blue bottle, a mango, and settles down between Susan and Alex at the kitchen table. Susan has to admit, she likes that Melinda doesn’t try to serve them, doesn’t offer anything from the refrigerator. Her mother did this compulsively, especially on Susan’s visits home from college, and Susan thought it was a kind of apology for no longer being close. If it was an apology, she knew it was also a way of staying separate, a way of maintaining her own bubble of control.

Melinda, Alex, and Susan sit at the table, the sun hovering just above the sliding glass window, lighting up the chips and scratches on the table where they once sat as children over large bowls of cereal. And Susan can’t control herself. She turns to Alex and says, “When you were born, I didn’t want to share Mom.”

Melinda looks up from her mango, but not suspiciously like Alex. Just curious.

Alex laughs and says, “How do you even remember?”

He says, “I think you’re writing a story.”

“No,” says Susan. “That’s why I was so mean to you.”

But Alex rolls his eyes and looks toward Melinda. He says, “You weren’t that bad.”

“But maybe that’s why we’re still so competitive,” Susan says. “Don’t you ever have that feeling, like we’re stuck together on a teeter-totter? If one of us is sailing up, the other is watching—sinking from below.”

“What?” asks Alex, shaking his head. “Are you saying this is why you missed the wedding?”

But Susan pushes aside his incredulity. His question too. She feels a memory coming on.

Susan remembers that once her brother came, she felt she had to move on, away from her mom, and that made her feel very small at first. Her hair looked so thin in the mirror in her mother’s bathroom, a mirror

the size of the huge landscape paintings at museums. Her mother had finally shown her the mirror when she lifted her onto the counter to tie large felt bows to the ends of her braids for a family picture. The bows immediately made the braids look as thin as toothpicks. Her mother chuckled at the disproportion—loved the awkwardness of her children, loved them most, Susan thought, when they didn't understand things, looked silly, or needed her help.

And of course, Susan didn't want to be a baby or a clown. She knew that although her mother said she could help with her new baby brother, it wouldn't be true. She suspected her mother and her brother would be one person until her brother was at least three, and by that time she'd be seven—practically an adult.

Susan remembers working hard on being independent, on strategies for making herself into her own landscape, house, or womb. She remembers her friend from down the street who played by putting dolls under her dress and tucking the dress into her underwear. But she didn't want to be only a mother—she wanted to be mothered too. She wanted to be wrapped in layers and surrounded by something bigger and more beautiful than herself but that she'd created.

She learns how to climb up into the cherry tree, lie in the crooks, and let her thoughts reach out like branches, bud into capillaried walls.

Or, she brings flashlights under the covers when she's supposed to be sleeping and learns to read inside the stomach of her orange felt blanket. Each word is a pulse. If she doesn't know it, she makes it up, quickly, so as not to skip a beat.

Melinda floats through her routine like a planet on a mobile over a crib. Susan wonders if the brother is rendered docile by Melinda's steady orbit, so different from their mother's, who always hurried and bumped into furniture, sometimes injuring herself trying to keep the house clean. Susan sips her coffee.

She's pissed that her brother implied she was writing a story. "So what if I'm writing a story," she says aloud. "According to Zola, a story is a scientific experiment, it's a hypothesis—it tests an idea."

"Whatever," Alex says, and then, "I think you should test a story through multiple points of view."

"Like yours?" Susan asks.

"Yes," says Alex, "and Mom's."

"Oh, I think I know Mom's point of view," Susan says.

But then she realizes that this is the heart of the problem: of course she doesn't.

Besides the dream catcher, Melinda has hung a painting of a newborn baby on the living room wall. Susan finds the picture startling, the newborn ugly and unhappy looking, with his eyes squeezed shut, a hospital bracelet cinched around his wrist, and little fists like prunes held up to his face. The paint around him is smeared, as if he's emerging from dust or exhaust. She wonders how Melinda doesn't see the pained expression on his face. At the same time, she admires Melinda's ability to know her wish and to hang it in the center of the wall.

Susan stares at the painting and then back at Alex. She points to it and raises her eyebrows as if to say, "What does this mean?"

Alex stares back at her. "Melinda put that up because she's friends with the artist." Susan narrows her gaze and looks at him.

"Oh, and I think it's very beautiful, don't you?" Melinda calls out from the kitchen.

Susan smiles at her brother, who has dodged her question: "*Does Melinda want a baby?*"

She knows he's scared. For the moment, she's won.

The sun is now burning a bright seam along the metal rim of the sliding glass door. It casts a reflective light across surfaces, burns them out. Susan walks into the living room and runs her hands along the soft nubby walls. She likes the eclectic non-decorating-decorating style. It seems familiar, similar to her own attempts to be both domestic and not. The room, though, is definitely tinged with Melinda. On the bookshelves are funny Dadaist knickknacks like a log wearing a sweater mixed with what are probably expensive crystal wedding gifts from the wedding she didn't attend. There are old gas station signs and a couple of large, salty-looking crystals. And it all begins to blur. It's as if all the objects are hanging together on one web, on Melinda's dream catcher. At least from the outside their lives are already like one of those double-image pictures that change depending on your angle of vision; their lives seem inexplicably intertwined. And Susan begins to give in, to let go of her resistance. She's going to be an aunt. Probably. Isn't it just like a bitter older sister to try to unravel a brother's happiness? To criticize and poke holes? Shouldn't she hope that somewhere in this vivid, clunky web there will be a space for her?

The irony is that Susan didn't, at first, care to be loved by Alex, nor did she notice his love, except as an annoyance, or a constant background,

like a wall painted yellow that bleached to electric white during adolescence but blossomed brightly on their returns from college and then bleached back out again, after a couple of days, to an annoying hum. From a certain angle, her brother's love was great and undeniable, as obvious as an amaryllis bloom. But she's been having to read Plato and Lacan, and she is half convinced that Alex's love came mostly because she was so busy without him. She half believes that all love comes from a desire to fill a perceived lack in oneself, something missing that her brother, for instance, thought she had.

Another irony is that even though she probably seemed full to Alex, she was in fact overcompensating for the lack she felt in relation to her mother. She was always busy making things for the mother, trying to show her she was separate and fully grown. She had factories—salt-dough-ornament factories, Shrinky Dinks factories, painted-egg factories, and origami assembly plants. She wanted to be independent but also wanted her mother's approval. Here, at least, her brother's love was useful; she let him be a helper, sometimes even a partner if he let her dress him as a girl.

Or, *let* isn't the right word. He liked to be dressed as a girl, especially when they organized shows for their mother, when they went into her makeup bag and, before the big mirror, unzipped the mother's secret factory of pink and coral lipsticks, silvery-gray eye pencils, and blush in pots shaped like seashells.

Susan pushes a chair to the counter and tells Alex to climb up. They sit cross-legged with the cool Formica against their bare legs, tingling all over at the thrill of invading their mother's space. This time she's gentle. She tells her brother not to be afraid, because she isn't sure about how to apply the makeup. She tells him to stop moving, places one hand on his forehead, and presses the back of his head against the medicine cabinet. His eyes shiver, are separate little organisms, and he lets out an "ah" at the pressure of her hand, but Susan is transfixed by the tiny lungs of the iris, their feathery expand and contract, the mucous-tipped end of each tapered eyelash embedded in a perfect row. And she is equally entranced with her mother's tube of mascara, with unscrewing it and the small pop of suction it makes when the brush comes out of the tube. As she brings the wand to the base of the lashes, Alex blinks, and the wand ricochets down his cheek. Susan says, "One more time," holding his head back, and "One more time," again, until her fingers are pitchy and his eyes are swirling black storms.

Susan picks up a glass prism, a knickknack off the coffee table, and sees her own eye enlarged, as opaque as a cow's. She feels a flood of affec-

tion for Alex, who stayed still for the torture. Did he stay still because she was finally looking at him with the interest she gave to her projects or her books?

There were things she'd forgotten about her brother.

"We got him tutors because he wanted to be able to read like you and he struggled," her mother had said.

"You would sit there with your nose in a book, just shutting him out."

Susan did remember Alex's trouble with spoken words, how they came like twitches, how they came like small explosions from caps, the plastic rings filled with powder that he would take outside and hit for hours with rocks.

But she also remembers how many of her brother's tics were also, annoyingly, hers. There was the compulsive eye twitch she developed in junior high. Her brother developed a stronger case of it after she'd gotten over hers, and she would cry "Stop!" when she saw him, sure that it was contagious and that she would be reinfected. And she was hypersensitive to his chewing, and the strange way he had of breathing and talking through his extra-large retainer, like a miniature drooling Darth Vader. Her father, she remembered, laughed when Alex learned to take out the retainer and set it next to her dinner plate, dripping with saliva.

And yes, she'd called him stupid and gross and weird. Because all their faults seemed horribly interconnected, as if he were her dark shadow or ghost in the closet. Their quirks and compulsions repeated themselves on each other's bodies in only slightly different ways.

Susan suddenly loses her balance on the high countertop, and Alex rolls away from the medicine cabinet, is tipping, falling over the edge, and here comes her terror, and the pang; there is her bruised love for her brother, rising up in the panic. She wonders if, now, she can come out of memory, ready to love her brother in the present, but her brother is screaming because he's hit his head on the toilet and is stuck in the garbage can, and their mother is rushing into the bathroom and pulling him out in one mighty swoop, grabbing Susan at the top of her arm, the root, and pulling the two of them together. She's found the mascara wand—she holds it up and says, "You cannot use this on your brother. Look at him. Look. You've hurt his eyes." And Susan, who was hoping her mother would appreciate the subtlety with which she was going to apply the mascara, sees that Alex is fine, feels her pride push up, and says, "I like him better as a girl." Her mother, shaking, says, "You're not the center of the universe." She says, "Someday he'll be bigger than you," and Susan feels the earth shifting, thinks of buildings falling down in slow-

motion films. Somewhere, amid the rubble, her mother is saying, "Someday, much later, you'll want him as your friend, and he won't have forgiven you."

Susan is back in the living room. She could at least tell Alex that she likes his photographs. But their mother is there too. She's in the furniture, in the air between them, in a way that seems to push all other relationships out.

Susan asks instead, "So, how is the art going?"

And it's the wrong question.

Alex deflates and puffs up at the same time.

"Great. Great. Fine," he says. "This L.A. art scene, it's all about who you know." He leans back in his chair, props his feet up on the table to display his orange leather bowling shoes, and tries to look intense. Susan wants to ask him, "But are you actually working?" She wants to comment about placing daily hard work over being charming and making connections.

Instead she asks, "Did it ever bother you that Mom always thought you had to do the same things I did?"

"No," Alex says with a defensive twinge in his voice that makes Susan suspect he's thought about it. "She encouraged us in art because she loved it."

"Well, she should have been an artist then."

"There's still time," Alex says, a little annoyed. "It's not like her life is over."

Susan thinks this might be true. A year ago, on a visit home, she'd come across one of her mother's creations in a consignment shop in Cedar Rapids. There were the painted paper birds cut from stray book pages, pinned onto an intricate wire frame made to look a birdcage. The birds hovered outside the cage in a variation on a theme—as if to say, "We're not trapped. It's our choice to belong to a home."

And then, on her last visit, her mother had changed. She didn't rush so much—she actually sat still, and looked at Susan, as if ready to listen. At dinner, there was a new kind of smile on her father's face when he looked at her mother. And then there was the wine bottle—when had they started drinking wine? In fact, her mother was wobbly when she leaned over, grabbed Susan's hand under the table, and said, "I try, but I never say the right things with you." Susan noticed that her eyes were shivering, like her brother's—there was that glossiness of tears forming, and that feathery expand and contract.

Susan had tried to hold on to this, even if she could have used it much earlier. That night in her old bedroom in Iowa, she'd opened the window to let in the air with its crush of cicada sound and humidity. And things her mother had said hovered sharp and out of context.

She'd said:

I think you do things to prove that you can do them and not because you really want to.

Or:

Writers have to be really driven, and you're not like that. I don't think driven people are happy.

Or, when Susan was excited to go back to school again:

I suppose you need to do that. I just hope your brother doesn't think he has to do the same thing.

Back at the dining room table, Alex has grown cocky. Susan can tell he's preparing to say something by the way he stands up from his chair—he says things in transit so people don't see them coming, and so he can make a quick getaway.

"Who's to say Mom isn't an artist?" he starts tentatively.

And then, bam, he adds, "We don't all need awards and degrees to make ourselves real."

"If you're a woman in a patriarchy, who needs to support herself, who doesn't have a nice sugar mama, actually, they help."

Bam.

"Well, if it's still such a patriarchy, why do I have a sugar mama?"

Bam, sort of.

And then her brother is gone, out the sliding glass door. She can see him reach in his pocket for cigarettes, pretending everything is cool, or shaking it off and leaving Susan to wallow in her evil sisterhood.

Alone, Susan goes back to thinking about her mother, but also about how it would be too hard to be any mother. If she were her mother, she might have done the same things. She might have told Alex that if his older sister had learned to read and speak quickly, he could get tutors and master those things too. Or that if his sister loved to draw and play the piano...Or that if his sister got a scholarship and went out of state for college, he definitely *should* do that, even if he said "No," slammed doors, and began sinking into a deep well of apathy and high school suspensions. Even if it meant that she, the mother, would have to fill out his college applications for him, and she and Susan would have to drive him, depressed and hung over, halfway across the country and deposit

him on his campus of fairy-tale turrets and creeping ivy, a campus he quickly grew to love, a much more prestigious school than Susan went to, and that Susan was so jealous of.

Susan had filled out one out-of-state college application, fearfully and covertly, and when she was accepted with a partial scholarship, her announcement was met with surprise and fear. Fear that there wouldn't be enough money? Fear that she wouldn't succeed?

But Susan has to admit that it was her mother, her mother who gave up school to marry her father, who finally joined her side. It was her mother who fought for her, who got her beloved father to change his mind.

She knows her mother fought for her in other ways as well.

She carried her in her belly for nine months.

At one point she'd been everything.

Now Susan wonders if her mother hadn't been able to look in the right way at her brother either. Her brother wasn't lacking just because he was younger, fundamentally agreeable, or because he wanted to be like Susan, like a girl. He wasn't lacking anything until first their mother and then Susan looked at it that way. Maybe her mother looked at Alex too much through the lens of the original sister, just as she seemed to look at Susan too much through the lens of herself, through the lens of what she hadn't imagined she could do.

Now Susan is suddenly in motion, as if she's grabbed on to something hard and useful. The walls and furniture have started to solidify and become one place instead of two, and she gains enough leverage to get up and help Melinda, who's been chopping, blending, and wrestling with her roots and herb jars in the kitchen.

Standing next to Melinda with her hands in the dishwater, she sees it, a tiny painting she did for the brother in college, a silly painting—a still life of a photo, the Man Ray eye, with teardrops attached to the ends of each eyelash in crystalline bits of glue. Why did she make a painting of a photograph? It was a pop art phase, she thinks, or maybe a comment on how we see the same things over and over, as if we have only one or two templates in the brain. Anyway, it wasn't very successful. The paint is flat in some places, muddy in others, yet her brother has found a place for it on his wall.

When Melinda, Alex, and Susan sit back down at the old kitchen table, Susan tries to be an adult. They're older now, and she should let go of her mother, whom she can't truly understand, who is a different person

now than she used to be. Alex has things that Susan doesn't. He's even moved ahead of her, or was always ahead of her, in terms of generosity and seeing outside himself.

He's shaken his irritation off, or so it seems, and is offering her a glass of wine.

Susan notices that he has a hard wrinkle at the corner of his mouth. So does she, but his is bigger.

She knows she should tell him how much she likes his beautiful photographs, but instead she asks, "Do you remember when I tried to put mascara on you and you fell into the wastebasket?"

Melinda gasps and smiles, and Alex, lifted by her interest, meets Susan's eyes, says, "No. What happened?"

Susan exclaims with joy and terror, "I thought I permanently damaged you. Mom thought I had ruined your eyes!" Alex looks a little worried about where the story is going, so Susan says, "But I obviously didn't."

She gestures to the walls of the house, to the photographs, and to the clutter and Melinda. Her brother, who has been ready to be her friend since she walked in the front door, settles into his seat and says, "Tell me what happened." And Susan, aligning herself with Alex, begins.