

## Rumors From an Aeolian Harp

Iris is sitting on a metal stool in the back room of Peter's gallery. Her mother is perched on the edge of a shabby velvet couch, drinking coffee that Peter offered her from an electric pot and circling programs she wants to watch in the *TV Guide*. The room smells like turpentine and patchouli soap and is silent except for the local classical music station playing softly on an old stereo in the corner.

Iris's mother digs in the purse at her feet. "Can I smoke in here?" she says. "I'd prefer if you went outside." Peter's eyes alternate between Iris and the pad of newsprint mounted on his easel as he sweeps a stick of charcoal across the page in loose, fluid arcs. "Asthma," he says.

She finds her pack of cigarettes and her lighter. "I'll be back in a minute, honey," she says.

Iris doesn't move. She listens to her mother's heels click across the cement floor of the gallery and then the pneumatic arm of the front door wheeze shut.

Peter had first seen Iris the week before while she was running errands with her mother in one of the few streets around the harbor that make up Gormouth's downtown. She heard the long honk of a horn and turned to see Peter jogging towards them, waving in apology at the windshield of a car.

"Excuse me," he said to her mother. He didn't look at Iris while he spoke. "I know this is peculiar, but I'm a painter. I run the gallery across the street."

He handed her mother a business card and pointed at a small storefront at the end of the block. “I noticed you walking with—your daughter?” She nodded. “I wanted to ask if you might let her sit for me someday.”

Her mother squinted at Iris. “For what?” she said.

Peter ran a hand through his thick brown hair and pulled on it slightly, like he was teasing something out. “I’m illustrating a book of transcendentalist poetry,” he said. Her mother didn’t respond. “Do you know Thoreau?”

“Yeah, I know him,” she said. “He lived on Walden Pond.”

Peter shoved his hands in the pockets of his khaki shorts, which were stiff with streaks of paint in muted shades of green and reddish-brown. *“There love is warm, and youth is young, and poetry is yet unsung,”* he said, gazing into the distance above their heads. Iris’s mother shifted a paper grocery bag from one hip to the other and reached for Iris’s hand. *“For Virtue still adventures there, and freely breathes her native air.”*

They all stood in silence for a moment. Iris was embarrassed to be holding her mother’s hand.

“They’ll be figurative illustrations,” Peter said. “Clothed, of course”—her mother’s eyebrows furrowed—“and done in a sort of idealized naturalist style.”

“I’ll have to talk to my husband,” she said.

Peter flips to a new sheet. “Now put your left foot up on the rung of the stool,” he says. “Look to the right. Yes, like that.”

“What should I do with my hands?” Iris asks.

“Rest them on your right thigh, one on top of the other.”

This doesn't feel natural to Iris, and Peter is frowning. "Bring them closer to your hip," he says. "Lean forward, like you're trying to see something."

Peter holds the stick of charcoal in front of his face, bisecting her body vertically and then horizontally. "Relax your mouth. Tilt your head toward me."

Iris is barely breathing. It's a hot day, and hotter inside under the bright clip lights pointed at her. She prays that Peter doesn't ask her to raise her arms.

A voice on the radio announces Bach's Sonata Number One in G Minor, and Peter starts to hum as he works—a string of notes sliding into each other, touching and receding from the melody. Iris hears her mother walk back through the gallery and take her place on the couch. Out of the corner of her eye she sees her mother lean back and cross her legs, her shins streaked with light in the sheer pantyhose she wears under her church dress.

"So when are you going to start painting?" her mother says. "You said you were a painter, right?"

"I paint. First I do studies in charcoal."

"First? How many times are we going to have to come here?"

Iris is counting the smooth silver pushpins stuck into the wall in front of her—each one a wish, the same silent wish.

"As many times as you like," Peter says.

When Iris's father hears that Peter has offered to pay her five dollars an hour to sit for him on Sunday afternoons, he agrees to let her keep going to his studio.

"You trust this guy?" he asks her mother at dinner that night. He brings a forkful of mashed potatoes to his mouth and then reaches for his beer.

“I thought you already said it was fine,” her mother says.

“It is fine,” he says. “Five bucks an hour under the table is *very fine*.” His voice is already too loud, and he’s starting to exaggerate words the way he does when he thinks he’s saying something particularly clever. Iris looks down and pushes a green bean around with her fork.

Her mother flicks her cigarette against the rim of the amber glass ashtray next to her dinner plate. “You can start buying your own clothes,” she says to Iris.

“Sure,” Iris says.

Her younger brothers have been fighting over whose turn it is to do the dishes. The older one pinches the younger one on the arm and he shrieks.

“Enough,” her mother says. “Go watch TV.”

Her youngest brother’s face is bright red and his lip is trembling. Her mother takes a drag of her cigarette as they climb down from their chairs and go into the living room, where the evening news is already blaring.

“I ask if you trust this guy because I’m going to be working Sunday shifts for a while,” her father says.

Her mother stubs out her cigarette. “Six days now? Six days a week?” She takes a sip from her Diet Coke and crosses her arms over her chest. “You’re already never home. The boys ask where you are.”

Her father slams his fork down on his plate, and her mother winces. “Sundays are time-and-a-half, ok?” he says. “You think I want to be stacking palettes six goddamn days a week?” He picks up his beer and frowns. “Grab me another,” he says, handing the empty can to Iris.

She gets up and goes to the refrigerator in the garage. When she comes back to the table her mother is rubbing a trail of wet mascara off of her cheek. Iris hands the beer to her father and he cracks it open.

“I’m just. *Saying*. If you’re watching the boys, no one can go with Iris,” he says.

Her mother turns to her. “What do you think, honey?” she says. “Do you feel safe there?” “Yeah,” Iris says. “I do.”

Peter has placed a fan in front of Iris that blows her long hair out behind her, like she’s standing against a strong wind. Because he has asked her to, she is wearing a loose, light-colored dress. Her flip-flops are still wet from walking in the rain and make mortifying squelching sounds whenever he changes her pose.

“How old are you, Iris?” Peter says.

“Thirteen.”

Iris is facing the wall. She can’t see Peter, but she can hear when he clears his throat or turns to a fresh page of newsprint.

“What grade is that?” he says.

“Well, I just finished eighth.”

There’s a new smell in the studio, which is humid from the rain and the hot lights—a rich, musky odor of unwashed T-shirts, sheets sweat through, socks worn too many times in a row. It registers somewhere in Iris as Peter’s smell.

“I’m going into the high school. I’ll be fourteen in September,” she says.

Peter flips to a new page and tells Iris to turn toward him. A strand of her hair blows across her face and she starts to push it away.

“No,” he says. “Leave it.”

Iris watches Peter as he draws. His hair is sticking up a little in the back and his cheeks are dark with stubble. He’s staring at her, squinting with concentration. She doesn’t know what he is seeing.

“Do you like school?” he says.

No one has ever asked Iris this before. She took it for granted that no one liked school—it was just something you had to do, like chores or babysitting.

“Not really, I guess,” she says. “Did you like school?”

Peter smiles. “Not really,” he says. “It gets better, though.”

They move through a few more poses in silence. Iris sees on the clock in Peter’s studio that their two hours are almost over. Before she loses her nerve, she says, “How old are you?”

Peter puts his stick of charcoal down on the ledge of the easel and steps away. He looks back and forth between Iris and his last drawing of her. “I’m twenty-five,” he says. “Does that sound very old to you?”

Iris is quiet for a moment. “Not really,” she says.

That afternoon while Iris is putting on her raincoat to leave, she sees a piece of Peter’s mail on a table by the door. It’s not addressed to the gallery, but to somewhere on one of the nicer streets in town, at the top of a hill overlooking the harbor.

A few days later Iris asks her mother if she can walk to the library to check out a book from her summer reading list for school. At first her mother says that she should take her brothers with her, but they’re riding BMX bikes in the yard and wail when they hear the word “library,” so Iris is allowed to go alone.

She walks through the neighborhood of long, narrow houses around the cannery where her father works—the familiar yards with rusted motorboats and sedans up on blocks, the tangles of overturned bikes and plastic toys, the mossy garages strewn with dismantled lawnmowers and chainsaws. Some people wave to her or ask about her family. A dog that has always scared her growls and yanks against its chain as she goes by.

Instead of turning toward the harbor as she usually does, Iris walks uphill. She doesn't know anyone who lives above downtown. She looks away from the road whenever a car approaches, not wanting to catch the eye of someone who might ask her parents what she was doing on High Street.

The houses she passes now are massive, with shingled towers and wrap-around porches and old-fashioned curlicue trim. Iris starts to sweat as she turns down Pearl Street. The address on the envelope had been strange—33 ½. She's reading the brass numbers nailed to pillars and doorframes as she walks, wondering what the “½” could mean, when she sees a little house at the end of a driveway dwarfed by mansions on either side.

The block is quiet except for the chirping of birds and the distant drone of landscaping equipment. There are no cars in the driveway of 33 ½, but there haven't been cars in many of the driveways she has passed on the hill. She thinks this must be where the summer people live that she hears her parents talk about, their eyes rolling—the people *from away*. Iris looks around to make sure no one is watching, and then cautiously walks toward the house. If someone asks what she is doing she will say that she is lost.

The driveway is bordered by blooming dahlias and bushes of blowsy loose-petaled roses. Next to the door is a window covered by curtains that don't completely meet in the middle. Iris can't see inside from where she is standing because it's too dark behind the glass. She looks

around one more time, and when she is sure no one is watching, she walks up to the window and cups her hands against it.

Iris sees a bed with a brass frame pushed against one wall, unmade, with striped pillows spilling from their cases and a quilt hanging onto the floor. An overflowing bookcase constructed from wide wooden planks spaced with bricks. Books stacked next to the bed, lining the windowsills, covering the dormant wood stove. A porcelain bathtub and sink. Coffee cups, sketchbooks, potted plants, melted candles. A braided rug and a rocking chair.

Her breath is clouding the window. She steps back and rubs at the oily print where her forehead touched the glass. Iris turns and breaks a blossom off of a rosebush, carefully avoiding the delicate thorns that remind her of kittens' claws. The flower looks nothing like the tight red roses on long smooth stems that her father gets for her mother at the grocery store after nights that he sleeps on the couch. She brings the flower to her nose and inhales its soft, sweet smell, and then drops it on Peter's doorstep and hurries back to the street.

The next spring, Iris occasionally stops by Peter's gallery when she's walking home from school. On some afternoons she finds him stretched out on the couch in the back room, reading a book, and he'll get up and make them both coffee. Other times he's busy painting—more often than not, painting a picture of Iris.

His studio is filled now with canvases in various states of completion: Iris sitting on a stone wall next to a glistening brook, one foot only sketched in, the trees behind her vague and gestural; Iris lying in a meadow with the sun behind her, still unrecognizably silhouetted; Iris standing in sloping dunes, watching a blank sea, the wind blowing her hair and the tufts of long grass in the sand.

Iris has never been to any of these places. Peter paints her against a white wall, posing her mysteriously. She can't bring herself to ask him what he is doing while he works—he looks like he's casting some kind of spell that needs absolute concentration.

She takes off her backpack and puts it down on a chair. "I brought you something," she says.

Peter folds over the page he was reading and sits up. She unzips the front compartment of her backpack and gently lifts something out of it, enclosing it in her palm.

"What have you got there?" he says.

She smiles and walks to the couch, where she opens her hand to reveal a perfectly intact robin's egg.

"Incredible," he says. "Thank you."

She hands the egg to him and he holds it up, turning it in his fingers. "This color—it's so hard to capture. Like a piece of sky that a robin creates inside of herself."

Peter stands suddenly and goes to the table holding his painting supplies, where he begins rooting around in a pile of crumpled aluminum tubes. "Titanium white," he says, his back turned to her. "Cobalt blue turquoise—light. What is it, though, that makes it so special? A little permanent green?"

"How do you know which colors to use?" she says.

"Practice. And experimentation."

She moves closer to the table to get a better look at what Peter is doing. He starts unscrewing the tubes he has chosen and squeezing dabs of paint onto a glass palette. "Do you have art in school?" he says.

Iris is standing next to him now, close enough to smell the musty wool of his sweater.

“We don’t have art class. There’s a club, though. After school.”

Peter picks up the egg in one hand and a small, flat brush in the other. “Start with white, for a color like this.” He nicks the mound of white paint with his brush and smears some onto the center of the palette. “Then the blues.”

Iris watches him move through each of the colors, checking his work against the egg she has given him while he skillfully blends the hues into one.

When Iris is a sophomore, a new girl moves to Gormouth. Her name is Caroline and she’s from Boston. At fifteen, she is the prettiest and most cultured girl Iris has ever known. Iris learns the word “cultured” from Caroline’s parents while she listens to them talk during dinner at their house up on the hill off of High Street.

Caroline is small and blonde, clear-skinned and clever, with a closet full of clothing that Iris sees advertised in the tattered copies of *Seventeen* that she reads at the public library. Caroline hates Gormouth, which she calls “Boremouth,” but she seems to like Iris—although Iris suspects she may just be the least unappealing option out of the many that Gormouth Central High School has to offer.

Iris is still taller than most of the boys in her grade, growing so quickly that nothing fits properly for more than a few months. Her wardrobe is almost all hand-me-downs anyway, except for the few items each year that she can now afford with the money she makes sitting for Peter. Iris wonders if it was her two sweaters from the Gap catalogue that drew Caroline to her, signaling that Iris was at least aware of a world beyond the Gormouth Walmart.

“This is where he lives?” Caroline says as they’re walking her spaniel down Pearl Street. It’s not even dinnertime yet, but the sunlight is already soft and golden, casting long slanted shadows of their bodies on the sidewalk.

“Yeah, in that house down there,” Iris says.

Caroline stops, squinting. “The garage?” she says.

“It’s not a garage. I mean maybe it was, or something, but now it’s a house.”

Caroline’s dog sits on the sidewalk and starts scratching her ear, her tag jangling against her collar.

“How long has he been painting you?” Caroline says. She’s the only person at school that Iris has told, even though she is also deeply afraid that Peter will meet Caroline somehow and want to paint her instead.

“Two years,” Iris says.

“Years?” Caroline says. “God. He must be, like, obsessed with you.”

Iris can feel her face getting hot. “He’s not obsessed with me. He’s working on a project.”

“Yeah, and the project is you,” Caroline says.

“Let’s go,” Iris says. Caroline’s dog stands up, but Caroline doesn’t move.

“Have you ever been in his house?” she says.

“Of course not.”

“Why do you know where it is?” Caroline cranes her neck, like she’s trying to look in the windows. “Is he home?”

“Obviously someone’s home. There’s a car in the driveway, right?” Iris says. “Now let’s go.”

“Is it his car? You must know what his car looks like.”

Iris tries to take a deep breath, but her chest is painfully tight. “I’m serious. Let’s go,” she says.

“I bet you’re serious. Seriously *in love*,” Caroline says with raised eyebrows. “Oh, Peter. I love you. Peter!”

Caroline is laughing until Iris reaches out and grabs a fistful of her hair. She yanks it, twists her wrist, and then pulls down harder. Caroline’s eyes are wide and her dog has backed up and started barking. “You fucking *psycho*!” Caroline says.

Iris lets go. She thinks she sees the curtain of the window next to Peter’s door move. Caroline straightens up and rubs her scalp, shouting something that Iris can’t hear because she is running as hard as she has ever run in her life, panting, the pain in her chest nearly unbearable as she turns onto High Street and back down the hill.

Iris’s aunts have always told her that she will be pretty when she’s older. She looks older in Peter’s paintings—that was the first thing her father said when he saw them, during his only visit to Peter’s studio after she started sitting for him regularly. *Jesus, she looks thirty years old*, he had said.

In the early spring of her sophomore year, Iris looks more like the paintings of her than she did at thirteen. Her body is fuller, the angles of her face more defined.

“Do I look different to you now?” she says to Peter. She’s standing in front of one of the first paintings he did of her, the one where she’s sitting barefoot next to a brook.

Peter is making his last cup of coffee for the day. Iris turns to watch him measuring the grounds in the fading sunlight coming through the plate glass window of the gallery. “You look more like you,” he says.

“What do you mean?”

The electric kettle clicks off, steam rising from its spout. Peter picks it up and begins pouring water over the grounds in slow circles. “It’s not really the way you look. It’s *how* you look,” he says. “Your eyes—there’s someone looking back at me now.”

Peter puts the kettle down and turns toward Iris. They stand quietly for a moment, and then he smiles. “I found something for you.” He crosses the room and reaches into a paper bag on the floor next to the couch, pulling out a bundle wrapped in tissue paper. He hands it to Iris.

“Open it,” he says.

Iris unfolds the tissue paper and lets it fall to the floor. “Oh, wow,” she says. She holds the gauzy white dress up to her shoulders. “Where did you get this?”

“An antique shop in a barn on route one,” he says. “Will you try it on?”

There’s a wooden folding screen in a corner of the studio where Iris changes into the simple light-colored dress that Peter asks her to wear when he reaches a certain stage in each of his paintings. “Of course,” she says. She drapes the dress over her arm and carries it behind the screen.

Iris carefully lays the dress on the back of the chair that Peter has put there for her and sits down to unlace her boots. She can hear him adjusting the clip lights and switching them on as she gets up and pushes her jeans to her ankles. She stands on one leg and then the other to pull them off, and then folds them and puts them on the chair, followed by her sweater and her T-shirt.

The legs of Peter's easel scrape against the concrete floor as he moves it to a new position. Iris is wearing only her underwear and socks. She stays still like that for as long as she reasonably can, the air of the studio chilling the newly bare parts of her skin as she listens to Peter on the other side of the screen.

He turns on the radio and starts to hum. Iris lifts the dress from the back of the chair and steps into it gingerly. The neck, wrists, and waist are trimmed with brittle lace that feels close to tearing. She fastens the row of satin buttons on each cuff and then reaches around to her tailbone, blindly pushing the buttons on the back of the dress into their corresponding slits until she gets to her shoulder blades.

“Peter?” she says.

“Yes?”

“I can't get all of the buttons.”

Iris hears the dull thud of Peter putting down his coffee mug. He has stopped humming.

“Do you want me to help you?”

Iris feels goose bumps rising on her arms, even though her face is burning hot. “Yes,” she says.

She closes her eyes and listens to the hard soles of Peter's boots moving across the floor toward her. When he is standing behind her, she opens them again.

“Can you move your hair out of the way?” Peter says. He has never touched her before. Iris tilts her head forward and brushes her hair over one shoulder. She feels him fumbling against her spine.

“I'm a little clumsy today,” he says.

“That's ok,” she says.

A wisp of hair slides onto her back and she reaches to move it, but Peter is already pushing it away, the calloused tips of his fingers rough on her skin. Iris wonders if he can feel her heart pounding through the thin fabric of the dress as he fastens it closed.

At the top button, Peter lingers. He moves her hair away again, slowly this time, his thumb tracing the curve of her neck to the top of her collar bone. Iris hears him exhale, almost a sigh.

“All set,” he says, taking a step back. Before Iris can thank him, he is on the other side of the screen again.

Iris drops her backpack on the velvet couch and unzips her jacket. “Do you want me to change today?” she says.

Peter is propping open the back door of the studio. “Not today,” he says. He stands in the sunlight radiating from the doorway. “Isn’t this beautiful? After a long winter?”

She comes to stand next to him. *“Even a little shining bud which lies sleeping behind its twig and dreaming of spring, perhaps half concealed by ice, is object enough,”* she says. He looks at her and smiles.

“Reading *The Journal*?” he says.

“We’re reading some of it in school,” she says. “No one really likes it, but I do.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

Peter goes back into the studio and starts positioning the lights while Iris fills the electric kettle with water. “My English teacher gives us extra credit if we can write a line from what we’re reading at the bottom of our comprehension tests,” she says. “I can never memorize

anything for long. I can keep it for about a week, and then I don't know where it goes." She takes a box of tea and a mug from a shelf. "Do you want anything?"

"I still have some coffee, thanks." He unfolds a piece of loose canvas and spreads it on the floor. "We'll be working in the same position as last time."

Iris finishes making her tea and puts the steaming mug down on the canvas. She arranges herself next to it, leaning on one arm with her legs bent gently beside her. Peter takes a brush out of a jar of murky turpentine and wipes it on a rag. "Have you memorized anything else?" he says.

*"I am no more lonely than the loon on the pond that laughs so loud,"* she says.

Peter picks up his palette and begins to paint. Iris listens to the muffled scratch of his brush against the canvas. *"I am no more lonely than a single mullein or a dandelion in a pasture, or a bean leaf, or a sorrel, or a horse-fly, or a humble-bee,"* he says.

Iris takes a sip of her tea. "Are you lonely though, really?" she says.

Peter's eyes move from his painting to Iris, and then back to the painting. "I don't feel particularly lonely," he says.

"Do you have a girlfriend?"

Peter laughs. "Not at the moment." He puts the brush he's using in the jar of turpentine and chooses another. "I'm not going to ask you if you have a boyfriend."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't want to know."

Iris feels her face flush. She looks down at her hands.

"Look up again, please."

She raises her chin. "Tilt your face toward me," he says.

“Like this?”

“No—less than that.”

Iris moves her head back a little. “This?”

He furrows his brow and makes a few marks on his canvas. “Not really.”

“Can you just show me what you want?” she says.

Peter puts down his brush and his palette. He steps out from behind his easel and walks toward Iris. When he is standing directly in front of her, he crouches down and cups her chin in his hand.

“Like this,” he says, tilting her head very slightly.

Iris is looking directly into his eyes. He is so close that she can smell his smell and the coffee on his breath. She moves her lips nearer to his, until they almost touch. “Like this?” she says.

Peter’s eyes close. He takes a deep breath. “Iris,” he says. His hand falls from her face and he looks away. “Iris.”

“Yes?” she says. She feels tears forming, but she doesn’t move.

“I want this to be a good story for you,” he says, still turned away from her. “I don’t want to be a secret you keep.”

“It sounds like you weren’t just a model,” Bernard says. “More like a muse.”

“Or a mentee,” Iris says, wiping her mouth with her napkin. “I don’t think I would have ever gotten out of Gormouth if I hadn’t met Peter. He was the first person who taught me anything useful.”

The house outside of Los Angeles where Bernard has brought Iris for dinner had been a convent for over a century before it was decommissioned and sold to an artist couple he knows. The windows are narrow and arched and the walls are made of thick plaster, which keeps it cool and dark inside. The four of them are eating paella served from an enameled skillet placed in the middle of the heavy oak dining table.

Ryan finishes chewing and puts an empty shrimp tail down on the table next to his plate. “Don’t you think he was a creep though?” he says.

“I think I was maybe the creep in that situation,” Iris says. “I mean, I was basically stalking him.”

“But,” Ryan says, “he didn’t discourage it. At all.”

Ryan’s wife Liz is leaning forward with her elbow on the table and her face on her hand. “I think it’s romantic,” she says.

“You *what*?” Ryan says.

Liz laughs and sits up. “It’s hard to explain if you’ve never been a teenage girl,” she says. “You’ve heard of puppy love, right? This guy is a saint, in my opinion, for not taking advantage of young Iris’s crush. Saint Peter.”

“So, did you ever see him again?” Bernard says.

“Not on purpose,” Iris says. “It was a small town, so sometimes I would see his car somewhere. Once I saw him in the grocery store and had a minor panic attack. I hid behind the bread shelf.”

“That doesn’t sound like a good experience to me,” Ryan says, more to Liz than to Iris.

“I think I was so attracted to him that it stressed me out, like on a physical level,” Iris says. “It was the most intense attraction I’ve ever experienced.”

“Oh, thanks,” Bernard says.

“It’s *different*,” Liz says. “I get it. The pristine ur-attraction. Mythic in proportion, never to be matched in reality. I think it’s a sign of a healthy imagination.”

“If you were so hung up on Peter, how could the boys at school compete?” Bernard says.

“They couldn’t,” Iris says. “But they weren’t really interested, anyway. I was always one of the weird kids at school. And I got weirder after everything with Peter. I bought some art supplies with the money I made sitting for him, and I spent the next two years doing basically nothing but drawing and painting.”

“So you did have a boyfriend in high school—and his name was Art,” Bernard says.

“I had to sublimate my obsession into something, right?” Iris says. “And at least that path got me a scholarship to CalArts, instead of teen pregnancies like the other girls in Gormouth.”

“I’m sure you would have gone to college somewhere,” Ryan says.

“I’m not,” Iris says. “One of my brothers works at the sardine cannery with my dad. The other is in prison.”

The table is quiet for a moment, and then Liz stands up and asks if everyone is finished. They all thank her and begin stacking silverware on their plates and handing her the piles.

“So, I have to ask—do you know where Peter is now?” Bernard says.

“No,” Iris says. She picks her napkin up from her lap, folds it, and puts it down on the table. “I’ve looked online a few times over the years, but it makes sense that he doesn’t have much of an internet presence. My parents told me that the gallery closed a couple years after I left Maine. That’s all I know.”

“Do you want to know more?” Bernard says.

“Not really. I don’t want to see him again,” she says, looking at Bernard. “But I do sort of wish I knew if he knows that I became an artist.”

Iris clasps her hands in front of her and looks down at them, at their shapes and shadows in the waning candlelight, mixing a palate for them in her mind. She would have to start with titanium white for a color like that.