

FORGIVENESS

The pain nudges her awake, boring into her right eye, and in the dark she reaches for the drops, the bottle rocking on the nightstand, and lies back, thinking, *There now. There now.* Thinking that perhaps her mother will have to take the school again, and that will mean another wasted day, long tales about her courtship, her slender ankles. The children will twitch in their chairs, waiting. Waiting until she comes to the part about the storm at sea and the sailor who was washed overboard, the look on his face. *On this day*, Alice thinks, as the warmth moves through her, *on this day there should be no more dwelling on death.*

She slides back into sleep and dreams a memory, as she often has these past long months. The tap on the front door and Mr Heath on the step, the bright autumn day behind him. She asks if there is a problem with the music Lillian collected and he says no, says that everything is fine. Nothing unusual in his face, nothing in his voice gives any hint. He says that he's sorry to interrupt, that he needs Rachel at home, just for a little while. Down the hall the children's clear voices are chanting: *seven eights are fifty-six, eight eights are ...*

She asks him in but Mr Heath says that he will wait where he is, says something about the clear sky. In the dream her feet are slow and heavy as she moves down the hall to the schoolroom, tells Rachel that her father has come for her, that it's just for a moment, and she can leave her things where they are. The dream Rachel wears a white dress, although in life Alice knows it was a faded blue. She moves down the hall toward the dark shape in the doorway and Alice turns back to the others. Through the schoolroom window she sees them crossing the street, hand in hand.

Alice wakes again with a start, as if at a sudden sound. The back stairs creak and that will be her sister, Sarah, and it will be exactly eight minutes before six. Hours before she needs to be behind her counter at Becks' store, but Alice has never asked why she rises, leaves the house so early. It will be something to do with the cause Mrs Beck has drawn her in to, leaflets to post or a meeting. She may even go creeping down the back lanes, may peer into dawn windows looking for empty bottles, for signs of dissipation. There is nothing wrong, of course not, with wanting to live a pure life. Nothing wrong with the Union, the meetings and speeches. But the thought of her sister standing grim-faced by the tavern door fills Alice with a familiar, helpless fury, and she rolls in her bed and closes her eyes, hoping for just a little more sleep. Finds herself thinking of Mr Heath, who is surely awake, behind his cell door, tries to imagine what it can possibly be like. Knowing that your life is now measured in hours, in minutes, less time than it takes to ride the train to the city, to read a book from beginning to end. She knows from the newspaper that Reverend Toller will attend the execution, that he has visited a number of times in the months since the trial, and she wonders if his intention was to bring comfort. A man who sat without a flicker of emotion through his own wife's funeral, who turned away when his son began to sob. But what comfort could even a kindlier man bring, what comfort could there be, even in

forgiveness, knowing that you wouldn't meet them again in Heaven. That even if you could, they would surely run and hide.

It's more likely, Alice supposes, that Reverend Toller simply kneels and prays, that perhaps they pray together. The same newspaper that called Heath a fiend, a monster, now reports that he spends most of his time sitting silently on the edge of his cot, staring at a spot on the floor. In fact, he has barely spoken since they found him that day, slumped on a cushion of crimson leaves at the base of an oak tree in the heart of Jackson's wood. The gun, with one bullet left, held loosely in his hand.