

## (3) Country House

*by Nathaniel Bellows*

Nan's advisor, Professor Paulson, insisted she stay in his country house over the spring vacation. After all, they weren't going to be able to use it—"they," meant himself, his wife, and their twin boys, who, when Nan met them on her first visit to her advisor's apartment on Riverside Drive, were five-years-old. Perhaps by now they were six, she thought, peering at the boys' photo on her advisor's desk. He sat across from her, his feet up, the sole of his loafer digging into a stack of papers she recognized as belonging to members of her seminar.

He had a photo of the house on his desk, which he showed her: a rambling white farmhouse with a broad lawn, a barn at the far end of the property, and a Japanese Maple, a red smear against the sky. It was somewhere in western Massachusetts but she couldn't remember where, despite the fact that he'd mentioned the house to her many times before, and often referred to the house by the name of the town where it was located.

It didn't matter what the house or the town was called; what was important was that he loved the place, and he wanted her to be there. The pairing of these two notions inspired her to complete a desperate, pitiful equation: He loves the house; he wants me at the house...he wants me to love.

She nodded her head—her proof made sense, at least it did in the part of her mind reserved for undisclosed, inappropriate things like the hopeless crush she'd had on him since she'd taken his class the second semester of her freshman year. To her, it wasn't a coincidence that he ended up as her advisor. Or that she'd gotten A's in every class he taught. Was it a coincidence that he was now insisting she stay in the place he'd once described to her as his "soul's retreat"?

Across the desk, he was nodding back at her.

"So, you'll do it?" he said, smiling. "You'll stay in the house?"

---

Available online at <http://fictionaut.com/stories/nathaniel-bellows/3-country-house>

Copyright © 2010 Nathaniel Bellows. All rights reserved.

“I—“

“Wonderful!” he said, throwing his legs off the desk and springing to his feet. “It will bring me so much pleasure to think of you there—working away. I know that in years from now, I’ll be able to say to people that you wrote some of your most seminal work in my house, sitting at *my* table, looking out over *my* view!”

He had told her she was very talented. He had gotten his hands on some of the fiction she’d written for a writing workshop she’d taken the year before. When he told her this, she was mortified: to her, the class had been a disaster—the teacher and students had humiliated her; they’d told her she wasn’t a writer; told her she didn’t know what real writing really was. She’d blocked out the entire experience and had thrown away everything she’d written for the class. But apparently her teacher had held onto some of it, and passed it along to her advisor, who had asked for it—which meant he was interested in her, or at least intrigued; he wouldn’t have asked to see her work if he wasn’t at least intrigued and now that he thought she had talent...whenever her mind went off in this direction she felt ashamed and embarrassed, and attempted to imagine a day when she might transfer these powerful feelings and sentiments to someone more realistic and appropriate.

Which had recently happened—in a way—with Malcolm, her fellow intern at *Verbiage*, the literary magazine on campus. He had recently graduated from the university and had moved back to New York. She liked him and had gone out with him a handful of times—in her freer moments, when she thought about his face or his slender, strong hands, she even considered he might be the one on whom she would bestow her upheld virginity.

Maybe after spring break, she thought to herself, after I get back. She had decided not to tell him about staying at Professor Paulson’s country house. She knew he’d hate the idea, both because he suspected Paulson had inappropriate feelings for her, (if only!), but also because, more than anything, she knew he would have wanted the invitation, which she also knew was unlikely. Malcolm had given

Paulson his novel to read, and was still waiting to hear what Nan already knew was a dismissive and unimpressed response. She didn't know Malcolm all that well—hence her intact chastity—but she knew him well enough to keep certain things from him.

She lied to her parents about going to the country house, too, which was unlike her—she told them she was staying in the city to work at the language lab and research a paper for her Art History seminar. She had gone back home for every vacation since she'd started school, so she wondered how they would feel—disappointed? Neglected? Spurned?

They felt none of these things—what they seemed to feel was the opposite. When she told them she was staying in the city, she sensed a subtle sigh of relief. Or was it pride? Whatever it was, she felt it palpably over the phone: they were happy she was doing something on her own; pleased to hear she had made other plans than hanging out with them for a week.

Do they wish I came home less often? she wondered after she hung up with them. Do they think I'm pathetic? She went home because she loved them, and she loved her house in Vermont, and, since her brother's death three years before, she worried that her parents were lonely, bereft—just as she was. In any case, their reaction came as a somewhat of a relief to her—she felt much less guilty about having lied to them.

She met her advisor at his apartment, on the Saturday morning after the official start of the break. His wife, a severe, sinewy woman who wore beautiful, coordinated clothing and jewelry at all times, opened the door for her. Nan and the woman were the same above-average height, but while Nan had long hair she always pulled back, the woman had a perfectly cut bob, the ends of which looked honed, and bright green eyes that reminded Nan of the way animals' eyes look at night when struck by headlights.

“Come in,” she said, smiling at Nan. “You're here for the car, and the keys, correct? I hadn't heard about this plan until just the other day. Isn't that insane?”

“Yes,” said Nan, because the last thing she wanted was to imply that this woman might be wrong about anything.

“You're taking Bug, too, yes?” she said. “Bug will be with you, no?”

“Who?” Nan asked. Was Bug one of the twins? She could hear them screaming their heads off somewhere at the back of the apartment. Was that the name of the house? The town?

“Bug,” said the woman, then more sternly. “Bug!”

A yellow Labrador retriever loped into the foyer, his nails clicking against the parquet floor.

“Oh,” said Nan.

He looked up at Nan with a baleful, beseeching expression.

“You didn't know about taking him, too?” said the woman, mirthfully. “Charlie certainly likes to keep secrets from the women in his life, doesn't he?”

Charlie was Professor Paulson. And she—Nan—was *a woman in his life?*

His wife, a lawyer, read Nan's expression and laughed, satisfied that she'd embarrassed her. With this, the balance of power seemed to be restored, and the woman's demeanor shifted to something closer toward warmth. She took Nan's hand and led her into the kitchen where a woman wearing a uniform and apron was washing the breakfast dishes.

“Charlie went to go get the car from the garage,” she said. “You can drive stick, right?”

“Standard?” said Nan, automatically. Her father had taught her how to drive a standard transmission first on a tractor and then on the VW Beetle he was restoring. He had always told her to call it “standard.”

“That's right,” said the woman, her eyes pinched to slits.

I don't want to fight you, lady, thought Nan. I'm not here to steal your husband. I'm just here to take your car and now your dog and stay in your country house to work on the writing your husband will hopefully admire me for.

What am I doing? she thought.

"You're here!" said Professor Paulson, walking into the kitchen. He was wearing a yellow windbreaker and light-colored blue jeans, which hit him just above the ankle and showed a thin band of bright white tube sock above his old running sneakers. It was an outfit like the ones she'd seen on the elderly men sitting outside the nursing home on Amsterdam Avenue now that the weather was getting warmer. He always looked so nice at school in suits and ties, things were different, it seemed, on vacation. She looked at the blue jeans again, and knew without a doubt in her mind how much his wife must hate them.

He picked up Nan's small suitcase, handed her Bug's leash, and they walked out of the apartment and toward the elevator. His wife had said goodbye, but Nan wasn't sure if it was directed at her or the dog.

Downstairs, the doorman was cleaning the windshield of the Volvo station wagon with a chamois cloth. Bug's tail began to wag rapidly when he spotted the car. He looked up at Nan with extreme gratitude.

"I told you about him, right?" he said, patting the dog's shoulders.

"That you'd be taking him along? You don't mind, do you?"

"Not at all," she said, letting the dog lick her hand. "I grew up with dogs. I love them."

"It's good to have some company up there," he said. "The house, while not exactly in the middle of nowhere, is pretty secluded." He held out a page from a yellow legal pad on which he'd written directions. "It's near town, though—a few miles outside. But our land is on the side of a hill, which is owned by land trust, so it's the only house around."

She felt this information would have been helpful to know beforehand, but knew that it wouldn't have been substantial enough to keep her from nodding her head that day in his office.

"That's okay," she said. "Where my parents live, it's really secluded, too."

The dog sat down on her foot and leaned against her legs.

"He likes you," said her advisor. "You'll find that he won't want to leave your side. He's very faithful."

"Labs are like this," she said. "We had a few when I was growing up."

"You always do that," he said, smiling.

"What?"

"Portray yourself as ineligible for someone's attention," he said. "Even a dog's!"

What was she supposed to say to that? She looked down at the dog, which looked up at her with its odd dog-smile.

"It's an easy drive up there," he said, handing her the keys. "About three hours, a little more if you stay under the speed limit, which, I'm just going to assume you will"—he smiled at her again—"just follow my directions; they're pretty basic."

Bug hopped into the back seat of the station wagon and immediately lay down, tucking his snout between his paws. She went around to the driver's side and opened the door. On the seat was a white bag emitting the familiar scent of bagels.

"You forgot this," she said, holding it up.

"No," he said. "That's for you—for the trip."

"Oh," she said. "Wow. Thank you. That's really nice." She put the bag on the passenger seat and sat down. He opened the door and peered in at her. "So, thanks again for.... everything," she said. "I know it's going to be a really great time...really productive, I mean."

"I know you're right," he said. "Like I said, I just love the fact that you're going to be there, using the place. I'd rather be there than here, working for some linguistics conference I was too stupid not to opt out of, and dodging the Missus."

Nan smiled, because, again, she had nothing to say.

"I've written down some stuff about the house for you here," he said, holding up another piece of legal pad. "Like where the house key is hidden, the light switches, where Bug's food is, etc. We've talked about this, I know, but I wanted to write it down for you, too. And please help yourself to anything in the fridge and in the pantry. There's wine there too, if you like—tons of wine. If you need

anything, you can call Lou, the caretaker, his number is by the phone in the kitchen...I can't think of anything else at the moment. Can you?"

"Not me," said Nan, though she really wanted to ask: how did all this happen? There she was, starting his car, pulling away from his building, turning onto Riverside Drive, with his dog in the back. Through the rearview mirror, she watched him grow smaller behind her—a man in a yellow raincoat and ugly jeans, begrudgingly walking back into his apartment building where his wife was waiting to berate him.

She stopped once at a rest stop to walk Bug around so that he could go to the bathroom. He peed by the dumpster behind Burger King, but seemed too absorbed with following various scents around the parking lot to find time to evacuate anything else.

Near the drive-thru line, by an over-flowing trashcan, he'd discovered a pink baby's hat—a little bonnet—barely the size of a fist: sad, soiled, and flattened. Before she could imagine the unfortunate circumstances that had resulted in its roadside disposal, Bug had picked it up in his mouth, chewed it quickly, and swallowed it whole. Oh God! she thought. He stood before her, hacking away, spittle flying onto her shoes. He's going to choke on a baby's bonnet and die! How will I explain this to...the dog stopped heaving. He was fine. He sniffed around a bit more on the way back to the car, and promptly fell asleep in the back seat after she gave him some water.

Western Massachusetts had lower hills than the mountains she was used to in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont, but the fields and trees, the clouds, heavy in the wide sky around her, felt familiar and true, and for the first time since she'd agreed to this, she felt grateful that she'd had the presence of mind to nod her head in her advisor's office. And she felt proud of herself for doing it—something she'd never have considered in the past—and understood, in a deeper sense, her parent's sigh on the phone when she lied to them.

"This is going to be a good vacation," she told Bug, looking at him in the rearview mirror. "I'm going to get a lot of work done."

He didn't respond—his eyes were closed, but she was pretty sure he wasn't asleep.

The house key was under a flat piece of slate under the corner of the porch. She opened the door, which led to a mudroom—raincoats, vests, and a selection of the twins' fleece jackets, hung all around in three distinct sizes. She went into the kitchen, a dark space with a small window over the sink that looked into a copse of pine trees. Off the kitchen was a room with a wall of windows overlooking the field she recognized from the photo; there was a long, polished table on one end and a sliding glass door leading out to the porch on the other. This was the room her advisor had suggested she work in—at the table, with a view of the lawn.

At the back of the house was a television room and study, a small living room with a leather club chair and stiff-looking couches—the kind of room that no one really sat in. There was a painting on the wall that looked old—the subject was a marriage ceremony done in an American folk art style, where all the figures and animals were the same size as the trees and houses, and all the crops grew separately and in perfect, ordered rows. As she walked around the house, Bug followed behind her, sniffing around.

At the top of the stairs, on the second floor, was the twins' room—full of toys, stuffed animals and colorful things on the wall: pennants and posters and framed illustrations, torn from picture books. It was immaculate, and didn't look as if any children had ever played inside it. Down the hall: a study, a bathroom, a guestroom, a laundry room, another small room with a daybed and television, and finally, her advisor's room—or rather, her advisor and his wife's room.

She avoided walking on the rugs for fear of her sneaker's tread leaving an impression; she tip-toed around on the wide wooden floor planks, examining the decor: the walls were a pale green color with gray trim. There were framed black and white photographs on the walls. The bedding was pulled tight across the sleigh bed's mattress, like a trap she might spring if she touched the comforter. The



pillows were fluffed to the point of appearing inflated, and she wondered which one—right side or left—his head indented. In their bathroom, she found herself staring at the shower, and at the light green towels hanging on the towel rack beside the tub.

This is absurd, she thought. Or perhaps she said it aloud—she didn't exactly know, but Bug was staring at her. She'd always believed that animals could read the minds of humans, but she'd only just met this dog, so she must have been talking to herself.

Her advisor had suggested she take the room at the top of the house—they'd redone the attic space with a bedroom and bathroom for guests who might want privacy. He'd made this point a few times—the privacy of the room—and, standing at the top of the stairs, she wondered if he didn't come up here when he needed some himself. It was a nice room with two long skylights in the ceiling and a window that looked out over the field and the tin-roof of the barn at the far end of the property. She put her bag down on the bed, which was full-sized, but seemed vast compared to the twin she had back in her university apartment. Bug lay down on the rug and began to chew at a spot on his leg.

“Where's your bed?” she asked him.

He looked up at her and wagged his tail. The sheet her advisor had written up for her had mentioned nothing about where Bug slept.

“Well,” she said. “You can stay up here with me if you want.”

His tail thumped against the floor.

She put down a placemat at the head of the long table in the dining room, and placed her laptop upon it. From here she could look out the windows over the field, which sloped down to a thick bank of fir trees at the edge of the yard. The Japanese maple, full of pinkish shoots, looked spindly, and through it she could see a hayfield and a distant stand of birches.

With her computer set up and her belongings in her room, she took Bug outside to walk around the land. They went through the side yard, the back field, and inspected the barren flower gardens at

the front of the house. The barn was locked up, but she looked in the windows: inside was a tractor, covered in a tarp; a cluster of Adirondack chairs, piled on top of each other like mismatched blocks; baskets of toys and lawn games, covered in dust and cobwebs.

She'd taken only one trip with her family, when she was eight and her brother was ten. Their parents took them to see their grandparents in Florida and had hired a local girl who worked at a nearby farm to feed the animals and stay in their house. Nan hadn't thought about that girl for years, but now wondered if she had wandered through her house, looking at their things, imagining what had taken place in the rooms, trying to figure out if it was a joyful place, or one of sorrow or loneliness. She believed her house in Vermont was joyful—and even the sorrow they had experienced had dissipated somewhat, the way she could feel winter's last scent draining from the air around her.

Looking at Professor Paulson's house, however, left no distinct impression on her in terms of its mood. She knew she had only just gotten there, she knew she had no right to judge a place she didn't know, but there was something about it—the windows, reflecting the darkening sky, the bare trees laying their skeletal shadows on the white clapboards...she wondered if, in fact, she would be able to get any work done there at all.

She made macaroni and cheese for dinner from a box she'd found in the pantry, and a salad from a sealed bag of assorted lettuce she'd found in the bottom drawer of the refrigerator. She kept track of all the ingredients she used—even down to oil and salt—and made a mental note to replace them. She brought Bug's food and water bowl out into the kitchen so they could eat at the same time, although once she poured in his kibble, it took him about ten seconds to inhale it. So she ate alone, at the long dining room table, at the opposite end as her computer. She thought of the movies she'd seen with counts and countesses, lords and ladies, facing off against each other down long elegant tables, studded with candelabras and high

fluted wine glasses. This table was empty except for her and her computer, its sleep light pulsing—dim, glow, dim, glow—waiting to be awoken.

After I'm done with the dishes, she thought while doing the dishes, then, I'll get down to work. But once they were washed and laid out to dry on a dishtowel beside the sink, she decided to look for some treats for Bug in the pantry. She found a bag of odd, bone-shaped dog snacks and gave him one. First, he spat it out, but then he picked it up with his front teeth, and bit down, spraying shrapnel on the floor, which he then lapped up. She gave him another one but he just sniffed it, and walked away.

Fine, she thought, and sat down at her computer.

She opened up the file of the story she was working on—she had just started it; only page two. She read the first line and tinkered with it, changing the word “within” to “among” so that it read: “He often left school early and found himself in the woods among the trees.” Found himself, she thought. Who says that? Earlier that day, when she arrived at the house, she'd walked around the yard and, at certain points, was among the trees, but she hadn't found herself there, she'd just gone there. Who talks this way, she wondered? What am I doing here?

She looked away from the computer screen; the windows in the room were dark; she couldn't see the yard outside. She was always aware that being in a lighted room at night was like being in a terrarium, or a store window, to anyone looking in from outside. Someone could be watching me here, she thought, looking at her reflection in the darkened windows. Someone could be on the other side of the windows right now—among windows—waiting for their chance to strike.

She closed her laptop. If Bug barks, she thought, that will be the sign of an intruder, and then I'll worry. Otherwise, I'm not going to think about it. She'd spent her entire life in a house not unlike this one, at the end of long driveway, in the middle of a field; these kinds of places were safe—much safer than the city, she told herself.

She sat completely still and listened to the noises of the

house—creaks and whines and a distant rumble and hum of what she hoped was the furnace. Old houses make noises, she told herself. Don't be alarmed. She was glad she'd known this long enough for it to seem true—her house in Vermont was old, and it was noisy, too. And again, if there was any supernatural disturbance or activity, she was going to rely on Bug to let her know. Weren't animals more attuned to things like that anyway? If there are ghosts or spirits here, she thought, Bug will know first, and he'll bark, and we'll go from there.

Tomorrow, she thought, removing a cold bottle of white wine from the door in the refrigerator. Tomorrow I'll get started. She rarely drank. It was only recently that she'd gotten drunk for the first time—with Malcolm, who'd only just barely tolerated her tottering around his apartment, and vomiting in the bathroom the next morning, while his roommates waited in the hallway to use the shower. One drink: one glass of wine, she thought, to celebrate my arrival here—to celebrate the work I'm here to do, which will start, officially: tomorrow.

By the time she took Bug out to go to the bathroom before bed, she was bleary eyed, weaving around the grass in the dark. She stubbed her foot on the exposed roots of a tree, screamed in pain and scared Bug, who bolted away from her, into the night. Now the person who'd snuck up the hill to spy on me will know I'm outside, she thought. This is the part of the story where my character is killed.

She stood still, listening for the sound of her murderer—there were night birds, and the distant sound of cars on the road, and maybe crickets or some other insects. She felt something warm and wet against her hand—blood! No: Bug's tongue. He wanted to go back in. She staggered up the stairs, locked the doors downstairs, went up to her third floor room, and flopped down on her bed. She woke up in the middle of the night to somebody snoring—Malcolm? Professor Paulson? Bug had climbed onto her bed and was sleeping beside her, his head on the opposite pillow.

In the morning, the bed was empty. Bug was waiting patiently for her at the top of the stairs. Still wearing the clothes from the day before, she took him outside and walked with him out into the field behind the barn where the grasses were long and unmown. She felt horrible—not as badly as she had that night at Malcolm's, but almost—her head felt like it might split in half. The early morning, however, coming slowly into focus around her, was beautiful—the wind felt warm and tasted sweet, the sun coming up over the trees at the far side of property lay in gold bands across the yard.

Behind her, in a thatch of long reeds, she heard Bug struggling. She could see him through the grasses in a quivering squat, hopping from side to side, clearly in pain. She wondered if he was sick—if perhaps the treats she gave him the evening before had gone bad. She walked over to where he'd finally managed to go and saw it: the wadded, baby's bonnet from the rest stop, barely pink anymore, steaming in a bright yellow twist of shit. That was all it took: she turned and vomited on the dew-coated grass.

She spent the rest of the morning thumbing through old issues of *National Geographic* and *Life* magazine, intermittently napping on the couch with the sliding glass door open and the fresh air blowing inside. She felt capable of nothing else. Towards late afternoon, she was awoken by the sound of heavy boots on the porch. She looked up and saw a tall, burly man on the other side of the screen door, staring in at her. She peered over at Bug, who should have been barking, alerting her. But he was asleep.

“Hi, there,” said the man. “Didn't mean to frighten you.”

“Hi,” she said. She hadn't really spoken to anyone for an entire day; the words were hard to assemble in her mouth.

He looked at her curiously. “I'm Lou,” he said. “I'm the caretaker here for the Paulson's...they said you'd be up here and I figured I'd stop by and make sure you're okay.” He focused in on her a bit more closely. “You sick?” he said. “You look a little...sick.”

“A little,” she said.

“I wouldn't be sleeping in front of an open door if I were sick,” he

said. "It's not even full spring yet. You could just get worse."

She clutched the blanket in lieu of a reply

"So," he said, leaning against the doorjamb. "They told me you're a writer? They said a writer was going to use the house—to write. But you look kind of young to be a writer."

"I'm not," she said, and seeing his confused look, she added. "I mean, yes, I'm young. But...I'm here to work on writing...but I'm not really...at this point, a writer."

He looked over at the dining room table, where her computer was set up. "I guess all writers are young at some point," he said.

He stayed behind the screen the whole time, so his entire body had a kind of gauzy scrim over it, but even so, she could tell that he wasn't very old himself—maybe thirty, with a close-cropped haircut and deeply cut features that reminded her of the pictures she'd seen of the mysterious statues on Easter Island.

"What's your name again?" he said. "Victoria told me but I forget it already."

"Nan," she said.

"Ann?"

"No, Nan," she said.

"Oh," he said. "I don't know anyone named Nan."

She shrugged; she had never met anyone who ever had.

"Well," he said. "Was everything okay when you got here—house clean? Driveway clear? Heat and lights on?"

"Everything was fine," she said. Her mouth was dry, her head still hurt, she didn't have the energy to think of all those things. "Thank you."

"My number's by the phone if you need anything. I don't live that far away," he said. "I can hop right over. Whenever you want."

"Okay, thank you," she said. "I'll let you know, but I can't imagine I'll—"

"So as a writer," he interrupted, looking over at her computer. "Do you just sit at that thing all day...writing?"

"That's the idea," she said. It sounded like an apology.

"You don't take any breaks?"

"I do," she said. "Or, I will—to take Bug out. To walk around the yard...or something."

Bug heard his name and woke up. He raised his square head and leveled it at Lou, on the other side of the door. Nan hoped he would growl, just to set some kind of standard, but instead he got up and went to the screen, swiping the air excitedly with his tail.

He drew the door open, got down on floor, pulled the dog to him and dug his hands into the yellow-white fur.

"You can take him to the river to swim," he said. "Just down the road, outside of town there's a turn off where you can park and walk down to the bank. I used to go there all the time with my old dog, before she got hit."

"I'm sorry—"

"Thanks," he said. "But I can show you, if you want. We can bring Bug; I've brought him down there before—last year when Charlie was up here without the wife and brats, working away on some book or something, the poor dog was just sitting inside, doing nothing." He smoothed Bug's ears down flat against his head as Bug's eyes closed to slits of rapture. "They have all this land and the dog stays inside the whole time? That's not how a dog should live."

She agreed with this—all the dogs she'd grown up with had their run of the land—the paddocks and fields around her house. They came inside to sleep and to eat, but mostly they were outside, being, as her mother would say—being dogs.

"So maybe you'll want to come, too?" he said. "Or I can just bring Bug here..."

"Okay," she said—suddenly, she didn't want to disappoint him, or, rather, she didn't want to turn down his offer, which seemed to cater more to Bug than to her.

"So tomorrow, then?" he said. "I have time after lunch."

She nodded.

He got up off the ground and slapped Bug a few times on the rump. "You," he said to the dog, "you are a big fat yellow bear. And I will see you tomorrow." He looked at Nan. Without the screen to intervene between them, she saw his eyes were pale blue, the color

of breath mints. "Tomorrow," he said.

"Right," she said.

She heard the sound of his truck's tires crunching the gravel in the driveway as he drove away. She pulled the blanket around herself; he was right: the breeze was pretty brisk. Bug came over to her and she patted his broad, bony brow, which felt warm beneath her fingers.

"You," she said. "You are a big fat yellow bear."

The next day, after lunch, she was sitting at her computer, working—well, sort of working. She was deleting most of what she'd written that morning and the night before, when, after her hangover had subsided, she'd decided to start over: to keep her main character and begin again. It was a good plan, except for the empty page on her computer screen, and the nagging image of Lou, looking at her through the screen door.

She thought of Malcolm. He never had this problem. No matter what happened in his life, he was always able to work; he never seemed to get distracted. Every time she talked to him, he was working on his computer, and many times, when they went out, he would interrupt what they were doing or saying to scribble down an observation or a scrap of dialogue he'd heard in the compact little writer's notebook he kept in the front pocket of his corduroys.

She left the blank page up on her computer and went into the kitchen. There was another bottle of wine in the door of the refrigerator: one glass, she told herself, and picked up the phone.

"I was just thinking about you," Malcolm said when he picked up.

"I'm glad you called."

"I'm glad you're home," she said. She'd made sure to call him at his apartment. If she called him on his cell phone, he'd see the number displayed, and know that she wasn't in Vermont, where she told him she was going to be for the break.

"How's home?" he said. "How are your parents?"

This was a huge mistake, she thought. The telling of the single lie wasn't that bad. But in order to participate in the call, which she



really wanted to do, she'd have to consistently lie, and keep track of all the lies, which, already feeling the effects of the wine, she didn't know if she could pull off.

"Things are fine," she said. "What's going on with you?"

He told her everything he was doing—writing, working, trying to find another job, watching movies with his roommates, going out for beers, etc—which was the same stuff he'd been doing pretty much since she'd met him.

Just because I'm doing something completely foreign and out-of-character for me, she thought, doesn't mean everyone else is. Somehow this realization relaxed her. She filled her glass again, dropped in some ice cubes.

"What's it like up there?" he asked. "Cold?"

He was from Arizona, so he didn't know how the seasons operated up in New England: early spring in Massachusetts was different from early spring in Vermont, and she had to stop and think for a minute which one to recount to him.

"It's still cold," she said. "But wet; muddy—this is the beginning of the mud season...the thaw...so it's all..."

"Muddy," he said.

"Right," she said. "Messy."

It occurred to her what Professor Paulson might think when he saw the phone bill from the country house—an unknown New York number, perhaps listed under Malcolm's name. She glanced above the phone, on the bulletin board; there was an index card with important numbers printed on it. The first one was Lou's, who lived nearby, who could hop over if she wanted anything.

"Can I call you back?" she said, quickly.

"We just got on," he said.

"I know," she said. "But I have to go help...my mother."

Ugh, she thought. She pictured what her mother might be doing at that moment—unloading the dishwasher, making dinner, setting the table. Her father was most likely out in his woodshop; her mother probably could have used her help.

"Okay," he said, sounding a little disappointed. "When do you

think you're coming back to the city? At the end of the break or before?"

"I don't know," she said. "I haven't decided yet, but I think at the end."

"Oh," he said. "I was hoping it would be before; I thought we could maybe go—"

"I'm sorry," she said. "I really have to run. I'll call you soon."

She hung up, feeling horrible. It was getting dark out. She had wasted the entire day. She went into the kitchen to find something to make for dinner. She hadn't felt up to going into town to the grocery store, and vowed, once again, to replace whatever she ate. Or drank. She filled her glass again.

Bug jumped up into the back seat of the truck and hung his head over the front seat between Lou and Nan. Before going to the river, they went on a brief tour of the area—the small town center with the grocery store, post office, Laundromat, and pizza shop; the town green; the church where Lou's parents had been married; Lou's high school; the local bar. About a mile outside of town, he parked the truck on the side of the road and led Nan and Bug (on a leash) down the steep embankment to the river, which was wide, and fast flowing, amber-colored, with frothy chunks of suds that collected in the rocks and pools.

On her drive up from New York, she'd driven along a stretch of this river—she'd almost swerved off the road while staring at it. She had read in books about grieving and loss that many people avoided the places associated with the deaths of loved ones, but this was not true of her. Her brother had drowned in a river near her house, but that hadn't changed her fascination with water—if anything it had strengthened her draw to it, as now more than ever, it seemed a part of her.

Bug huffed and squeaked with excitement as Lou waved a dingy tennis ball in front of his snout. Lou threw the ball far upstream, into the center of the river, where it landed with a flat splash. They watched as Bug skittered excitedly along the shore, picking his way

over the rocks. Finally, he jumped, legs cycling in the air, and landed like a cannonball; he went under, bobbed up, and began swimming toward the ball. The current in the middle of the river was too strong for him to swim against, so he treaded water until the ball floated by, then snatched it up and headed back to them, nostrils snorting above the surface.

As Bug shook on the bank, Nan noticed a group of men sitting around a fire on the other side of the river. It looked like a hobo camp, or like the colonies of the homeless she'd seen on the lower tiers of Riverside Park, when driving up the Henry Hudson Parkway.

"Who are those guys?" she asked.

"This area gets a lot of them around this time of year," he said. "Drifters—like, itinerants who come through towns to get farm work or work at the county fairs, which start up right around now." He looked at Nan looking at the men. "Don't be scared," he said. "They won't bother us."

But the men across the river had noticed them—they'd turned from their fire and were looking across the water. Lou threw the ball again, far upstream, close to where the men were. Bug, flew into the air, landed with a huge splash, and, within a minute or so was shaking out on bank beside them, the ball clutched in his mouth.

"Maybe don't throw the ball so far upstream next time," said Nan.

"Maybe throw it closer to us. Or down there a bit." She pointed to a still pool off to the side of the river.

"That's no fun," said Lou. "Bug wants to swim, he likes it when I throw it far—that's the whole point."

Two of the men had gotten up and were standing by the edge of the river to watch Bug retrieve the ball. The other men stood up, but stayed by the fire where it looked like something was cooking on a skewer.

"Please," said Nan, grabbing Lou's arm, cocked back and ready to throw. Bug, his head twitching around frantically, awaiting the sound of the splash.

"Don't worry about it," he said, and let the ball fly, way upstream, just beyond where the men were standing. It landed in a swirling

eddy.

Bug ran up the rocks and jumped in, swimming on the side of the river where the current wasn't as strong, so he could actually make progress upstream. Nan watched as he went, his tail slithering back and forth behind him, his flat, golden head chugging through the water. He was so determined and intent, it was almost heartbreaking to watch. He cut across the middle of the river, picking his head up to catch sight of the ball, bobbing in the water, but it was gone. One of the men had fished it out of the eddy and was holding it in his hand. The other man with him was calling for Bug, trying to get him to come over, yelling: *C'mon boy! Come here, boy!*

Bug swam toward them, heeding their call and seeing his prize, which the man bounced against a flat rock.

"Bug!" Nan cried out. "Come on! Come on, Bug!"

Bug, turned back and looked at her, and as he paused to do so, the current pushed him downstream.

The men called out for him again, slapping their knees and whistling. Come on you stupid mutt! They called out, laughing. *Get your ass over here!*

"Lou!" said Nan.

Lou screamed for Bug, too, and again, he turned around to look at them. He was in the middle of the river, fighting the current, swiveling his head back and forth across to each side of the shore. He looked confused and desperate, sinking slightly.

"Come on, Bug!" yelled Lou. "Come on back, boy!"

One of the men stepped into the river—up to his knees—held out the ball for Bug to see, and reached out his other arm to grab Bug's collar.

"No!" said Nan, she looked up at Lou, staring across the river. "I told you!"

She charged into the river, slapping the brown water with her hands, calling the dog's name. The current was stronger than she thought, the water colder, and it quickly grew deep. The riverbed was slippery with uneven, sharp, and slimy rocks that dug into her

feet through the soles of her sneakers. She kept her eyes trained on the men on the opposite shore, who were now laughing and skipping stones at Bug who spiraled around in the water, confused.

“Bug!” she cried again, the water pressing hard against her ribs. “Come here, Bug!”

Her wet jeans and sneakers grew heavy. She felt a sharp pain in her shoulder, and then another in her hand. The men were cheering and hooting. They had started skipping stones in her direction and had hit her. She reeled around to look for Lou, but she lost her balance and fell over into the frigid water. Instantly, she was swept away by the current, her feet out from under her. She couldn't get her footing, the current was too strong and the rocks were too slick, and then suddenly her head was being shoved under further. She thought the men had gotten hold of her and were trying to drown her, but it was Bug, scratching her back and neck with his paws, huffing his muzzle against her ear. She knew he was trying to help her—the dogs she'd grown up with had done the same thing when they went swimming—but he was pushing her down deeper. She peered up and saw a small outcropping of rocks and a shallow bit of shore, and tried to make her way toward it, pulling Bug along with her.

She felt a hand grab the neck of her sweater and yank her toward shore. Lou carried her up to dry land, wrapping her, coughing and heaving, against his soaking shirt. They stood on the shore, shivering, as the men laughed and screamed at them from the other side of the river. Bug sat patiently beside them and waited for them to throw the ball, which he hadn't realized they'd lost.

Lou dropped her off at the house; she'd insisted that she was fine, that she just needed to get in the shower, change her clothes; she would be all right.

Once his truck was out of the driveway, she let herself go, crying into her hands, as Bug rolled around on the lawn. She wasn't crying because Lou hadn't listened to her, or because the men were frightening, or because she feared for Bug's safety—all of which, at

the time, were what caused her to charge into the river. She was crying at the memory of how it felt when she went under, when the water wrapped around her and pulled her off her feet—struggling, flailing around, weighted, helplessly sinking. It was what her brother must have felt—except under the ice, without the sky above him, the sun, which had shone down on her and had showed her where the air was, where she would be safe. She pictured him trapped and spiraling in that cold passageway of water, the blades of his skates caught on the riverweeds and rocks. She stood soaked and shivering, crying in her advisor's yard.

She made a fire in the woodstove in the study and sat by it in the rocking chair, covered with a blanket. She had taken a shower for twenty minutes and put on her warmest clothes, but she still couldn't shake the chill from her body. Bug slept soundly, still damp, snoring on the rug in front of the stove. She clasped her hands together. There's no way I can work now, she thought, my fingers are frozen.

She heard the sliding door open in the other room.

“Hello?” she heard Lou's voice call out. “Hello?”

She said nothing, and listened to his footfalls walking around the kitchen the dining room, the living room; soon, she knew, he would find her. He stood in the doorway of the study, holding a pizza box and a brown grocery bag.

“Smart,” he said, nodding toward the fire. “I came by to tell you that I'm sorry. About this afternoon. I didn't think any of what happened would actually...you know...happen. That was all just so weird.”

She shrugged. It didn't really sound like an apology to her. But when she thought about it—and she had from the moment he'd dropped her off—it wasn't like any of it was really his fault. He didn't ask the men to try and get Bug over to their side of the river, (to do what, she didn't know). And he didn't tell her to go into the river to get swept away by the current. Could she really be angry with him for throwing a tennis ball for the dog's enjoyment? After all, the worst

that happened was that she got wet—they both did. Bug was fine; no one died...

"I brought some food," he said lifting up the pizza. "If you're hungry. And stuff for us to drink, if you want."

He put the pizza and grocery bag down on the coffee table, and moved over to stand by the fire. Bug looked up at him and thumped his tail.

"You looked really freaked out when you went under," he said to her. "Do you not know how to swim, or something?"

She wondered what she'd looked like from where he stood on the bank—and from where the other men were standing, across the river—ridiculous, no doubt, running into the current to save the dog. That's why the men were laughing at her. And maybe Lou was laughing at her, too, behind her back—this dumb girl, this city girl, some supposed writer, splashing around in the water like an idiot.

"I must have looked so stupid," she said, staring at the blazing fire behind the stove's glass paneled door.

"I didn't say you looked stupid," he said. "I said you looked scared—genuinely scared."

She could have said: my brother drowned in a river, under the ice while he was skating. Or she could have said: I was just worried about Bug. Or she could have said: I don't know why I agreed to come here.

"I was terrified," she said. "Until you pulled me out."

The next day she called her advisor and told him that she was coming back early. She said her boss at the language lab needed her—a fellow employee had gotten sick and they needed someone to fill in. It was an emergency.

"Can't they get someone else?" he said, incredulously. "Don't they know you're three states away?"

Of course they don't know, she thought. How would anyone know?

"Everyone else went away for the break and my boss is alone," she said. "Apparently there's a visiting group, some on-campus seminar that's been running him ragged all week. He needs help."

"I sympathize with him," said her advisor without sympathy. "The same people are hounding me, too. But I don't see why you have to come back, I was actually planning to come up on the weekend—"

"I need to come back," she said. She'd barely heard what he'd said.

"Well," he said, sighing. "It's your choice. Of course it's your choice. My only hope was that you'd get some good work done, which, since you're coming back early, I'm assuming you have. You're not the kind of person who'd come back from such an opportunity empty-handed, hmm?"

She had done nothing over the past three days but delete what she'd brought with her.

"Well, I'll call Lou and get him to stop by after you're gone to straighten things up," he said. "Has he been around much since you've been up there? I suppose not—"

"He actually stopped by yesterday," she said. "But he didn't stay very long."

She could have said: He came by yesterday, and he left this morning. But that would have been the truth, and so far, this had been the week of lies.

He'd brought a bottle of red wine in the grocery bag—a large one, inexpensive, (\$10.99; she saw the tag), which they drank as they ate the pizza in front of the fire. When it was almost gone, they stumbled upstairs. Driving back to the city, she tried to piece together the evening, and wondered if the whole thing had been her idea, her doing. She remembered saying to him that she was still cold from the river—she'd said it over and over again, because, she quickly discovered, it drew him nearer to her.

At one point he'd said: Don't you have work to do? And she'd said: I'm doing it now.

Did she really say that?

Upstairs, she gave him a little tour of the place—the laundry room, the twins' room, the guest room, etc. When they got to Professor Paulson's room, he walked right in—his boots incising their treads on the rugs—and flopped down in the center of the



perfectly made bed with its tightly pulled sheets and blankets; she thought it might shatter beneath him.

She said: there's still another floor; there's still my room to see. And he said: I want to stay here, in Charlie and Victoria's room. I like this one.

Then they were laughing about something, their voices hoarse from the cheap red wine. His teeth and lips were purple. Her feet were still cold. He pulled her onto the bed with him—she remembered flying in the air toward him. He was so tall and broad, that being on the bed with him—on top of him, or under him, was like being back in the river: smothered, enveloped, cradled, crushed.

She woke up, naked, his arm slung around her neck. The sun was barely coming through the dense pines at the edge of the yard. Bug was asleep on the rug at the foot of the bed. Her head ached; her eyes felt gravelly in her skull. She looked around the periphery of the bed for her clothes and, getting up to put them on, felt wetness by her legs. Lifting the blankets she saw a bloodstain the size of her palm, seeping into the sheets.

“So you met Lou?” said her advisor.

“I did,” she said.

“He's a little rough around the edges,” he said. “But he does a good job—he's a good man. Did you meet his wife?”

“His what?” she said; she felt the caustic vomit of red wine rise in her throat.

“She works at the pizza place,” he said, informatively. “The next time you come up we'll have to go; it's best pizza around—some say better than anything you can get here in the city.”

Upstairs, in the laundry room, the dryer's bell went off; the bedding she had washed was done. Once it was replaced, her plan was to jump in the car and go. Lou had left the house while she was in the shower that morning, so she hadn't even seen him awake. The last sign of him was the condom wrapper he'd left floating in the toilet.

“So,” said her advisor. “When can we expect you?”

“I'm leaving within the half hour,” she said. “So, probably around

one o'clock."

"Just get Carlos—our doorman—to ring up when you're here," he said. "I'll come down and find you."

The drive back to the city was a blur. Just before she got on the highway, she made a quick call—to Malcolm. He wasn't there, but she left him a message telling him that she was coming back early, and that maybe they could get together sometime soon, maybe even that evening. She had an overwhelming urge to see him, to sit with him and hear about his doomed novel, his despised job at the bookstore, the selection of odd Asian movies his roommate was always forcing him to watch.

As she drove, images of the previous evening flashed through her mind, unbidden—a fractured slide show of what Lou had done to her, what she had done to him. And of course, the blood—the garish emblem of something she'd considered so precious when, in the end, felt as cherished and fleeting as a suntan. Accompanying these images came the conflicting feelings of embarrassment, disgrace (he had a wife!), excitement (a wife!), and something unexpected—a vague sense of wonder, of awe for whoever that person was who had accepted the offer to stay in the house with hopes of writing something great, something seminal, but who crawled out of the experience a slacker, a drunk, a tramp. Who was that person? Nan had no idea—and neither would anyone else. It was the one thing that mitigated the onslaught of shame and guilt she felt pushing against her heart: no one would have to know. She had already successfully covered her tracks with her friends and family; it would only take a little more effort—a few more lies—to keep them all in the dark.

This, she felt like she could do.

Professor Paulson came out of his apartment building wearing the same bad light colored jeans, an Irish cable knit sweater and duck boots. He waved at her and smiled heartily. His wife followed behind him, wearing a sleek pale gray trench coat and shiny brown leather

boots. Nan got out of the car and took Bug out by the leash.

"I'll just take it from here," said her advisor, coming around the car to the driver's side. "I have some errands to run. Hope everything was okay, now, was it?"

"It was great," she said, smiling. "I'm really sorry I had to come back so early."

"You did what you had to do," he said, a little sadly.

She thanked him again and told him how helpful it was to her, how great the time away was, how beautiful the house was, and how much work she'd gotten done, which he seemed to appreciate.

"All I ask is that you show me the results!" he said, as he climbed in the car. "I can't wait to read it—and neither, I'm sure, can the world!"

She stood under the apartment building's awning with his wife and Bug, watching the car drive away. She handed over the dog's leash.

"Well," said Nan. "Thank you again. I'm sorry I had to come back so soon—"

"Yes," said her advisor's wife. "You're back early, but I'm sure you got what you needed out of it."

Nan could only smile.

"Charlie tells me that you met Lou, our caretaker."

Nan nodded.

"Charlie thinks he's a bit of a lug," she said, laughing. "But I just think he's just *delicious*."

Her eyes zeroed in on Nan's.

"I asked him to stop by the house because I didn't want you feeling too lonely," she said. "It was Charlie's idea, really. Well, not really—when you left the other day, Charlie got this hair-brained idea that you'd be frightened up there by yourself, and he wanted to drive up and make sure you were okay. Isn't that kind of him? Isn't that considerate? He's not nearly as protective of his own sons, or even of me!"

Nan said nothing.

"But we need him here," she said, brightly. "Which I'm sure you

understand. A family doesn't run properly without its father, right?"

She thought of her own father, whom she loved, and nodded.

"So, I told Charlie I'd call Lou and ask him to stop by," she said. "Just to make sure you were okay. And, of course, so Charlie wouldn't have to worry."

Nan knew it would have been appropriate for her to say, thank you, at this point, but she couldn't quite get her mouth to work.

"So, I told Lou that our friend, a country girl who fancies herself a writer, is staying in our house, and will you stop by and make sure she has everything she needs?"

Nan stared at her.

"And it sounds like he did just that," she said. "Just as I asked. He was there, right? He came over?"

"We took Bug swimming in the river," Nan finally managed to say.

It was the only thing she could think of—the truth, which seemed like the only weapon she had.

The woman raised her eyebrows and tilted her head.

"He swam for a long time," said Nan, patting Bug's head emphatically, her voice louder than she seemed able to control. "We threw him a tennis ball again and again, and he kept going back in the water for it, even though it was freezing! But I've grown up with Labs all my life, so I know how they love to swim."

The woman smiled, put her hand on Nan's shoulder and squeezed. The sensation brought back a physical memory of the night before—nothing specific, only the pressure, the clutch of her flesh.

"Well that sounds like fun," said the woman, looking satisfied. "What a pleasant thing to do during your time away."

