

AUSTIN

AFTER IT HAPPENED

—It's funny, Rose says. —After it happened there was a period where I thought that God was punishing me. She smirks and looks down at her hands. She is sitting on the couch, her legs tucked up underneath her. She plans to crash at her cousin's place tonight; that's where she's been staying.

—I mean, she says, —I had done this whole thing to like *get away* from God, and then it just turned out so *badly*.

—Yeah, says Austin. He wants to say *it wouldn't happen that way now*. In the years that have passed since then he has improved himself, he believes this, he has learned things about how to be a good man, and if the man he is now could impossible back in time and meet the Rose of the past he believes that they would find a way, together, to seek solace and comfort in one another. He would hold her in his arms. But they are in the present. Two bodies in a room. It is after dinner. A half-finished bottle of wine sits on the coffee table, along with two emptied glasses, set so that they are touching. He sits on a footstool, near her. She is looking at her hands. He takes them in his own, and she lets him, and then she begins to speak again.

—I thought about that for a long time when I got back to Minneapolis, she says. —I wanted *so badly* to be forgiven, so that the punishment would stop, so that this *feeling* would stop, and I kept thinking that I couldn't be forgiven until I found some way to make *amends*.

—To God? Austin says. He's cautious here, he isn't quite sure he understands what he's saying.

—Yeah, to God, Rose says. —And to, you know, the baby. And that's where I kept hitting this like *wall*. Because you *can't* make amends to the baby; I mean, the baby is gone. She makes a kind of laugh. —I was really a mess during that time. I was having these really fucked-up dreams, and because of that I wasn't sleeping very well, and so I'd walk around all day in this kind of dream-state, I'd just go like waste hours in cafes, drinking all of this coffee to try to stay awake, and I'd start seeing angels everywhere, I'd like—look down at the surface of the table and these *faces* would come out of the pattern? And I knew that the faces were angels, and at the same time they were kind of like, the faces of the baby? That the baby might

have had? And so it was also, like, my face, and your face, all like mixed together and coming through these angels? And all during this time I was like trying to *paint*—trying to get this *down* in an *image* and just like losing my *mind*—I wanted to make this enormous *sculpture*—God, I was just a *wreck*. A total *wreck*. She laughs again.

—That sounds really intense, Austin says.

—Yeah, yeah, she says. —It *was*. *Totally* intense. And then I began to get it, I guess, what the dreams were trying to tell me. I guess you could say I *remembered* it, because it was something I knew when I was younger, and then had lost sight of for a while.

—What was it? Austin says.

—I remembered, Rose says, —I remembered that God isn't interested in punishing us. That God is, I don't know, love, I guess. This reservoir of constant love. And so this whole matter of making *amends* was something that I felt like I had to do so I could feel better about *myself*—I didn't need to make amends *to God*. You know? Because God had already forgiven me. And I didn't need to make amends to the baby, either, because when I had the abortion the baby became like *part* of God again. *Forgive's* not even the right word, it's not a matter of *forgiveness*. None of us *need* to be forgiven because none of us ever fall out of grace. It's constant. We just have to choose to *accept* that grace. And after I went back to Minneapolis I kept *resisting* it—it's *easier* to resist it than it is to accept it, because to *accept* it we have to have faith that we deserve it; that we're worthy of it. And that's really hard, especially after you fuck up. You know?

—I think so, Austin says. He isn't sure. He's never really believed in God as a being. But what Rose is saying makes sense to him somehow, in a way that he doesn't quite understand. He thinks about playing the guitar: when he improvises he can get to a certain place; he's only gotten there a few times but he remembers it. In this place, he feels like he's working from pure intuition; he doesn't feel like the music is coming from him, he feels like it's coming from somewhere else, coming *through* him. As though his own body were being used as an instrument by some other force, something larger. And he feels like Rose is tuned in to that larger force all the time, and he thinks that maybe that is what she means when she speaks of God.

—So, Rose says. She squeezes Austin's hand. —So then everything kind of fell into place. That fall, fall of what, 2000, I guess, I started going back to school, and I got my Master's in Pastoral Counseling, and then I started working at the center last summer. And now I'm here.

—I'm glad, Austin says. He wants to ask her if she's seeing anyone. She hasn't

mentioned anyone. (But he hasn't either—and before she came over he put a pile of Lydia's clothes into a cardboard box and slid it way back in the closet.) He wonders what time she will want to head back out to Evanston, back to her cousin's place. It is already after nine. He holds her hand. They are both quiet. Outside, flakes of snow turn and weave in the wind.