CAROLINA MOONSET

BOOKS BY MATT GOLDMAN

Gone to Dust

Broken Ice

The Shallows

Dead West

Carolina Moonset

CAROLINA MOONSET

MATT GOLDMAN

A Tom Doherty Associates Book / New York

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CAROLINA MOONSET

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For my brother, David.

Catcher of chameleons. Slapper of sunburns. Big Man posting up in Nerf Basketball. Gulper of Horseradish.

I would not have survived our many moves without you.

1

When I saw my first palm tree, I almost died of disappointment. It wasn't on a tiny island. It didn't have coconuts under its fronds or monkeys clinging to its trunk. That palm tree failed me.

The tree lived in Beaufort, South Carolina, in my grandparents' backyard, and the letdown I felt over its lack of picture-book clichés is my earliest memory of that place. I must have been three or four. It was the same trip I met the ocean at Hunting Island State Park. I waded into the salt water. Tasted it on my fingers. Scanned the surface for sharks. Thought every dolphin and hunk of driftwood was a shark, which sent me screaming and splashing back to the beach.

I spent languid afternoons with my sisters catching chameleons. We put the lizards in a box and named them. Took the box inside to show the adults. And under strict and often shrieked orders, carried the box back outside to let the creatures go. The chameleons turned brown on the palm tree's trunk or green if set on a leaf. I was determined to bring one home to Chicago and set it in our snowy backyard to see if it would turn white. But my sisters told my parents of my plan, and the chameleon was freed from my suitcase.

That's when I learned I could not trust family.

"Remember that time, Joey, when we came down to Beaufort to

visit Grandpa and Grandma?" My father spoke in a South Carolina drawl, a melody he'd reclaimed since moving back to the place he grew up. He'd always been loquacious, but his lyrical cadence had lain dormant for half a century until the salt air brought it back to life. "You couldn't have been more than three years old. Grandma took you kids to the strawberry farm, and you went row to row picking strawberries and putting them in your little basket. Then Grandma picked a berry and added it to your basket. . . ." My father began to laugh, the memory vivid to him like film. ". . . And you said, 'No! Joey's basket!' And you dumped all your strawberries in the dirt. . . ." My father laughed so hard he listed, held up by his shoulder strap in the back seat.

I didn't remember the strawberry farm. The incident happened over forty years ago. Forty vacations ago. Although trips to visit family don't qualify as vacations. Families have pecking orders, and each gathering is an opportunity to shift the hierarchy—that hardly creates an atmosphere for relaxation.

My mother sat in the passenger seat. She responded to my father's story with a tragic smile. Carol Green had aged in the last six months. Aged fifteen years by the looks of it, her face now drawn and pale. Her gray hair dull. She'd had it cut short. Not cute short but surrender short. She could no longer deal with something as trivial as hair. She'd lost weight. It looked like her bones wanted to push their way out of her skin. From her cheeks, her shoulders, her wrists, and her knees.

She was only seventy-three.

My mother used to sparkle. She'd had the social calendar of a debutante. A champion pickleball player, she and Judy Campbell ran the table at the tournament out on Fripp Island. But age had caught up to her. Passed her even. My sisters had each visited to give her a break. Now it was my turn. My parents had picked me up at the Charleston airport. Such expectation and excitement on the faces of Carol and Marshall Green. It's a thing with relocated retirees. They're eager to show you their life of leisure the way children are eager to show you the fort they built.

"What color is your suitcase?" My father stood at the carousel excited for the responsibility of spotting and retrieving the bag. The challenge of lifting it. He was surrounded by septuagenarians like himself, most picking up their children and grandchildren who'd flown down to visit for spring break, the beginning of Beaufort's bustling tourist season.

"Navy," I said. "It's a roller with a green bandana tied to the handle."

"Green bandana for Joey Green. Smart." He smiled, entertained by his observation. Brown eyes squinting behind trifocals, the old kind with visible lines, his eyebrows creeping over in need of a trim.

My mother pulled me aside and lowered her voice. "I want you to drive back to Beaufort, Joey. Your father's sense of direction is . . ." She shook her head and pressed her lips together. "And he doesn't like it when I drive. He complained the whole way here." My mother sighed. "We were at the neurologist this morning. She changed the diagnosis. I haven't even had a chance to tell your sisters yet."

My father turned around and said, "Hey, Joey. What color is your suitcase?"

"It's navy, Dad. A roller bag with a green bandana tied to the handle."

"Green bandana for Joseph Green. Good thinking." He gave me a thumbs-up, turned around, then walked toward where the conveyer belt spit the bags onto the metal merry-go-round. He moved with small, slow steps, like a cartoon old person. Shoulders stooped. Suspenders holding his jeans on his slender hips. Bent forward as if he needed the tilt to maintain inertia.

He was only seventy-five.

I wondered when my father had started wearing suspenders and if I was too old to be embarrassed about it. And I wondered when I'd started associating the word *only* with *seventy-five*. Maybe it's because my father's parents had lived into their nineties. I looked at my mother and said, "Dad has Parkinson's and Alzheimer's, right?"

My mother shook her head. "That's what they thought, but the neurologist and internist discussed Dad's symptoms. Now they think he has Lewy Body Dementia."

"What's that?"

My father got halfway to the end of the carousel then stopped and turned to show us a most confused expression. "Carol?"

"What, Marshall?"

"What are we waiting for?"

"Joey's bag."

"I'll get it. What does it look like?"

I told him. Again. As if it were for the first time. As if my father were a small child. I had last seen him at Thanksgiving in Chicago—that's when I first witnessed his disease while driving to a restaurant in Evanston. He had said it looked like rain and we should go back to get umbrellas. I told him I'd brought umbrellas. Then five minutes later, he said it looked like rain and we should go back to get umbrellas. I said, "Dad. You just said that. I have umbrellas." He apologized. Said he was getting old. Said something about how it was going to happen to me, too, one day. We laughed it off. Then a few minutes later, he said it looked like rain and we should go back to get umbrellas. I caught my mother's eyes in the rearview mirror. She was crying.

At the Charleston airport, my mother said, "We'll talk more about it when we get home. And there is a silver lining. Dad's long-term memory isn't affected. He won't forget me. Or you. Or your sisters or his grandchildren. He's been talking nonstop about growing up here. And about when you and the girls were little. Your father has loved the simple pleasures in life, and to hear his stories about the old days, it's really quite sweet."

My mother's words were hopeful but her eyes betrayed her. She was moving forward in time as my father moved backward. She was losing her companion of fifty-one years. An hour and a half later, my father laughed at the strawberry farm story he'd just told. "Oh, you were mad Grandma put that berry in your basket!" He laughed until he cried as I drove into Beaufort's city limits.

Beaufort County is a delta of sorts comprised of the Sea Islands bordering the coast. The town is rich with antebellum charm, but much had changed since my father grew up there, and his lack of short-term memory made it seem like a tidal wave of new development had hit every time he left the house.

"Would you look at that?" he said, shaking his head. "Hammond Island has three construction cranes. I'll be damned."

I kept my eyes on the road and asked what they were building.

"I don't know," said my father. I would soon learn this was his go-to response. He was resigned to his moth-eaten memory. I wondered how that worked—how he could remember that he couldn't remember.

My mother said, "They're tearing down the resort and building a gated community of luxury homes."

"On Hammond Island?" said my father with disgust in his voice. "Who would want to live on Hammond Island? You can only get there by boat."

"No. Remember, Marshall? They built a bridge last year." She looked at me and said, "We all voted against it, but the powers that be won the day."

"The powers that be," said my father. "Those Hammonds are nasty sons a bitches. Every one of 'em. Stole that island from the blacks. When the Union Army came through, they gave black people their own land. Gave 'em a chance. And it worked, too. The people prospered. Until the goddamn Klan took over and redistributed the land." My father had venom in his voice. "Redistributed the land with guns and knives and ropes and trees. I wouldn't live on Hammond Island if you paid me a million dollars. Hope a hurricane wipes it off the face of the earth."

"Marshall, you don't mean that," said my mother.

"The hell I don't."

My mother looked at me and shook her head, as if to say *he doesn't know what he's talking about*. I checked the rearview mirror to see my father scowling at the construction cranes.

When my sisters and I were young and still lived at home, we

played a game called Divert Dad. The object of the game was this: if our father got onto a topic any one of us didn't care for—say, government public health policy, pharmaceutical companies, or worst of all, one of our social lives or academic missteps—we would introduce a new topic he couldn't resist commenting on. One thing about our father: if he could make his point using ten words, he'd use a hundred. By the time he finished saying what he had to say on our interjected topic, he'd have forgotten what we distracted him from.

There was only one rule to the game. The rule was that neither my father nor my mother could know the game was being played or that it even existed. Divert Dad was a game for three players and no spectators. My oldest sister, Bess, invented it when I was about eight, and we have played it, on and off, ever since.

The game grew more intricate over the years. We could earn bonus points for working in obscure vocabulary words, or by trying to get him to say a predetermined word like *mozzarella, tomfoolery,* or *bunion*. But the one rule has remained—the game is between us three and for our amusement only. If that rule were ever violated, the game would be forever ruined. Therefore, a competent player must have (1) a good poker face, (2) a vast knowledge of distracting subjects, and (3) an understanding that Divert Dad is a team sport. Sure, you can rack up impressive personal stats, but we never competed against each other. For example, if our father was lecturing me over my C in physics, I couldn't be the one to divert him onto another topic. That would have been too obvious. One of my teammates had to do it.

But today, with my sisters home in Chicago, I was the only player. My father glared at Hammond Island. It upset my mother. Therefore, it fell upon me to Divert Dad.

"Dad, looks like the White Sox pitching staff is in trouble. Two starters out with injuries."

In the rearview mirror, I saw him look away from the construction cranes, but instead of launching into a diatribe on the White

Sox front office, he looked blank and then sad. He sighed and said, "I don't know anything about it."

Divert Dad was going to be a lot harder now. I said, "Well, the days of 2005 are long gone. Hey, remember José Contreras's start in game one of the World Series? When Guillén pulled him in the seventh?"

"Oh, hell, that was great," said my father as if the game had been played last night. "Guillén brought in Jenks in the bottom of the eighth to face Bagwell. Struck him out with a hundred-mile-an-hour fastball. High heat. I've never seen anything so beautiful."

"Eh-hem," said my mother.

"I stand corrected," said my father. "The most beautiful thing I've ever seen is Konerko's grand slam in game two."

My mother laughed and said, "Oh, Marshall! You're terrible!" as I pulled into the driveway behind the big white house.

2

I was born and raised in Chicago like my mother. She met my father while attending the University of Illinois when she was an undergrad and he was a medical student. She loved his South Carolina accent, though my father worked hard to lose it, and was attracted to his altruism. My father passed on lucrative offers in private practice to open a free clinic on Chicago's South Side, where he worked twelve hours a day, six days a week, until he turned seventy.

My friends' parents all told me how great my father was, putting the less privileged before himself. I thought, what about me? I'm the one who has to wear clothes from Sears. I'm the one who's allowed only one week of summer camp. I'm the one with the bedroom that's not the size of a closet but an actual closet without windows and a lofted bed so my dresser could go underneath. What about my sacrifice? Where's the praise for me?

Then, the day he turned seventy, a switch flipped in my father. He'd had enough. Of medicine. And sacrifice. And Chicago. He retired, convinced my mother to do the same, and begged her to move to South Carolina.

My mother would later tell me, "It was as if he didn't have a choice, Joey. Your father had to return to Beaufort, like he was

programmed that way, like a salmon has to leave the ocean and return to the stream where it was born. He just *had* to."

I parked my parents' car in the garage, went around to the tailgate, and removed my bag. The air smelled of the sea, heavy with salt and humidity. I took a deep breath and inhaled forty years of pleasant memories from this place I loved.

My father saw my bag and said, "Hey, a green bandana for Green. I like the way you think!" That big grin again. "So good to have you here, Joey." I put an arm around him. He felt old. More bone than muscle. And up close, I saw he'd missed a few spots shaving, silver patches of stubble where there should have been none.

My mother said, "Oh, Joey, I forgot to tell you. Dad hired the guide to take you two fishing tomorrow."

"I did?" said my father.

"Yes, Marshall. And it was very nice of you. You and Joey will have some good father-son time on the water."

I said, "It'll be just like old times, Dad. You can untangle my line and buy my patience with candy bars."

"Aw, Joey. You were always a good fisherman. Even when you were tiny you were fascinated by what you couldn't see below the surface. That's what fishing is all about. Curiosity and the patience to learn."

I only fished with my father. I tried to get my kids interested because I appreciated the bond fishing provided between me and my father and hoped the sport could do the same between me and my kids. They didn't take to it, which was fine. We bond over other things. I didn't love fishing, but I did it for my father. To spend time with him doing something he loved. But I took his compliment as we walked into the backyard I had known since I was a boy, back when the house on Craven Street belonged to my grandparents. It was built in 1853 and had white clapboard siding and a red tile roof. Verandas out front on the first and second floors. The house rested on pilings eight feet off the ground to allow flood waters from hurricanes to pass underneath.

My grandfather was the only one of his siblings to have children. My father was never a wealthy man but inherited money from his parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles. It wasn't a fortune, but it was something, and it included the house on Craven Street.

We walked through the backyard where my father's boat sat covered on its trailer, out of commission without its skipper. We passed a bed of roses and a small orange tree, its branches bent by heavy fruit. The old palm tree was still there, the kind that had a thick trunk and wasn't too tall, its bark woven like a basket. I checked it for chameleons, a habit I couldn't break, but saw none. Of course with chameleons, that didn't mean they weren't there.

My father said, "Remember, Joey, we were visiting Beaufort and sitting on the back porch, you were just a little guy, and you said you had to go inside to use the bathroom. Do you remember that?"

I reached for my phone and started the voice memo app. Greta, the younger of my two sisters, had asked me to record our father's stories. I said, "I don't remember that."

"I told you, 'Joey, we're men. And the best thing about being a man is if you got to go, just find a tree in the backyard.' So you went down the stairs and a few minutes later rejoined me on the porch. I didn't think anything of it until a couple hours later when I was taking the trash out back and saw that right there, at the base of that palm tree, was a human shit." Laughter seized him. I thought he might topple over. My father said, "I assumed you had to go number one. But no, sir. You just laid one out in the backyard!"

For a parent, there is nothing better than watching your child laugh. But watching your memory-impaired, stoop-shouldered father laugh is pretty damn close.

I said, "I might take a dump out here during this trip."

My mother laughed. "You'd better not, mister!"

My father took off his glasses to wipe away his tears and catch his breath, then he climbed the back steps at inchworm speed. Held the railing tight. My mother walked behind him, as if she

could catch him if he tipped backward. I set my bag on the back porch then descended the stairs and took her place.

Two fighter jets roared overhead, and my father said, "You know what they call that, don't you, Joey?"

I knew but said, "No, Dad. What?"

"The sound of freedom."

He'd been saying that since I was a kid, and him repeating it had nothing to do with cognitive impairment. He just liked to say it. A lot of people in Beaufort did, the Marine base at Paris Island a source of hometown pride.

The old house looked like it had when it belonged to my grandparents. Plaster walls painted in solid colors. Blue, peach, green, yellow, depending on the room. High ceilings. Floors of heart pine. The windows extended nearly from floor to ceiling, which let the sea breeze push through the house before the invention of air-conditioning. The kitchen, however, had been remodeled into something that functioned without hired help.

We were greeted by a dear family friend. Ruby was dark-skinned and thin and had relaxed-straight hair that followed the contour of her face and stopped short of her shoulders. She had started working at the house on Craven Street for my grandparents when she was just a girl, like her mother had.

Ruby's family, the Wallaces, and mine, the Greens, had leaned on each other for generations. I wouldn't exist if it weren't for the Wallaces. In the 1940s there was a great migration from home births to hospital births. My father was slated for the latter. The first and only child of Julian and Ida Green was to be born in a modern hospital that was sterilized and full of life-saving doctors and equipment. Their child in utero had other ideas. While Julian was in Atlanta buying wares at a trade show, the soon-to-be-named Marshall Green made his appearance a full month earlier than scheduled.

Ida woke up in labor, her sheets wet with amniotic fluid, and a great pressure on her cervix. She could not get down the stairs to phone for help. By the time Ruby's mother, Ella May Wallace arrived to work, my grandmother's contractions seemed continuous.

Ella May had served as midwife for dozens of mothers and knew there was no time to call for help. She delivered my father, and most likely saved his and my grandmother's lives.

Ruby had stopped working as a domestic thirty years ago to start her own bakery, but still had a key to my parents' house. The bakery was two blocks away, and when my parents were out of town, Ruby took in the mail and watered the plants—she knew the old house as well as her own.

When we entered the back door, she pulled her head out of the pantry and said, "There he is. Joey Green. Still a little boy to me."

When I *was* a little boy and wouldn't sit still with my sisters, couldn't sit still, unmotivated by coloring books or Go Fish or cat's cradle, it was Ruby who'd walk me down to the waterfront. We'd watch the boats and pelicans and throw bread into the air dense with gulls. Ruby let me expend my boy energy, which my parents had deemed misbehavior in the wake of two well-mannered daughters. She'd push me on the swings and time me running around a circle of palms at Waterfront Park. I'd cross the finish line, look at her with expectation, and wipe the sweat out of my eyes. Ruby would glance at her watch, announce my result, and say, "I think you can do better." It was a perfect symbiosis. Ruby stole a few precious moments off her feet and gave me a few precious moments to move mine as fast as I could.

I hugged Ruby tight and said, "I smell praline cookies."

Ruby said, "I tried to sneak in here and drop them off like your fairy godmother before you got to the house, but you caught me in the act. There is no way I am going to let you visit Beaufort without baking a big old tin of my cookies. A boy's got to eat. And the part about me getting caught in the act? Well, that's just a big fat lie. I couldn't wait to see my Joey Green. Lord, look at you. Must be fighting off the ladies with fly swatters. And how are those babies doing?"

"Great. They're on spring break with Cheryl."

"Bring 'em next time. That's an order. And you'd better come visit me at the bakery."

There is no way I'd visit Beaufort without setting foot in Ruby's bakery. But I said, "You still baking elephant ears?"

"Sure am."

"Then I'll be there."

"Elephant ears, my backside. You're coming to see me and you know it."

Ruby left, and my father helped himself to a cookie before excusing himself to take a nap. A minute later the old wooden staircase creaked under his slow climb. My mother went to the refrigerator, retrieved a pitcher of iced tea, and poured two glasses.

She said, "I don't know who's happier you're here, us or Ruby."

"Well, based on this tin of cookies, I'd say Ruby."

My mother managed a smile. "She was so good to you when you were little. And she's right. Next year, you'd better bring my grandkids here." She had wanted to sound playful—I could hear it in her voice—but the idea of next year pained her.

I changed the subject and said, "What was all that in the car about Hammond Island? I haven't seen Dad get angry like that in a long time."

"Dad and the Hammond brothers didn't get along when they were boys. Now that your father only thinks about what he can remember, those old feelings surface more often than they used to."

I felt I already knew that, but wasn't sure how. I started to wonder but was distracted by the cookies, which tasted of pecan and molasses, a recipe that came to the house like Ruby had, with her mother and grandmother. I had half a cookie in my mouth when my mother said, "Oh, before I forget . . ." My mother opened her purse, retrieved a key, and handed it to me. "I'm worried Dad will wander off and get lost so I had the deadbolts switched to the kind that need a key from the inside. Here's yours. Keep it with you and please make sure the doors are locked. Dad can't go outside without one of us."

"He can't even go for a walk?"

"Not alone, no. He gets disoriented easily. Sometimes the locks make him mad, and he'll yell about them being a fire safety issue,

but it has to be this way. Oh, and we bought Dad a special life vest for fishing. His balance isn't what it used to be, and I'm worried he'll fall off the boat. Promise me he'll wear it?"

"Of course." I sipped my iced tea. It tastes better in the South. And it wasn't even sweet tea. "Does Dad know about his diagnosis?"

"Yes. And he gets upset about it. He says it's not fair because he's taken such good care of himself. And he's right. It's not fair. He's scared to death he'll end up in memory care at some assisted living place. That he'll forget everything and everyone."

"But you said it's only his short-term memory that's affected."

"So far. Yes. Thank God."

"It's weird. He seems kind of happy."

"He is most of the time. He doesn't get frustrated with politics or his sports teams because he has no grasp of current events."

"That would make me happy."

My mother sat down next to me and said, "It's like when a person loses their sight, their hearing improves. Except with Dad, he's lost his short-term memory, and his long-term memory has improved. He tells stories I've never heard before."

"That's no small feat for a guy who hasn't stopped talking since he was one."

She sighed and smiled a sad smile, reached over, and placed her hand on mine. Her hand belonged to an old woman, spotted and bony. She had a younger woman's hands last time I saw her. "It's such a relief for me to have you here, Joey."

"Why don't you take a break, Mom?" I said the words as I thought them. No filter. No editing. "Go somewhere and relax for a few days."

She shook her head. "That's sweet, Joey, but I can't leave him."

"You're not leaving him. I'm here. I won't lose him."

"You lost Steve." She smiled.

"Steve was a hamster. And yes, I lost him. When I was six. I've matured since then. A little. And I wouldn't mind the one-on-one time with Dad."

"Really?" She handed me a second cookie, insisted I eat it.

"When Cheryl and I split up, I got less time with the kids, but it was better time because it was just the three of us. I got to know them in a different way. It's been the best thing about the divorce. No offense, but I'd love some one-on-one time with Dad."

My mother thought a moment, then said, "Well . . ." She sighed. "No . . ."

"No what?"

"Judy was heading down to Jacksonville tomorrow for a pickleball tournament, but her partner sprained a knee. Judy asked if I could sub in but I told her I couldn't. I have to stay with Dad. So she's looking for someone else."

"Mom, if Judy hasn't found anyone, you should go. What's it, two days?"

"Three. Joey, I can't. But I'll play with you while you're visiting."

"Pickleball?"

"Yes. Why not?"

"I think, legally, I'm too young to play. It's out of my hands."

"Oh, poo," said my mother. "Everyone is playing pickleball now. People your age, kids—it's not just for retired people. You'll love it. It's like a cross between tennis and Ping-Pong. I'll buy you a paddle as an early birthday present."

"Mom, I promise to play pickleball with you sometime. But you need a break. From the house. From Dad. Even from Beaufort. You need to have some fun. There will be plenty of time to kick my butt in pickleball when you get back. Please. Call Judy. See if she's found a partner."

My mother nodded and began to cry, a leak to relieve the pressure.

"This is good, Mom. You deserve it."

She nodded and said, "Will you please get Dad's life vest now so you don't forget it tomorrow?"

I unlocked the back door and walked outside past the orange tree and my father's covered boat and into the garage. His workbench—my father tinkered in retirement—held his fishing gear. He had always been meticulous. Neat and clean and organized. But like

his memory, his organization and cleanliness had deteriorated. Fishing rods lay across his workbench at odd angles like pick-up sticks. Bait casting reels, their lines loose, tangled with one another. Tackle boxes sat open, their lures bound by intertwined treble hooks. A can of WD-40 on its side, its red plastic spray straw a foot away. A hammer on a dry sponge, rusted on the side where the sponge had been wet. Screwdrivers scattered pell-mell. The socket set case open, sockets missing and nowhere in sight.

The father I had known was fading. I wanted to call my sisters back in Chicago. The three of us had to do something. Get our mother more help. Insist she and our father move back to Chicago where we would be close. Something.

I spotted my father's new personal flotation device hanging on the pegboard, reached for it, remembered something, and stopped.

The pistol.

My father had always kept a pistol in his old metal tackle box, the tackle box pocked with rust, its paint eaten away decades ago. The revolver had been in the family forever, but my mother and sisters didn't know about it. As my sisters grew older, they and my mother lost interest in fishing. By the time I was ten, spending the entire day out on the water had become an exclusively father and son activity. That's when he showed me the pistol and swore me to secrecy, knowing that if my mother and sisters found out he owned a gun, he never would have heard the end of it.

For as long as I'd known the gun existed, my father had kept it locked in the tackle box, hidden in a canvas sack. But I found the old metal tackle box out in the open, unlocked. I opened it, and its levels of storage compartments stretched out and up like a staircase. My father had always kept the pistol in the bottom level. I removed lures, boxes of hooks, a decade-old jar of pork rind frogs, lead weights, pliers, sunscreen, a fillet knife. But the gun was missing.

I sifted through the mess on the workbench, lifting up rods, tools, an unopened package of paper yard waste bags. No gun. I looked below the workbench, pulled out half-spent cans of

paint, extra tile from a bathroom remodel, a bike tire pump. But I couldn't find the gun.

My father's old fishing vest hung on a nail near the new life vest. I took it down, searched its pockets, and found a small box of ammunition—.32 shells. The shells fit the gun, but the gun wasn't in the fishing vest. I opened the box of ammunition—it was about two-thirds full. I pocketed the shells and took a cursory lap around the garage, lifting up bags of potting soil, pushing aside an edging tool, tipping over the old lawn mower, which was no longer in service since my parents hired out for lawn care over a year ago. The gas can was empty. I flipped through folded lawn chairs as if they were files in a filing cabinet.

No gun.

Marshall Green wasn't mentally sound enough to have access to a gun. If it was in the house, my mother would have found it, and if she'd found it she would have asked me about it. *Asked* probably isn't the right word. Freaked out is more accurate. The good news was my father was no longer permitted to leave the house unaccompanied. He was locked inside without access to a key.

I started to walk away but stopped. I didn't know why. I had no reason to stay in the garage, having decided that the gun presented no danger to my father nor to anyone else because he had no way to get at it. Besides, the old pistol had probably rusted into futility, wherever it was, buried in the natural decay of the neglected garage. And yet the revolver pulled at me. At least its image did, which was burned into my memory, or perhaps a memory of my memory, for a reason I couldn't explain.

After a minute of standing still, inhaling the mildewy air that's ever-present in the unkempt corners of a seaside town, I remembered my mission, grabbed my father's new life vest, and exited the garage.