BEFORE YOU KNOW KINDNESS

A NOVEL

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FOR THE BLEWER WOMEN:
Sondra, Cecilia, Evelyn, Victoria, and Julia
Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weakened broth.

NAOMI SHIHAB NYE, “Kindness”

... she took a long breath and looked behind her up the long walk to see if any one was coming. No one was coming. No one ever did come, it seemed, and she took another long breath, because she could not help it, and she held back the swinging curtain of ivy and pushed back the door which opened slowly—slowly.

Then she slipped through it, and shut it behind her, and stood with her back against it, looking about her and breathing quite fast with excitement, and wonder, and delight.

She was standing inside the secret garden.

FRANCES HODGSON BURNETT,
The Secret Garden
The bullet—cylindriform as a rocket but tapering to a point almost sharp enough to prick skin with a casual touch—was two and a half inches long when it was in its cartridge in the rifle. The shank was made of copper, and the expansion chamber would cause it to double in diameter upon impact. The tip was designed to swell upon contact as well, ripping apart the flesh and muscle and bone as it made its way to the elk’s or the bear’s or (most likely) the deer’s heart. It looked like a little missile.

The bullet did not hit Spencer McCullough in the chest that very last night in July, however, because that would have killed him pretty near instantly. Nor did it plunge into his abdomen, which—depending upon how much of his stomach, his liver, and his spleen were in harm’s way—would have killed him over the course of minutes. A thirty-ought-six—a .30-caliber bullet atop the classic cartridge case developed by the U.S. Army in 1906—turns bowels into pudding.

Instead, it ripped into the man’s body just above and to the side of his chest, slamming into him below his right shoulder. It shattered completely the scapula and his shoulder joint, demolished his rotator cuff (which would have been even more debilitating for his wife, Catherine, because she still gave a damn about her tennis serve), and mixed into a thick, sloppy soup the muscles that Spencer used to move his shoulder and lift his right arm. The bullet was traveling at two and a half times the speed of sound, and the tissue had to absorb the velocity: Consider the way a bullet does not appear to pierce a brick of Jell-O but, rather, causes it to explode.

What was of most importance to the two EMTs who arrived at the house at the very peak of Sugar Hill, New Hampshire, however, was that the bullet had also obliterated the first branch of the axillary artery—the superior thoracic artery—though as they were taking what remained of Spencer’s vitals near what remained of his snow peas that summer night in the garden they tended not to use words like axillary and thoracic. They used words like bleeder and terms like bleeding out, and Evan Seaver
— the male of the pair — allowed himself a small assortment of expletives and invectives. Evan was two decades younger than his partner, a fifty-one-year-old first-response veteran with hair the color of hoarfrost that fell over her ears and rounded her skull like a helmet. Her name was Melissa Fearon, but everyone called her Missy Fearless. She ignored Evan’s occasional lapses in decorum that evening because he had never before seen a gunshot wound. He’d seen his share of grisly car and snowmobile accidents, and he had in fact been with her when they found the vacationing TV producer who’d been decapitated behind the wheel of the convertible he’d rented in Boston. But that gentleman was clearly dead—not dying—and so Evan hadn’t had to get too close or spend any time with the corpse.

Both EMTs were volunteers who did other things for a living. Evan worked at an electrical wire factory in nearby Lisbon, and Missy taught math at the high school in Littleton. On at least a half-dozen occasions she had pulled her own students from their dads’ toppled four-by-fours or their very own Geos, Escorts, and Corollas, the vehicles inevitably crinkled like the foil wrappers that folded themselves around sticks of chewing gum. She had dealt before with audible bleeding—hemorrhaging that seems absolutely torrential, the flow not in reality making the noise of a geyser but seeming to everyone present as if it is—and seen people (grown-ups and teenagers and, alas, children) impaled on the shards of twisted metal that once were parts of automobiles.

Spencer was well into the first symptoms of shock when they arrived: He was cold and clammy and pale, and he was having great trouble breathing. Consequently, he was what Missy Fearon and her more seasoned associates referred to as a scoop-and-run. She and Evan did little at the edge of the garden where they found Spencer (his body half in the lupine that bordered the vegetables and half in the ugly, knotted vines on which once had grown snow peas) other than apply a thick, gauzy trauma dressing to the wound—and then lots of hand pressure—slip a stiff plastic cervical collar around his neck to immobilize his head, and roll him onto a backboard. Then they were off to the hospital in Hanover. Somehow Missy managed to stick a saline IV into Spencer in the ambulance while continuing to keep weight on the wound. She thought of how the EMTs sat on patients or jumped on the rolling gurneys to maintain pressure in the TV dramas, but she couldn’t imagine actually doing such a thing, especially with this poor guy. She’d be sitting on jam.

As for the emergency room physicians and the surgeon who, fortunately, lived within minutes of the hospital, once they had Spencer McCullough stabilized their greatest concern was the reality that before shattering all that bone in his shoulder and upper back, the bullet had done a pretty fair job of pulverizing the brachial plexus—the network of nerves that sends signals from the spine to the arm and the hand. Recall the Jell-O: Meaningful reconstruction was completely out of the question. Assuming they could even save Spencer’s right arm (which was no guarantee), it was highly unlikely that it would ever do a whole lot more than flop at his side like a scarecrow’s.

Inevitably, Spencer was right-handed. And so even though he wasn’t the athlete his wife was (the rotator cuff was among the least of the surgeon’s problems), this would be a severe disability. Even though he worked at a desk—Missy overheard enough as she worked to get Spencer into the ambulance to understand that he was a public relations guy for some animal rights organization in New York City, and this house he
was at was his mother-in-law’s—it was going to be a very long time before anything came easy to him again.

Once the physicians had started pumping the units and units (and still more units) of blood into him, done a chest X-ray, and gotten the only good news that Spencer McCullough’s body was going to offer that evening—there was no hemorrhaging inside the thorax and a lung had not collapsed—they set to work trying to control the bleeding in his shoulder and washing out the wound. This meant, among other tasks, meticulously removing all those tiny fragments of bone, which were now little more than contaminants. It meant using a Gore-Tex sleeve that looked a bit like a miniature version of a radiator hose from a car engine to reconnect the severed arteries, and then—when they needed yet more tubing—stealing a part of a vein from his leg.

Weeks later, they might do whatever reconstructive surgery they could. They might perform a nerve-cable graft, taking nerves from the part of the man’s leg where they had just taken a vein so that a portion of the pudding of sheared links in the nearly invisible wires in his right shoulder might begin to grow back. Or, if necessary, they might amputate the arm. In all likelihood, it was going to be completely useless. No, it would be worse than useless. It would be a hindrance, a limp and flaccid tentacle that hung by his side, caught on counters and tabletops, and banged against him when he tried to move his body in any manner that was even remotely athletic.

Still, Spencer McCullough was alive. And if someone had said to either Missy Fearon or Evan Seaver before they arrived at the house on Sugar Hill that a guy there had taken a bullet from a thirty-ought-six a couple of inches from his heart, they both would have assumed that they could have driven from the scene to the hospital at the speed limit with their siren and two-tone switched off, because all that was going to happen when they arrived was that the body was going to be declared dead and put on ice for the ME.

Only when they had deposited Spencer at the hospital and he had been rushed into the OR did either of them have the time to voice the questions that had crossed both their minds: Why the hell was there a loaded deer rifle on the property three and a half months before hunting season? And why in the name of heaven was a twelve-year-old kid—the guy’s own daughter, for God’s sake!—firing potshots into the garden on the last night in July?
Part I

The Deer
The sun was up over Washington, Lafayette, and the trio of nearby cannonball-shaped mountains that were called the Three Graces, and Nan Seton—elderly but far from frail—sat sipping her morning coffee on a chaise lounge on the Victorian house’s wraparound porch. She noted how the sun was rising much later now than it had even two or three weeks ago: It was already the twenty-eighth or twenty-ninth of July (it disturbed her that she couldn’t grab the precise date right now from the air), and her children would be arriving tomorrow, Friday.

A golden retriever—old like her but not nearly so energetic—lolled near her feet on the outdoor rug.

She had been on the porch close to half an hour and even the coffee in the stovetop percolator she had brought outside with her was cold, when she heard her granddaughters pound their way down the stairs. The older girl, Charlotte, was twelve; the younger one, Willow (a name that drove Grandmother crazy both for its absolute lack of any family resonance and its complete New Age inanity), was ten.

The girls collapsed into the two wicker chairs near the outdoor table, opposite their grandmother and her chaise. She saw they both had sleep in their eyes and their hair wasn’t brushed. They were still in their nightgowns, their feet were bare, and Charlotte was sitting in such a fashion—the sole of one foot wedged against her other leg’s thigh—that her nightgown had bunched up near her waist and she was offering anyone who cared to see an altogether indecent and (in Nan’s opinion) appalling show of flesh.

“Good morning,” she said to them, trying hard to resist the urge to put down her cup and saucer and pull Charlotte’s nightgown back down over her knee. “How are my two little wildflowers?”

“Sleepy,” Charlotte said, her voice already the uninterested drawl of an urban teenager.

“You girls are up early. Any special reason?”

“There’s a bird on the roof,” Charlotte said.

“A woodpecker,” Willow added, and she reached down to pet the drowsing dog.

Nan nodded. She decided the bird must have been on the roof over the kitchen porch on the other side of the house, because otherwise she, too, would have heard him just now. “They don’t normally drum this late in the season,” she said to her granddaughters. “They—”

“Trust me, we are not making this up,” Charlotte said. “It sounds like there’s some guy up there and he’s trying to open a tin of Altoids with a machine gun.” The girl had two tiny hillocks starting to emerge on her chest. Not yet breasts and not visible in this particular nightgown. But they were evident in bathing suits and T-shirts. Her eyes
were the shape of perfectly symmetrical almonds, her nose was small, and her mouth was a luscious pucker at once waiflike and impudent. She lacked her mother’s paralyzingly sensual red hair, but her mane was thick and dark with natural hints of henna, and it fell on her shoulders like a cape. In a few years, Charlotte would be gorgeous, an absolute knockout. For the moment, however, she was in that murky world between childhood and serious adolescence. In one light she might pass for ten; in another she might be mistaken for fourteen.

“She didn’t say we were making anything up,” Willow murmured, and then she did exactly what her grandmother wanted most in the world that very moment: She reached over to her cousin from Manhattan and pulled the older girl’s nightgown down over her knee so that taut and tanned twelve-year-old thigh once again was decently covered.

“If I had a gun, I would have shot it,” Charlotte grumbled, widening her eyes as she spoke because she understood her remark was so gloriously inflammatory. But then—and here was that child—she still lacked the anarchic courage of a truly angry adolescent, and so she allowed herself a retraction of sorts. “Well, not it, of course. Dad would completely disown me if I ever did something like that. But maybe I would have shot near it. Scared it. Scared its beak off.”

“Do you know why a woodpecker might drum in July?” Nan asked them.

“Because it’s an idiot.”

“Charlotte—” Willow began, but her cousin cut her off.

“It is! Why do you think we have the expression birdbrain?”

The woman watched Willow’s round face carefully. The girl was two years younger than Charlotte, and she lived in northern Vermont—barely two hours from this house, actually. She had worried this whole month that Charlotte would (and the word had come to her the moment she had spoken to her own adult children that spring when they had begun planning the girls’ annual summer stay in New Hampshire) corrupt young Willow. So far that hadn’t happened, but she knew there was still plenty of time. She saw now that Willow was more hurt by Charlotte’s tone than impressed by her attitude. The girl was gazing down at her toenails, and the salmon-colored polish that she had layered on them the night before. Her feet were elegant and small. The soles were smooth, the skin was soft.

“It’s not likely the bird is stupid, Charlotte,” Nan said. “He’s either boasting of his responsibility for a second clutch of eggs or he’s lonely and still trying to find a mate.”

“I wish I spoke woodpecker, then. I’d tell him to go write a personal ad. It would be a lot quieter.”

“Have you seen the crow?” Willow asked her grandmother.

“Yes, why?”

“It’s so big. I never think of crows as big. But twice yesterday near the garden—by the apple trees—I saw it.”

Charlotte rolled her eyes. “It’s probably a raven then. Ravens are much huger. Right, Grandmother?”

“No, it is indeed a crow. There’s a family with a nest at the top of one of the white pines near the strawberry patch. Try an experiment later today, if you feel like it. Before we leave for the club, place a dime in the driveway near the trees. Maybe even tilt it on its side so it catches the sun. When we return, there’s a good chance the dime
will be gone.”

“Oh, good,” Charlotte said, and she smiled. “A woodpecker so dim he thinks bashing on the roof will get him a girlfriend and a crow who’s a petty thief. What nice birds you have, Grandmother.”

“He wants the dime because it’s shiny,” Nan said simply, as she carefully placed the wicker tray that held her coffee on the table beside the chaise and stood up. “Now, what would you two like for breakfast? I actually have some pancake batter in the refrigerator from yesterday and, of course, sausages—”

“Dad would freak if he knew how much meat you were trying to feed us,” Charlotte told her.

“Yes, your father probably would. You don’t have to eat it. But Willow and I still eat—”

“Dead things.”

“Yes, we do.”

Willow’s hair was the color of a sand dollar that has not yet been bleached by the sun. She looked up now, brushed her bangs away from her eyes, and said to her grandmother, “Maybe I’ll just have pancakes this morning, too, please.”

“What? No sausages?” Nan asked, unable to hide the surprise in her voice.

“No, thank you. Not today.”

“Hallelujah,” Charlotte said happily, and then she climbed off the chair and ran up the stairs to get dressed. The dog lifted his head, the vibrations from the human on the stairs causing his spot on the porch to shudder beneath his snout. Willow paused for a moment, and it seemed to her grandmother that there was something more she wanted to say. But then she stood, too, shrugged her shoulders and raced up the steps after her cousin.

As she dropped the pancake batter—after nearly twenty-four hours in the refrigerator, it was thicker than pudding—onto the electric skillet, the phone rang. Nan Seton had never bothered to purchase a cordless phone, and so she made a mental note as she scooted in her slippers across the long kitchen to keep the call brief: She did not want the pancakes—which, because the batter was substantial and heavy, reminded her of small loofah sponges on the griddle—to wind up looking like charcoal briquettes.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Nan. It’s Marguerite.”

“I’m making the girls breakfast.”

“Oh, I’ll just be a minute. Do you remember how you noticed at the club yesterday that Walter Durnip’s color wasn’t very good?”

“Vaguely. He looked a little gray.”

“He did, he did. Well, he died.”

She sat on the wooden stool by the phone, and nodded to herself. “How?”

“In his sleep.”

“That’s how I want to go. What was it? A heart attack? A stroke?”

“I don’t know. But when he went to bed, he didn’t say anything to Elizabeth about how he felt. He just went to sleep, and when Elizabeth woke up this morning she knew
right away he was dead.”
“He was eighty-four, wasn’t he?”
“Something like that.”
“He wasn’t even ill.”
“At least not visibly.”
“Oh, we would have known if Walter was ill. He wasn’t particularly stoic.”
Nan heard her friend laugh, but she hadn’t meant this as a joke. It was, in her mind, a simple reiteration of an obvious fact: Walter Durnip was a man, and men were notoriously unwilling to keep pain to themselves—which was where, more times than not, it belonged. As a general rule, old people who talked about their ailments made Nan Seton uncomfortable. Too much... body.
“Elizabeth doesn’t know for sure when she’s going to have the funeral yet, but it will probably be the day after tomorrow. Saturday.”
“Saturday? Too bad. Oh, well. At least by then I’ll have a houseful, so the girls won’t have to go. John and Catherine arrive tomorrow,” she said, referring not to a husband and a wife but to her son and her daughter. Nan knew from years of conversations exactly like this one with her friend Marguerite that she did not need to explain that when she said Catherine she meant Catherine and her husband, Spencer, and when she said John she meant John, his wife, Sara, and—now—their infant son, Patrick.
“How long are they staying?”
“Catherine and Spencer are both taking next week off. Isn’t that nice? They’ll be here for nine days—”
“And John and Sara are bringing the baby, right?”
“Of course.”
“You will have a houseful.”
“John and Sara will only be here for the weekend. Till Monday morning. Still, it will be good fun. I’m sure the girls miss their parents. The only hard part is going to be dinner because Spencer is just so difficult.”
“Being a vegetarian is no big deal, Nan. Lots of people are!”
“There are degrees. And most people don’t obsess about it the way he does or lecture their dinner companions the way he does. Soy milk. Soy hot dogs on the grill. Tofu. Yuck. It just makes things so complicated because I never know what to buy.”
“Make him cook!”
“He does. Sometimes that’s worse. Everything always seems to have lentils in it.”
Upstairs in the bedroom above the dining room she heard a colossal thud and then she heard the girls laughing hysterically. Charlotte, she knew from experience, always woke up in a foul mood but tended to cheer up as the morning progressed. By lunchtime, she would be charming. Willow, on the other hand, seemed to grow tired as the day wore on and if she was going to be cranky (and it was generally rare for the younger cousin to grow irritable) it was likely to be at the very end of the day. Late afternoon, just before dinner. After they had returned from the club, where she had the children in a regimen of swimming, tennis, golf, and junior bridge lessons.
“How is Elizabeth doing?” Nan asked, referring back to her and Marguerite’s mutual friend, a woman who—like her and Marguerite—was now a widow.
“Oh, I believe she’s fine,” Marguerite told her, her voice as light as a dandelion
puffball in May.

“Good. Walter was a lot of work, wasn’t he?”

“A lot of work,” Marguerite agreed.

Across the kitchen, the deep black circles around the outer edges of the loofah sponge pancakes were spreading into the centers, and the acrid smell of badly burned batter was starting to waft through the house. Quickly Nan said good-bye and hung up. She flipped the pancakes, telling herself that if she scraped the creosote-like sludge off the bottom and served each one with the undercooked side up the girls would never know the difference. She didn’t believe this for a second, but she wasn’t about to waste all that good leftover batter.

While the girls were picking apart their grandmother’s pancakes with their forks—each curious in her own way as to exactly how the edges of the pancakes could appear charbroiled while the insides were the consistency of mayonnaise—Charlotte’s father, Spencer, was standing before 150 executives and middle managers from the American Association of Meat Substitutes in the Ticonderoga Room in a conference center in Westchester County. The Ticonderoga Room was the largest of a series of meeting rooms in this wing of the building, all of which seemed to have been named after regional Revolutionary War landmarks (the Saratoga, the Delaware, the Yorktown Heights), though Spencer had yet to see anything anywhere in the conference center that in the slightest way reflected a colonial motif. Not so much as a bellhop in knickers and a tricornered hat, or a plugged-up wrought-iron cannon and hitching post along the exteriors.

Spencer was asked to speak here this morning both to provide the group with some light breakfast entertainment and to inspire them in their ongoing efforts to garner more (and more) refrigerator and freezer case space in the nation’s mainstream supermarkets for their garden burgers and faux sausages, their Fakin Bacon and Foney Baloney, their ground round made from seaweed and soy protein.

In today’s speech, before he got to his routine slides of the slaughterhouse in North Carolina that sent thirty-two thousand desperately frightened, squealing hogs to their death every single day (many of them dunked by mistake in vats of scalding water while still half-alive), he played a television commercial on the room’s three large TV monitors. The ad was for a more individualized torture chamber called the Microwave Home Lobster Steamer. He chose this particular commercial to warm up the crowd—get them good and indignant before they had even finished their bagels and muffins and vegan granola—because this morning he was beginning his speech with his own restaurant experiences when he was nineteen, his very first summer in Sugar Hill. He guessed he was choosing this part of his life because he and Catherine would be flying to New Hampshire tomorrow for their annual summer vacation.

He had already told the crowd of the restaurant’s snappish dying lobsters, those behemoth earwigs on steroids, and then of the busloads of senior citizens in their thin plastic bibs who came to the Steer by the Shore to devour them. They would come for dinner after gazing upon the craggy visage of the Old Man of the Mountain in nearby Franconia Notch—a curmudgeon who had since slid down the side of the cliff—
someone inevitably observing that the natural granite bust indeed had a certain Daniel Webster–like resemblance from the side but from the front looked like nothing more than an outcropping of shale and rock.

“No one could cleaver a live lobster as quickly as I could,” he said now, segueing from his well-practiced Alcoholics Anonymous Twelve-Step confessional tone into what he considered his Baptist preacher’s crescendo. “That’s not hyperbole, that’s not immodesty. That’s fact. I could kill two in a minute. One night I killed sixty-four in half an hour and change—enough for the whole bus! That evening every single man and woman on the tour ordered the restaurant’s signature meal, the baked stuffed one-and-one-quarter-pound Maine lobster, and—honest to God, I am not exaggerating—I might have split even more if the restaurant’s ovens had been larger, because there were three buddies from Texas on that sightseeing jaunt with their wives, and each of them volunteered his belief that the only thing better than twenty ounces of baked stuffed Maine lobster . . . was forty!”

The audience laughed with him, appalled, and he shook his head now, suggesting that in hindsight he couldn’t believe what he had done. And, the truth was, he couldn’t. He remembered those evenings well, especially the nights when there would be those sightseeing tours. As soon as the bus would coast into the dirt-and-gravel parking lot, he would retrieve the wooden coop with the torpid crustaceans from the walk-in refrigerator so that the creatures were right there beside him on the floor. Then, like an automaton, he would bend over and grab one from the container that reeked of low tide and pin the writhing, asphyxiating decapod (five pairs of appendages on the thorax, a word he’d found in the entry on lobsters in the dusty encyclopedia from the Coolidge administration he’d discovered in a spare bedroom in Catherine’s mother’s house) on its back. He would uncoil the springy ribbon of tail and hold down the bulbous crusher claw with his fingers for the split second it took him to line up the cleaver on the lobster’s carapace (an unbuttoned sports jacket, he thought at the time) so that the animal’s abdomen was exposed. Then he would press the metal blade straight down as it breathed.

But not, alas, breathed its last.

The point was to get the creature into the 450-degree oven while it was still alive.

And—whether he was cooking five or six lobsters on a given night or five or six dozen—after he had sliced the animal lengthwise down to the exoskeleton, he would pack the open cavity with rouxlke gobs of Ritz cracker crumbs and margarine, sprinkle paprika on the stuffing, and slide him off the cutting board and onto a baking sheet. Rarely did the animal have an aluminum leaf to itself, usually it would be one of three or four lobsters pressed together, the claws of one beside the tail of another, Y to Y to Y. Then he would deposit the creatures into the oven on whichever rack was not at that moment occupied by swirls of sole (wrapped around ice-cream-scoop dollops of the same Ritz cracker crumb and margarine paste), slabs of bluefish, or chicken breasts buried beneath bubbling puddles of tomato sauce.

“The animal would cook for ten to twelve minutes. I presumed it finished dying within the very first, but that probably wasn’t the case,” he said, his voice softening both for effect and because he knew this was true and it disturbed him.

First it’s the whales, then it’s the dolphins. Next it will be the tuna. It’ll never stop, you know, until someone’s protecting the bloody lobsters! The words of a whaler—an
otherwise charismatic old bird with a furrowed, hard-bitten face—spoken to Spencer the year before last at a gathering of the International Whaling Commission he’d attended in Japan. He remembered their discussion now, as he did often when he talked about lobsters. Well, yes, he’d told the whaler. *That’s exactly the point.*

In addition to being Lobster Boy—Spencer’s title was actually second chef, but the grown men who were waiters all called him Lobster Boy—he also prepared the sole and the bluefish and the chicken Parmesan at the restaurant. The first chef, a burly guy who’d cooked on an aircraft carrier before enrolling in culinary school when he was done with the navy, worked behind a grill the length of a shuffleboard court in the dining room itself, searing the steaks and the chops before any customers who wanted to watch.

When Spencer would return to his girlfriend’s mother’s house, he knew he was sweaty from his hours beside the hot ovens and from his exertions—he moved quickly and he always pressed the cleaver down hard, convinced even then that it hurt the animal less if the evisceration was fast—but he knew he smelled mostly of fish. Consequently, in late June and July and early August, when the nights were still warm, he kept a bathing suit in the car and sometimes he would detour to Echo Lake before going home. There he would dive into the water and swim along the surface until he felt free of the smell of dead lobsters and sole, and the skin on his fingers no longer had an oily film from the bluefish.

He never went skinny-dipping, even though it was dark and he was alone, because he knew the lake was filled with crayfish, and he felt awfully vulnerable among them when he was naked. Most weren’t even as big as his thumb and he didn’t believe they would try to exact revenge for the way he slaughtered so many of their saltwater genus kin, but the idea had crossed his mind and so he always wore a suit—just in case.

He didn’t tell his audience this part of his story. But even at the podium he recalled those swims vividly.

“I must admit, at nineteen I took no small amount of pride in my abilities as second chef, and I understood that Lobster Boy was a compliment of sorts,” he continued. “No one killed lobsters with my supernatural speed, and speed mattered greatly to the waiters—and, yes, to the diners—at the Steer by the Shore.”

The fact was that Spencer took pride in most of what he did, even then, whether it was cranking out a five-page essay on Gogol at the last minute—usually between 6 a.m. and the start of class at 9:10—playing pickup basketball at the gym his first spring semester, or butchering live lobsters in the summer that followed. He knew he was intolerant of ineptitude, and he understood that as he grew further into adulthood he would be the sort of person who was easily annoyed by incompetence. He sensed this both because he was impatient and because he viewed his impatience as a virtue. Serene people annoyed him.

“At the end of the summer,” he said, lowering his voice once more as he prepared to build toward the particular moment in his life that marked the turning point for the sinner—the carnivore!—that he knew he once was, “I took the bus from New Hampshire to the Port Authority in Manhattan. I lugged my suitcase across town to Grand Central in sweltering, Bombay-like late August heat. At nineteen, it never crossed my mind to take a cab, and the only subways I could find then were those that followed the island’s avenues north and south. I met my father at the platform where
the 5:57 to Scarsdale was waiting.”

By design Spencer did not add that once he and his father had boarded the train, he asked to see pictures of the new house. While Spencer had been having sex with his girlfriend in northern New Hampshire and scuppering lobsters, his parents had decided to move. Again.

“That night at dinner”—in, alas, an unfamiliar dining room in an unfamiliar house—“I realized that something had changed. The lamb—an animal nothing at all like a lobster, I know—made me gag. There I was with my parents and my sister and a serving plate layered with skewers of shish kabob, and I thought I was going to be ill. Really and truly ill. And I knew—I knew!—at precisely that instant that never again was I going to yearn for meat or poultry or fish and that I would always find the slick, rubbery touch of bologna revolting. I might never have nightmares about lobsters, but nor would I ever again dream of meat.”

With his thumb he flipped the small button on the remote in his right hand that dimmed the room’s overhead lights and then the second one that controlled his PowerPoint presentation slides, and instantly the FERAL logo—an image of lions and tigers and bears and cows and chickens and dogs and goldfish and cats and (at Spencer’s insistence) lobsters planted on a grid on a lentil-shaped oval that FERAL’s critics insisted was a subliminal hand grenade—filled the screen.

THAT NIGHT IN NEW HAMPSHIRE, the last night when the house would still have in it only the dog, the cousins, and the girls’ grandmother, the deer discovered the massive vegetable garden in the sprawling meadow beside Nan Seton’s long and meandering gravel driveway. There were three animals, a pair of does and a yearling, and they smelled the radishes—which they wouldn’t eat, but which they understood often seemed to coexist with so many of the plants that they would: the leafy oakleaf and Bibb lettuce that was just starting to go to seed, the lush, sprawling spinach rosettes, and the snow peas and the string beans and the purple vein-laden greens that towered above the golf ball–sized beets.

The animals had their summer fur, a rosy, almost reddish tan. They wandered silently through the broad, sweeping fields of lupine on which they would never dine, moving so quietly that the dog in the nearby house neither stirred nor lifted his aged snout. The next morning there would be tracks—twin mollusk shells pressed into the earth—at the edge of the garden and in some of the rows, but the girls and their grandmother would not notice them when they wandered out to weed and water the plants. This was the first time in a generation and a half that there had been a vegetable garden beside this house, and while Willow’s parents might have detected the deer prints and recognized them—John Seton, after all, had lived in Vermont most of his adult life, and his wife, Sara, had been there since birth—Willow herself did not. Nor did her cousin from Manhattan’s Upper West Side or their grandmother, who lived across that city’s vast ecosystem of a park from young Charlotte. After all, Nan only spent the summer and early autumn at this ancestral homestead surrounded by fields of lupine and—far enough down the hill that it didn’t obstruct the house’s views of the White Mountains to the east and the south—a small forest of sugar maples and pine.
Nor did anyone notice the way the whitetails had browsed the lower branches and twigs of the apple trees that separated the vegetable garden from the driveway or the scat that one of the creatures had left near the mounds from which had sprung the first tubular sprouts and broad leaves of the zucchini and squash.

They noticed instead the more obvious signs that the deer had visited: The leaves on many of the plants the girls’ parents had placed into the ground with such care as seedlings or seeds over Memorial Day Weekend were gnawed or nibbled or gone, and a part of one of the rows of corn—finally knee high—had been knocked over. Stepped on. Crushed.

When the girls and their grandmother discovered the damage in the morning, it crossed all of their minds that when the middle generation arrived that afternoon—their idiosyncrasies and their hopes as clear on their faces as their receding hairlines and their adult-tired eyes—there would be discussion and there would be debate. There might even be action. Certainly Spencer, the catalyst behind the vegetable plot, would want to do something. But they all knew on some level that despite the exertions and proclamations of that energetic middle generation, there really was nothing they could do to prevent the deer from feasting on what was left of the garden.