

Mary Helen Specht

House of Guns

—for Joshua

JUSTIN HADN'T PLANNED ON COMING BACK to Texas for Christmas. He only flew home from Boston, where he was attending graduate school, because his mother was stirring things up. Threatening to put his grandmother into a Home. Threatening ridiculousness.

His grandmother had just turned seventy. She lived in the guesthouse—he called it the House of Guns—with its wraparound porch from which, on one side, you could see the corral and the hayfield and, from the other, the entrance to the main ranch house twenty yards away, which was post-and-beam and looked like an enormous log cabin. In a reversal of the houses' given names, Justin and his grandmother were the only ones sleeping in the guesthouse, while all the actual guests were staying in the main house with Justin's mother and her new husband Paul.

Justin sat on the hayfield-facing porch in one of the seven rocking chairs lined up in a row, smoking a cigarette and waiting for his grandmother. The wrist of his smoking hand was wrapped in the multi-colored rubber bands he used to secure his architectural drawings into rolls. Slumped with his legs crossed and his cigarette pinched between two fingers, Justin was going for the look of listless entitlement. He had high cheekbones his mother called *imperial*.

When his grandmother finally appeared, she was wearing red silk pajamas and a ratty ankle-length fur in honor of Christmas dinner. She yelled at him, unprovoked, "When you get to be my age you can wear whatever the hell you like." But she was not angry. She sat down beside him and ran her fingers through the matted fur of her coat—a wolf with mange. It was becoming hard for him to remember a time when she hadn't been like this—many years ago—when she hadn't been going crazy. Justin tried to see the Hole through the back of his grandmother's head. Was it beneath one of the springy white curls, he wondered? Was it much bigger than the Hole in his own head?

"In the newspaper, the mayor called for all city fountains to be turned on. Real pretty. They're real pretty."

"What fountains? Where?" he asked, taking her papery hand between his own and looking across the pasture as if he might find marble spigots sprouting from the Frog Pond. This was how conversation went with his grandmother who spoke with her head tilted, clip-on pearl earrings weighing down her thin, leaf-like earlobes.

"Not here, boy. In Boston. Where I live," she said, as if she were always

having to repeat herself.

"What do you do there?"

"I go to Haymarket for the clams, and I squeeze hot sauce and a quarter of a lemon on each one, and they are still briny, having only been snatched from the sea hours before, maybe even minutes."

She was quoting from the letters he'd sent from graduate school, adding a bit of herself here and there until he could no longer remember how it really went. When he'd lived here at the ranch in high school, they did this all the time. They sat on this porch, and she told pieces of stories, things all mixed up, her life and her husband's and her children's all running together, swirling like a snail shell into one continuous spiral. Now it was usually his life that became the stuffing to make up her own.

Once she'd told him, and he wasn't sure where she got it, that the worst part of growing older was this: people passed away until there wasn't anyone left to be proud of you. She was dying, and he was starting to understand what she meant.

"My next assignment is to design something for underground," he said, flicking his cigarette onto the gravel surrounding the porch like a moat, turning his gold-flecked eyes on his grandmother. "I've drawn spaces in the shape of large cylinders, like grain silos turned on their sides, and there will be a strip of glass running along each one at the top, at the ground surface. Above: tulips everywhere."

"Underground the tunnels make your mucus black with steel dust, and bits of mica surround you like false stars. There are a dozen men in a row swinging sledgehammers in discord with one another, and the sparks run red to yellow," she said, and Justin was amazed she hadn't missed a beat. She'd forgotten so much, but not any of this. "Take a yellow canary with you. It probably won't be of much help, but it won't hurt, either."

This tendency to quote from letters, letters she'd revised and improved on over the years, made her sound like a bad television actor whose lines were too perfect, too flatly delivered to be real. The allusion to the tunnels came from a man she'd fallen for before marrying his grandfather, during a trip she'd made to New York City with her family. The lover was a subway track worker who wrote her letters for years until one day he didn't. His grandmother wouldn't respond if asked directly about the past; she didn't see it in that way anymore, as a series of events that had happened to her. She could only find it indirectly, by association.

She suddenly remembered her glasses, told him she was blind as a bat without her glasses, could he please go fetch them for her. He left her rocking on the porch and walked inside the guesthouse, straightening the corduroy jacket it had been too cold to wear in Boston, and found them perched on the nightstand in her room. They were vanity glasses from the fifties, black with white rhinestones; his grandmother could see perfectly fine.

He retraced his steps down the narrow hallway and back into the living room with its limestone fireplace and various taxidermied animal trophies. While the main house dated from the early 1800s, the guesthouse had only been added after his grandfather bought the ranch in 1938. On Justin's right, as he headed for the door to the porch, was a bookshelf built into and covering an entire wall. A section of it, however, was actually a camouflaged door that opened onto a tiny room filled with rifles and pistols lined up like infantry—it was the reason he called the guesthouse the House of Guns. As a child, he wasn't allowed inside, although he knew it was there because the hallway was longer than it should have been, and so he'd imagined a place with books of spells and beakers and wide-eyed animals suspended in jars. When college applications asked for an essay about a personal rite of passage, he'd written about the time his grandfather first showed him what was actually inside the hidden room. He was twelve and finally old enough to be taken along on hunting trips. His grandfather, lean muscled with thick white hair, had held onto his shoulders, smiling proudly as Justin stared gaping at the room. But it wasn't the guns, although Justin did eventually become a proficient hunter, it was the place itself, its mystery made manifest. That was when he first became interested in buildings and the secrets they held within them. And later Brutalism: A style inspired by High Modernist architecture that, when he found it, he recognized as the embodiment of his entire life thus far. The Robin Hood Gardens, an enormous East London housing complex with aerial walkways encased in long slab blocks. La Tourette Monastery in Lyons with its concrete stilts, undulating thick and thin, supporting an upper-story covered with tiny grid-like windows that cantilevers over a grassy slope. Buildings that were incongruous, that mirrored their guts externally, that were stronger than you were and made you feel every corner and contour as they butted up hard against space, against flesh, willing you to press your body flat along their blank slates of steel and poured concrete and glass.

Justin let the screen door of the guesthouse slam behind him and handed his grandmother her glasses. Time to go to the main house, he told her. She stepped regally onto the stone path, a Carousel pony in bedroom slippers, and they walked holding hands, fingers entwining like new lovers.

It had been almost a year since Justin found out that latent within his own brain was the same disease destroying his grandmother. He ate fish practically every day and drank large glasses of Pomegranate juice, but the doctors said it was still there, tangling and complicating itself with more neurotendrils, a word he invented that made him think of the ivy blotting out the windows of the buildings back at Harvard. Maybe he should stop drinking, they said. And smoking cigarettes. He was twenty-six and did not consider these steps necessary. After all, his grandmother might be crazy, but, watching her in the silk pajamas and fur, he thought, at least she hasn't lost her sense of fashion.

Justin had been diagnosed with what he called the Hole at Mass General

after several non-alcohol-induced blackouts. After receiving the results from the CT scan, the one that confirmed what the doctors already suspected, Justin went to a bar, drank a bottle of wine, and tried to drive somewhere, anywhere. He wasn't hammered, but still he pulled out of the parallel parking space and smashed directly into the front bumper of a car. Standing on the edge of a children's plastic playground, Justin handed his driver's license and insurance to the stranger named Abdul and began to sob. As he did so, Abdul became uncomfortable, repeating, *Don't cry, Mister. It is done.* And Justin later thought to him

self: but that's what all grief is—sorrow for what we can't change. Most days he didn't think about it, not really; it would only be giving more of his life to the Hole and that he would not stand.

The Hole did not strike suddenly, was not an instant killer; his grandmother had in fact lived to be an old woman. The Hole usually came on slowly: it stamped out the mind first and, through the mind, the body. But "stamped out" was probably the wrong phrase; it changed the mind, uprooting it and planting it into a new pattern, like crop circles that could only be deciphered from above. One couldn't predict the part of the brain it would affect first, but once it arrived at the brain stem, destroying critical functions of breathing and digestion, the end was swift. In his grandmother, it had mostly transformed her memory and cognitive function—as well as freakishly improving her vision—but she was now beginning to lose muscle control. His family was one of twenty in North America to have been diagnosed with this particular Hole. They were lucky that way.

As they reached the main house, his grandmother threw open the screen door and practically screamed, "I am dying. I am starving to fucking death here."

"I saw that nurse at the hospital today," his mother said, ignoring her, not turning from the counter where she was glazing sweet potatoes. "The one who used to be in that band with you." The walls of the kitchen were covered with retro-style posters of 1950s canned goods: Strickley's green beans and Campbell's tomato soup.

"Christ, Mom. We were never in a band together," he said, sitting astride a turquoise-painted chair, forearms draped across the chair back.

"But that's what she always says."

"Yeah, well, she talks a mean band," he said, watching his grandmother gnaw on the flesh of a Kalamata olive and spit the seed into the pot of garlic mashed potatoes heating on the old stove with its bleach-white edges rounded like a spaceship. Justin smiled at her. "We went out a few times, that's all." He felt no need to admit anything more.

"That doesn't mean you weren't in a band together," replied his mother, tying her bottle-blond hair up into a handkerchief.

"As usual, you don't know what you're talking about," he said. The girl

under discussion, now a woman and one of his grandmother's nurses, was Valentina Valentine. She had lived on a neighboring ranch and the two of them used to drive to a fruit stand outside of Pecos and buy melons that made their fingers and mouths so sticky they were forced to lick each other clean. If they'd married, he wouldn't have let her change her name, maybe even would have taken it, but she eventually left him for a man who wore baby blue V-neck sweaters. He had no idea where Valentina got this band shit.

"She's still not married, you know. No ring."

"Don't *even*," he said, his voice suddenly low. "Do you think I'm that stupid?" Justin told his mother she couldn't manipulate him, that he wasn't going to drop out of school and move back to the ranch just because she dangled an available ex-screw in front of his face. He'd been gearing up for this confrontation ever since the phone call he received two weeks earlier at his Cambridge apartment; the conversation had boiled down to this: his mother said she could no longer handle being the sole caretaker of his grandmother, it had become too much. The phrase *nursing home* was tossed like a grenade.

"I don't care what you decide. But I'm not doing this alone anymore," she said, continuing to stirfry the green beans, tossing them lightly in the pan, her voice steady, as if she were discussing the gravy. Ever since he was diagnosed with the Hole, his mother had absorbed Justin's anger, his outbursts, without flinching or shifting expression, as if they were something to be endured rather than answered. "It's like I'm a little girl all over again, being yelled at by her for everything, only this time around she really is nuts." His mother's face was red and splotchy from the stovetop heat, and Justin did feel bad for her. But he felt worse for himself and for his grandmother and for how much of life was out of his control. The Hole had skipped his mother, like a stone skimming along the surface of the pond, and so what did she know about anything?

"Alone? What about Paul? Doesn't he help you?" he asked, propping his chin on his forearms, feeling the lines of the corduroy on his neck. His mother's new husband had recently moved out to live with her at the ranch. She told Justin his grandmother was not Paul's responsibility, and when he said, "And she is mine?" his mother answered: that was up to him.

"Help or Home. That's what it comes down to," she said. "You will come back to help me or I'll find a place that will."

Justin retreated to what he referred to as the Vomit Bathroom, not because he'd ever vomited there, although it was possible, but because it was brimming with sheaths of lace and hokey sayings embroidered in pink—*No Thieving or Loose Women*—and country kitsch: wooden cows and miniature butter churners and crap like that. Sitting on the edge of the claw-foot tub, his thin frame crumpled. He knew he was acting like a child, that he should be out there helping prepare dinner, but the argument aside, this domestic side

of his mother that only emerged around holidays disturbed him. Because while this was where he stayed when he came home to Texas, his childhood had been spent in Houston eating Chinese take-out in a brick bungalow filled with the detritus of his mother's projects: heaps of antique doorknobs, jagged pieces of stained glass, chicken wire left over from the sculpture of an anatomically correct male angel. Back then he had also been one of his mother's projects. But ever since they'd moved here to Fayetteville County, there'd been a distance between them, maybe from the strain of nursing her own mother or maybe not. Maybe it was just what happened when a son grew up.

They had moved out here when he was in high school, after his grandfather died, to take care of his already deteriorating grandmother. Justin had refused to attend school in the middle of nowhere; he finished his last year by taking correspondence classes through the mail. He got used to being pretty much alone, just him and his grandmother rocking back and forth in the chairs on the porch of the House of Guns. On the weekends sometimes, Valentina Valentine rode her father's tractor over to see him, floral skirts flapping around her knees, and they would lie in the fields and talk about turning the ranch into an artist colony, about letting the cows wander wherever they wanted, into the houses and barns, saving them from slaughter. These days, however, that was exactly the part of ranching he liked to watch—the butchery; he was becoming accustomed to the idea of death.

From inside the Vomit Bathroom, Justin heard the rest of the Christmas guests return, boots stomping and voices shrill, from the tour Paul had been conducting of the little vineyard and the watering tank and Krebb's cemetery across the Farm-to-Market road. He might even have driven them to the general store, which sold everything from condoms to beef jerky while also serving as post office and polling place. He would tell them that back when the Democrats ruled the rural vote, in the primaries Republicans had to vote outside the store, out back with the manure. It was obvious Paul enjoyed playing host; he shuttled people back and forth, made dramatic displays, filled up the room with his gregariousness, his loud voice and melodramatic gestures. He felt right at home.

His mother had been too busy preparing bedrooms and food to pick Justin up from the airport in Houston when he'd arrived the day before—"and it's not as if I can leave your grandmother home alone"—and so Paul came in Justin's mother's faded blue pickup and honked the horn once without getting out.

The two of them were silent most of the drive until they turned off the Interstate and Paul asked if Justin wanted to use the barn for studio space while he was home. "I've got it set up as my woodworking shop right now, but I'll be too busy the next couple few weeks to get anything done out there. It's all yours if you want it."

Back when Paul began dating his mother, he was always giving Justin things: a 35mm camera, a cellular phone. But what pissed Justin off, besides the flagrant brown nosing, was that Paul's gifts were all leftovers, hand-me-downs. He would buy himself a new camera and give Justin his old one: Congratulations on your acceptance to Harvard! Here's an old gadget I don't need anymore! And now, thought Justin, Paul was trying to offer him space in his own family's barn? Unbelievable. "That barn is haunted," he said.

"So I've heard," Paul replied. "You don't actually believe that bull honky?"

"It has nothing to do with what I believe," Justin said cryptically, his hand pressed against the dashboard to steady him as they flew down the unpaved road, "It has to do with the way things are."

This year they had a full house for Christmas. His mother's only brother, Uncle Charlie, was there with his family: Aunt Audrey, thin-lipped and bird-boned and quiet, and their two dirt-smearred sons who ran around the house like crazed pinballs knocking everything over. Uncle Charlie worked construction, a real man's man.

And this was the first holiday Paul had invited his own family to come to the ranch as well. Paul's sister Susan, an interior decorator, had married into money—Don was in the oil business—and they had a son Matthew, who was in high school and who folded his arms across his chest, perpetually annoyed. Justin wasn't used to such din and racket; he was used to having his mother and his grandmother to himself.

At dinner he pretended to be a gentleman, constantly reaching over platters of goose and sweet potatoes and collard greens to refill wine glasses as an excuse to top off his own. His mother talked throughout the meal about everything imaginable, especially about how great it all was, trying in vain to make up for the situation, to lubricate this new family dynamic. *Perfect, absolutely perfect*, she said of the new Arabian stallion brought from Houston, of the catfish Justin had fried up the night before, of the sky and the weather. Perfect.

"Justin is going underground," his grandmother announced to the table. Her eyebrows rose conspiratorially as she brandished her goblet of apple juice in the air. "He has taken a job with the subway."

"Do him some good," said Uncle Charlie, whose way of dealing with his mother's health was to pretend as if nothing were wrong with her. "Manual labor is better for depression than any drug on the market."

"Justin is *not* working for the subway. He's still at Harvard," his mother said, always looking for a chance to slip that in, and at that moment Justin realized even though she'd asked him to drop out, she knew he wouldn't; she didn't really expect him to. She probably figured it would relieve her from being 'the heavy' if putting his grandmother into a Home was partially

his decision too. "And just because someone doesn't have your *sensibility*, Charlie, doesn't mean they're depressed."

"Don't go taking my words out of context, now. I was just making a general statement about hard work, wasn't I, hon?" he said, turning to his wife, who proceeded to flip his bolo tie over his shoulder to keep it out of the sauce.

His mother mentioned that one of Justin's professors had recently been profiled in the *The New Yorker*, probably hoping this would prod Justin into discussing what he was doing in Studio. But Justin avoided talking about his work in graduate school, avoided expounding on his newfound conviction that Brutalist architecture—making a virtue of the construction process; leaving the structural and service elements exposed—was not dead. Not everyone called it dead but most did, especially those who did not live within walking distance of the Carpenter Center, the only Le Corbusier in America, situated on the edge of the campus like a spiraling concrete rabbit hole. Justin's theory was if you gave it time, let the landscape grow lush around such buildings, twisting and unfurling over the steel and concrete, it would work. But he didn't feel like talking about this even though his mother always loved to listen to these theories, in part because she didn't understand them, or maybe understood they were silly, but not to him. He didn't feel like hearing Uncle Charlie call him "art damaged" or an "ineffectual intellectual," which was more or less the opposite of what his uncle meant when he called somebody a "straight shooter."

"And I said to her, I don't like lemons in my beer, in my water, in my goddamn lemonade," his uncle was telling the table, something about an argument with Aunt Audrey, who didn't seem to be listening but rather concentrating on slicing her sons' meat into pieces small enough for a sparrow. Justin's mother smiled at her newly minted husband as if to say, only one more day, endure them for one more day, and we will be alone again with the dogwoods and deer, just the two of us—and a crazy old woman wearing red silk pajamas and a fur coat.

"To the Chinese, the lemon is a symbol of death," Justin told his uncle, ignoring the private look between his mother and Paul, which should have been a look exchanged between his mother and him. It was *his* ranch, not theirs. His dogwood and his deer and his grandmother and his Hole.

"Key lime pie is not my favorite pie, but it is my favorite name for a pie," his grandmother said. It was the lemon, thought Justin. The lemon made her think of lime.

The more Justin drank, the more contemptuous he became of the family strangers, as he called them, these people who were crowding the dining room and eating with their mouths open. He passed food down the table when asked, his long fingers splayed out beneath platters of green beans with almond slivers, onion casserole, buttermilk biscuits, but the entire meal

disgusted him, so much death and gluttony, scraping and masticating.

"This market ain't gonna last forever," Don, Paul's brother, was saying, his napkin tucked into his shirt like a bib. "Especially for big holdings like this. I'm just saying you should consider it."

"Will do. Will do," Paul said. "Although, the decision's not up to me, if you know what I mean." He nodded his head toward Justin's mother. And that's when Justin realized they were discussing the ranch. Paul, who had only been married to his mother for a year, was actually discussing selling the ranch as if he had any say at all.

Susan was simultaneously yapping his ear off about her son Matthew, about how smart he was, how well he would do in school if only he'd apply himself. "It's all baseball and rock concerts. I really wish I knew what to do with him," she said, fiddling with her gold bangle bracelets. "Maybe you could talk to him. Take him aside and let him know it's possible to be both smart and cool."

Justin got up to leave the table, picking up his china plate, stained purple from the cranberry sauce, holding it upright like some kung fu weapon. "But it *isn't* possible," he said. "I chose cool."

After washing dishes in the basin sink, scrubbing until his hands were red, Justin walked back to the House of Guns while most of the others ate desert in the parlor and got drunk. The sky was the still, empty cobalt of winter, almost grey along the horizon, and the rocking chairs on the porch, as if inhabited by ghosts, pitched forward and back with the wind. Paul was out in the pasture walking the Arabian in circles, ankle deep in dead brown grass.

Justin wanted a smoke, but he was out of papers. He found a Gideon Bible in the living room cupboard, God knows where it came from, and ripped out a page from Song of Solomon. He was reminded of a story he'd heard about one of his professors, about how he'd been in a Japanese POW camp with tobacco and nothing to roll it in but a pocket copy of Dante's *Inferno*, which he smoked page by page, but not before memorizing its every line. Justin supposed it was some sort of sacrilege to smoke the Bible. One of his friends back in Boston called him an aesthetic Catholic, which he considered to be mostly true. He loved the churches, the way they echoed the click clacking of high heels, the way they could be filled with sheaths of velvet and towering gold crosses and endless wooden pews and yet be so empty—all artifice. Like his saint medals, beautiful but helpless hanging against the bones of his chest. Unlike those who lose their faith and secretly pine for it the rest of their lives, Justin did not wish things different. Devotion stole minutes—thoughts and the minutes you used to think them. Thought-minutes he didn't have to spare.

His grandmother came down from the main house to sit with him on the porch as he smoked; she attempted to tuck her legs up under her like a young

girl, but her joints would have none of it. The two of them rocked back and forth in unison.

"Who gets the ranch? In your will?" he asked, not turning to look directly at her.

"There is a graveyard, you know, back beyond the grove of Pecan trees. I don't know who's buried there. Probably just dogs," she said. Justin had scoured every corner of this ranch as a youth and had never noticed a grave marker anywhere near there.

"Do they split it? Mom and Uncle Charlie? Please, try to focus for a minute. They want to sell the ranch. You can't let them. Do you understand what I'm saying?" he asked.

"Talk to Floyd in the morning. Talk to Floyd about it," she said, referring to her dead husband. She told Justin about how the ranch used to be the largest one for miles and how she was so proud to marry Floyd because she liked owning all the land she could possibly see in any direction. She told him how they'd eventually sold off some pieces to pay debts and how she didn't like the family who'd bought the largest share. "They were *real* Southerners, if you know what I mean. From Alabama. They do things differently there."

Justin dropped the issue of the will. He thought to himself, *just let it go, she can't help you anymore*. But he laughed at what she said about Alabamans. It was true Texas was not exactly the South, but when you were in New England it became close enough, and so he'd bonded with students from Tennessee and Mississippi as if their hometowns were right next door. Ironically, Justin had never seen wisteria bloom until his first spring in Cambridge, when he thought to himself, *so this is what Faulkner was talking about*. He believed home was the parts of your past you chose to keep. He wore a straw cowboy hat out to the bar when he was in the mood to get loaded, and people would say to him *Texans sure do know how to drink* and he would grin and think: just don't ask me how to two-step; I can do it, but like a twelve year-old dancing with his mother.

People in his design program were probably saying he was a drunk, the wild motherfucker in the Western shirt, which wasn't the whole truth although it certainly was part of it; part of him just hoped if he acted crazy, like a loose cannon, when he finally designed something good, they'd say it was brilliant. Maybe that was because, if he was going to fizzle out, and he was, it should be fast like a comet. Maybe he was no different than any other ambitious fuck. Maybe he didn't want to design buildings. Maybe he just wanted to be one. Yes! To be a building! A building that lasts. Except they never really did; they were just the illusion of permanence. But, sometimes, late at night, smoking a cigarette on the porch of the House of Guns, he thought that might be enough.

His grandmother began to doze off in the rocking chair; she looked briefly at him first, before letting her eyes close. This meant he should carry her to

bed, which he did, not because he was that strong but because she was that small, eighty-seven pounds. He had no use for people who did not live like this, like he and his grandmother lived, on unspoken understanding. He said loyalty and suspension of judgment were the two qualities he valued most in a friend; what he really meant was he needed someone who could sit beside him on the porch, on the stoop, when the whole craggy world was flooding unbearably in through the Hole in his head, and say nothing.

As he carried his grandmother in his arms—he could feel the padding of her adult diaper beneath the silk pajamas—through the living room with its exposed brick walls, its shelves lined with dozens of knickknacks and its animal pelt rugs, he thought about his friends in Boston: they would be crowding into Geoff's apartment about then, in their turtleneck ponchos and wool pants, wet boots lined up outside the door covered with the brown slush they'd had to trudge through.

Geoff, who had done his undergrad in anthropology and had an annoying habit of attracting women who were much better looking than he was, would be trying to convince everyone to play his old-school Civilizations board game, *I'll even let you be the Illyrians*. Stella, who was Belgian and in the landscape design program would be taking black and white photographs of everybody with her Yoshica. She liked to capture parts of people, body parts, a calf in stockings, a flexed tricep, a mouth saying "no." And Rachel, the spiky-haired woman whom Justin had been sleeping with on and off, would be watching everything, wondering what she was doing anywhere near a party where so many people were talking about the superstructure and the phantasmagoric and floating signifiers.

Of course, that's not all people talked about, even at Harvard Graduate School of Design parties. They were pretentious, sure, but there was still gossip, talk of the Red Sox and the weather, of being homesick. And then someone would ask, does that mean you'll move back when you're finished? And he would say nonchalantly: *no, probably not, nothing to go back to really. Maybe one day I'll buy some land out there. But not now. Definitely not yet.* Because the northeast had become something of an addiction; it made him feel as if he needed it, as if it had something, something he couldn't exactly put his finger on, but doubted he could live without. Justin was the ranch—a place where the Hole lurked around every corner—but he was also Harvard; he was also architecture; he also had his own life to lead.

After tucking in his grandmother and hanging her fur coat on a metal hanger in the accordion closet, he didn't go straight to bed but wandered through the house, turning off lights and closing curtains. When he and his mother first moved to the ranch, Justin had insisted on living in the House of Guns. Sometimes, when he was home visiting, he swore he heard tapping on the windows, heard Valentina Valentine tapping to get in, to come inside and make love on the animal pelts like they used to when he was seventeen

and felt all grown up. A boy with a man's house. He and Valentina never had much to say to each other, and Justin thought that was why he'd never entirely forgotten her. Rachel, back in Boston, was capricious and was always trying to tell him how she felt—he was emotionally abusive one day and the love of her life the next—as if she had no filter whatsoever. Valentina had never ruined it with words. Valentina understood what he had come to believe: words change nothing. But, then again, Valentina had also left him. Something Rachel never seemed quite able to do. Not that it really mattered one way or the other, he thought, because when he saw his future, he never imagined anyone by his side. Maybe it was melodramatic—so what?—but it was the ranch he imagined as his family when his family was gone.

Justin's grandmother had only moved to the House of Guns within the last few months when Paul decided it was too disturbing to open the bathroom door at night and find an old woman staring at him from an empty claw-foot bathtub. But Justin didn't think she was safe living in the House of Guns by herself, and he imagined this was intentional, another way his mother was pushing him to decide. Or maybe he was overreacting. It was strange how, in some ways, his grandmother was taking Justin's place; and in other ways, he would one day be taking hers.

Barefoot and walking gingerly across the living room floorboards, Justin jerked the lever behind Carlos Fuentes's *The Old Gringo* and pulled the bookcase toward him like a French door. Bordello, dungeon, lair: these were the words that always slipped into his head as splinters of light from the hallway half-heartedly illuminated the ground and rising dust particles of the secret vault, the brooding and threatening shadows. There was the smell of must mixed with metal: the smell of manhood. Every time he opened this door, he felt its power.

As his eyes adjusted to the dark, he reached above his head for the string leading to the light bulb. The room was the size of a large walk-in closet. Cedar walls lined with hunting equipment: camo jackets, orange vests and decoy turkeys. The guns were amazing. His grandfather had made a special freestanding shelf for them in the center of the room, and they were lined up in rows, all pointing 45 degrees upward toward the sky. There was a row of rifles, Remington 700s mostly with a couple of Browning A-bolts, and another row of pistols, all different, antique as well as more modern ones, that his grandfather had acquired at gun shows. Justin had rarely gone inside this room since his grandfather died, once to show Valentina, who hated it and had cocked her head as if she were somehow disappointed in him, and once to get a rifle so as to scare away coyotes that had been stalking the cattle at night. And once, earlier that day, to clean the guns. When he'd held one outright, aiming it at the door, his arms and hands shook like a Parkinson's patient, like they had never done before. In the year or so before his grandfather's death, they'd gone hunting every time Justin visited. His

mother said his grandfather was using any excuse to get out of the house and away from his ailing wife; the moment she'd stopped making sense was the moment his grandfather stopped listening. But when Justin went out with his grandfather—dove hunting, deer hunting—he had always been a steady shot. His arms definitely never shook like that. Had they?

Justin stood in front of the rack and picked up his favorite—the lightest of the rifles with delicate silver engraving—and remembered one night a few months before he'd moved away from the ranch for college. His grandmother had been with him in the House of Guns babbling half-nonsense from the couch, and he went to help her to bed. They padded silently through the living room, Justin's arm circling her waist as she leaned heavily against him, and his grandmother stopped him right there in front of the bookshelf, pointing at it with a persistent finger, pointing, he thought, to the cache of guns behind the bookshelf. They stood there for a while, her body tensed in rebellion against him, until finally he shook his head definitively and she went slack, defeated. Let him take her to bed. He'd felt a strange surge of power. And shame at feeling that power. But his grandmother had done something he'd since sworn not to do—waited too long. She had waited to do it until she needed someone else's help.

That night Justin dreamed he was in the Smithsons' famous House of the Future surrounded by its Jetsons-like plastic furniture; he was lying in the middle of the floor, which was actually the ground since the house was built around a garden, looking up at the ceiling as it curved away from him. Like footage from a time-lapse camera, tree branches steadily grew until they were stymied by the walls and the ceiling, forced to bend their way back downward, brushing up against him, wrapping and suffocating him. He was being freed from the need to breathe.

In the morning, after polishing his boots in the bathroom, Justin knocked on the door to his grandmother's bedroom. Again and again, until finally he said, "Okay, I'm coming in." She wasn't there. Her red silk pajamas were folded neatly at the end of the bed. He yelled for her, walking toward the closed bathroom door, but nothing. He stood for a moment before opening it, images lit up behind his eyes: her slight, wrinkled body collapsed in the tub, on the floor, the Hole having swallowed her whole. But when he finally pushed open the door, there was nobody in the tub or on the floor. She had simply disappeared.

As Justin walked out onto the porch of the House of Guns, he could see his mother standing at the screen door of the main house, drying her palms along her faded Levis. The wrinkles on her cheeks ran vertically, giving her face a thinner appearance, and she frowned at him as he walked down the path toward her. "Got yourself an escapee?" she asked.

"You act as if this isn't unusual," he replied.

"It isn't," she said. "She needs to be in a Home where someone can watch her all the time, Justin. I just can't do it."

"Are you selling the ranch?"

"What?" she asked, looking down at him from the edge of the porch.

"I heard Paul last night at dinner," he said. "So just tell me. When she dies, are you selling it?"

"Justin, don't be ridiculous," she said. "Even if we wanted to, we can't. They left you fifty-one percent."

"Of the main house and the House of Guns?"

"I hate it when you call it that."

"How was she even capable of...?"

"It was your grandfather, actually, before he died. He said a boy without a father ought to have something. If it's ever sold, you'll be the one who does it," she said, her face suddenly emptied of expression, the look, he thought, that she got when her mind had already moved beyond the present moment and had no more use for it. "I'd suggest heading toward the hay field."

He started jogging down the dirt road covered with a cinnamon-brown silt, not exactly worrying about his grandmother so much as thinking about her, knowing she'd be all right. Even if she wasn't.

As he ran, he imagined the Hole as the inverse of what it really was, imagined his grandmother had become too full of wisdom to communicate with mere mortals, the bursting flesh of a plum from skin too tight to keep it. And somehow this made him think of Valentina Valentine and how she would sit in his kitchen and scrape the rind of her melon clean with a spoon, how sensuous he thought that was and how innocent he'd been to think it was enough. Justin liked to say he didn't believe in the pornography of detail, but that wasn't really true. All architects knew details were everything.

He rounded the bend of the dirt road and spotted his grandmother teetering along. She was dressed to the nines in pumps, a pillbox hat, a leather valise gripped firmly in her blue-veined hand as she made her way to freedom.

"Where are you going?" he asked. He had caught up with her. He knew exactly where she was going, yet, breaking their rule to understand in silence, he had asked anyway.

"I left a note," she said. "Didn't you get my note?"

"No note."

"I wrote it in my head," she said. She stopped to look around, surprised, then sat on a flat rock by the side of the road and placed the valise on her lap. She crossed her legs as if she were a young woman in a train station somewhere. She motioned for him to sit beside her and he did. "It said: It's important to leave while you can," she told him. "That's what the note said, I think. Something like that."

As she leaned toward him, her valise slid off her lap and the latch popped

open. Justin flinched as a flash of metal appeared. But it was only a picture frame with an autographed photo of Gene Kelly. A dozen or so other items tumbled out and onto the ground, and Justin helped her to gather them back up. Plastic baggies stuffed with figs and pretzels. A wooden set of rosary beads. She picked up a stack of papers, scrambling for them with trembling hands. They were letters. He looked closer and realized they were his letters to her. He loved her for that.

"Here," she said. "I have these legal documents for the lawyer. But we must hurry. Mr. Taylor closes at four."

Neither of them moved. They both stared in front of them for a long time, looking out at the brush and the barbed wire. A couple of crows flew overhead. He felt both exalted and wretched. At some point, Justin thought he would ask her if she'd like some migas for breakfast, and he would tell her, like any good friend, that she should eat something to give her strength before starting out again. But first he just sat there beside her as silent and still and expressionless as the buildings he loved so much: Trellick Tower, Robin Hood Gardens, La Tourette. He was blank. He was a found object. He was glass and steel. He was concrete. He was the poetry of the every day. And he would be beautiful in time when the vines and climbers twisted and unfurled and grew up lush around him.