DETROIT, April 1, 2015—In *Garden for the Blind*, trouble lurks just outside the door for Kelly Fordon’s diverse yet interdependent characters. As a young girl growing up in an affluent suburb bordering Detroit, Alice Townley witnesses a tragic accident at her parents’ lavish party. In the years that follow, Alice is left mostly in the care of the household staff, free to forge friendships with other pampered and damaged teens. When she and her friend Mike decide to pin a crime on another student at their exclusive high school, the consequences will reverberate for years to come.

Set between 1974 and 2012, Fordon’s intricately woven stories follow Alice and Mike through high school, college, and into middle age, but also skillfully incorporate stories of their friends, family, acquaintances, and even strangers who are touched by the same themes of privilege, folly, neglect, and resilience. A WWII veteran sleepwalks out of his home at night, led by vivid flashbacks. A Buddhist monk is assaulted by a robber while seated in meditation. A teenaged girl is shot walking home from the corner store with a friend. A lifelong teacher of blind children is targeted by vandals at the school she founded.

*Garden for the Blind* visits suburban and working-class homes, hidden sanctuaries and dangerous neighborhoods, illustrating the connections between settings and relationships (whether close or distant) and the strange motivations that keep us moving forward. All readers of fiction will enjoy the nimble unfolding of Fordon’s narrative in this collection.

**About the author:** Prior to writing fiction and poetry, Kelly Fordon worked at the NPR member station in Detroit and for National Geographic magazine. Her fiction, poetry, and book reviews have appeared in *The Boston Review*, *The Florida Review*, *Flashquake*, *The Kenyon Review*, and various other journals. She is the author of two poetry chapbooks, *On the Street Where We Live*, which won the 2011 Standing Rock Chapbook Contest, and *Tell Me When It Starts to Hurt*, which was published by Kattywompus Press in 2013. She received her MFA in fiction writing from Queens University of Charlotte and works for InsideOut Literary Arts in Detroit as a writer-in-residence.

**GROSSE POINTE BOOK LAUNCH:** Wednesday, April 22nd, 7:30-9p.m. at the Ewald Branch of the Grosse Pointe Public Library (5175 E. Jefferson Grosse Pointe Park, MI 48230). Kelly Fordon will present her new book of short stories. Books will be available for purchase and signing. Program is free of charge, but seating is limited. Please register online or call 313-343-2074 x222.

For more information on this book or the author, please contact Kristina Stonehill, Assistant Editor, Wayne State University Press, (313) 577-6127 tel; (313) 577-6131 fax; kristina.stonehill@wayne.edu.

To learn more about the Press, or to listen to an audio sample from this book, please visit wsupress.wayne.edu.
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In *Garden for the Blind* Kelly Fordon has situated her stories such that they dazzle with the immediacy of deeply felt life even as together they awe with the epic sweep of a life lived. Whether set in Greater Detroit, the Caribbean, or the Great Lakes Region of northern Ohio, each story finds its peculiar curiosity in the midst of blight and rends the reader’s heartstrings with the love the character has for it. An unforgettable first collection.

—Daniel Mueller, author of *Nights I Dreamed of Hubert Humphrey* and *How Animals Mate*

Kelly Fordon’s profound and deeply moving stories ask how you deal with the unbearable truths of your life: the missteps and missed chances. Fordon’s characters have to navigate a world of cynical politics and easy drugs. They long for their own identity but are lost in the demands the world makes of them. They want a set of rules in which to live their lives of easy comfort and killing neighborhoods. These stories are at once unsentimental and tender and you won’t forget them.

—Gloria Whelan, National Book Award winner and author of *Living Together* (Wayne State University Press, 2013) which received the 2014 IPPY Silver Medal Award

Each of Kelly Fordon’s stories is perceptive, memorable, and moving—but taken together, they compose something far more significant: a tragicomic elegy for American youth as we knew it in the late twentieth century. I loved this book, and I will be haunted by its recurring characters for some time to come.

—Julia Glass, author of *And the Dark Sacred Night* and National Book Award–winning *Three Junes*
In the spring of her junior year at Michigan State, Alice’s father called with what was, in her estimation, horrific news. He’d gotten her a summer job in his small Ohio hometown working in a bank. This was the last thing she expected from the man who paid her Visa bills and quietly replenished her account every time she bounced a check. And besides that, she already had plans to teach sailing at Martha’s Vineyard with her boyfriend, Mike. They had spent the last two summers together: freshman year working at Meldrum’s in Manhattan, and the following year taking intensive Italian on what was essentially an extended booze cruise through the Mediterranean.

It was as if her father, the devoted golfer, had chipped a divot in her life. But no matter how loudly she protested, he would not back down. The Ohio job was not a punishment, he insisted. She
needed to focus on her career. Working in a bank would open her eyes. She would be staying with Grandpa Bill until August.

Alice’s job was the butt of a lot of jokes at school that spring. “If you’re summering in Newburg, Ohio, look Ollie up,” Mike told a large group of friends gathered at The Peanut Barrel. “She’ll be doling out dineros at the People’s Bank on Main Street.”

Alice, laughing, took a mock bow.

Driving her Volkswagen Gulf on I-90 after a brief visit home to take care of all of her gynecological, opthomological, and dental checkups, Alice tried to think positively. It felt a little like fitting the small lip of a balloon onto a helium tank.

*I will only be here six weeks. Lake Erie is beautiful. I will diet and read a lot. I will spend every weekend sunning on the beach.* She lit a Marlboro Light as the Talking Heads played on the radio, and decided the distance would only enhance her relationship with Mike. The summer might lack excitement, but it would provide her with an excellent chance to detox and reflect.

Late that afternoon, she turned off the highway, passing the placard on the outskirts of town that read:

**NEWBURG**
Easternmost track of the Western Reserve.
Settled 1800.

Main Street still looked exactly like the nineteenth-century postcards that hung in burnished gold frames in the post office. The same gazebo dominated the town square. The bank was now a tearoom, the old inn a funeral parlor, and the five-and-dime had
become a diner, but all of the brick facades remained unchanged. The funeral-parlor windowpanes still sported hearts and initials etched by newlyweds in the late 1800s when the building was the Rosemont Inn, a destination for honeymooners.

It’s quaint, she thought as she turned down Lakeview by the Book Barn, but Mike, the snob, would hate it: no Third Edition, no Belle Haven Yacht Club. He once told her that when he thought about Ohio all he could picture were cornfields and Dairy Queen poster children.

His attitude was not so different from her parents, who kept their distance as well. Her father was raised on Russell Street, in a house that was now the Depot Inn, home to Marge’s famous lasagna. After Georgetown University he’d returned to Ohio only briefly to work at Lake County National Bank before moving to Michigan and starting up the tool-and-die company in Detroit. Alice’s mother didn’t like Michigan any better than she’d liked Ohio and fled the Midwest every chance she got, which was a lot. They were always too geared up—fundraisers, tennis, traveling—to give Ohio more than a pass through. Like migratory birds pausing midflight, they only touched down once or twice a year.

For his part, Alice’s grandfather, Bill, wanted little to do with his son, Gerard, and his “cha-cha” wife, Michelle. Even though Bill was no Ohio bumpkin—he’d traveled to Mongolia and canoed around the Seychelles—he couldn’t stand to hear Michelle prattle on about celebrities she’d run into on the Med, or the charity event she was chairing to benefit sick children she’d never laid eyes on, or the tennis championship she’d won thanks to Dan, the pro, and his grueling workouts. Sometimes
in the middle of one of her spiels, he’d get up midsentence, take Alice’s hand, and walk down to the beach or out onto the deck overlooking Lake Erie to watch the sunset.

When Alice arrived, Rosario, Bill’s housekeeper, met her at the door.

“Just in time for cocktails,” she said, gesturing toward the room beyond where a group of octogenarians were gathered around two bridge tables.

“It’s a good thing you arrived when you did. An hour from now he might not have recognized you.” Rosario had to reach up to give Alice a hug. Then she picked up her bag and led her into a living room, jammed full of masks, knives, miniature wooden tribal people, and elaborately carved ebony walking sticks, vestiges of Bill’s adventurous past.

This summer she’d actually have a chance to check out his collection. She applauded herself for her persistent upbeat mindset. Rosario dropped the bag by the stairs and they continued on toward the bridge tables. It seemed to take all that time for Bill to figure out who was coming toward them.

Finally, when she was standing before him he sprang up from his seat. “It’s Alice!” he shouted. “How’re you doing, kiddo?” He gave her a couple of sound thwacks on the back.

Every year Alice braced herself for signs of decline, but every year his hair, curly and gray with a swath of skunk white at the temples, remained the same. His arms were still sinewy, his grip strong. The only concession to age was the colostomy bag, which sloshed a little when he squeezed her.

Bill looked back toward the table. Did she know Mrs. Kimble? Her son, Don, was the owner of Waverly Used Cars on Main. The
other man was Stan Olner, his oldest friend, the man who’d purportedly invented the pop top. “And you know Marcy,” he said. Alice nodded. Marcy, a small Italian woman, had recently retired from Newburg High School, where she had been the principal for thirty-seven years. She had been Bill’s constant companion since Peggy, his wife, had died more than twenty years before.

“We’re going to have a great summer!” Bill said, sitting back down at the table. Behind him the angry lake roiled outside the picture window. “Go on upstairs and unpack.”

The next morning Alice woke up at six. She didn’t have to be at the bank until nine, but she was hot and agitated and her stomach hurt. The more she tossed and turned the more obvious it became that sleep was a futile pursuit. This must be what happens, she decided, when a person goes to bed at eight.

She had gone upstairs to unpack the night before, and by the time she came down, Bill had announced that it was 5:00 p.m. and the bar was open. Carmela appeared with a tray filled with four triple Manhattans in oversize copper goblets. Alice pulled a chair up behind him. Bridge was a mystifying game and no one seemed inclined to explain the rules once they started. She ended up in the kitchen, helping Carmela with the pastrami sandwiches and polishing off a large bag of Lay’s sour-cream-and-onion potato chips, which was probably why she’d spent most of the night feeling like she was going to puke.

By eight, they were all shuffling out the door. When Alice went up to her room the clock by the bed read 8:14. She sat down and stared at the pink paisley wallpaper on the opposite wall. Bill walked by on the way to his room.
“Is your clock set?” He swayed back and forth in the doorway. “I don’t want you to miss work. I never really get going until ten these days.”

Alice nodded.
When he closed the door, she fell back on her pillow. “What am I going to do all summer?” she whispered. Her voice sounded tinny, like a child’s.

Ben Broder, the trust manager, met her in the lobby at nine. He led her upstairs to the third floor to a cubicle near the back of a long, narrow room with pumpkin-colored walls. To her right, a large woman with a half-eaten apple on her desk was speaking urgently into her phone. She smiled bleakly at Alice and then turned away to continue her conversation. On Alice’s desk someone had placed a large stack of papers.

“You just have to check the numbers,” Ben explained, leaning over the desk. He looked like the type of person (yellowing buckteeth, polyester button-down) who might smell, so Alice scooched her chair back.

“Punch them into the ad machine and make sure they stack up. Sometimes they move too fast downstairs and make a mistake.” Alice nodded. If everything was OK, she could put the papers in the out-box. If not, she should bring the problem to him. He looked at her to see if this made sense, absentmindedly tapping his pencil on the top of the partition. She couldn’t believe this was her job.

Why would her father put her up to this when she had barely passed Algebra I in high school? She wasn’t enrolled in business school. Didn’t he know that? Her brother Ray was the financial wizard; everyone knew Alice was not inclined that way. Was the job
a shift in the weather

payback for all her parties? Her frivolous spending? Did he even care about her or any of her goals? What the hell was he thinking?

“OK,” she said. “Is there anything else?”

“Oh, no!” Ben gave her a big toothy grin. “If you can do this for us, you have no idea what a big help you’ll be. We got these new-fangled computers in the conference room but no one knows how to work them yet.”

The woman with the apple hung up the phone and turned toward them.

She was middle-aged—Alice guessed forty—with pressed, wavy hair that reminded Alice of a hairdo she’d seen in her history of film class: Katherine Hepburn in the one with the leopard. She wore a black-and-white polka-dot dress with a thin, black patent-leather belt riding up under her voluminous breasts. A large mole was wedged into the crease on the side of her nose.

“This is Linda Strickner,” Ben said, putting a hand on her shoulder. “She’s been with us for twenty-two years. Can you believe that?”

“I can believe it.” Linda had the lopsided smile of a stroke victim. She held her hand out to Alice. It was so thick and sticky it felt like homemade Play-Doh.

Ben peeked into two other cubicles, both empty.

“Well, Linda will make sure you meet everyone,” he said. “My office is down at the other end of the hall.”

He walked away, listing slightly to the left. Linda picked up her apple and leaned back in her chair.

“So, you home on vacation?” Linda bit into the apple. Juice spurted out onto her dress.

“Yeah, my dad got me the job, but I’m not really from here. I’m staying with my grandfather this summer.”
“Bummer,” Linda said. “Unless you want to do this for a living?”

“I’m not sure what I want to do. I guess my dad thinks I should figure it out.”

Linda threw the apple core into her wastebasket. “That makes sense. Let me know if you need help with anything.”

The question that plagued Alice while she worked was whether she and Mike would last the summer. Lately he was drinking and getting high all the time, and it didn’t seem like he cared about her one way or the other. When he was drunk he was completely out of control. At the Deke summer send-off in May a freshman named Patty had used the crowded couch as an excuse to plop down on his lap. Alice had forgotten her sweater, and when she returned for it, she caught Patty flinging her arm around his neck. Last fall the captain of the women’s swim team yanked him down from the Halloween hayride and kissed him on the back lawn by the senior quad. Her close friend, Missy, witnessed that one. It had often felt like a full-time job fending off women, and the effort made her feel old and haggard. Mike was adept at deflecting the blame.

“I didn’t sit on her lap!” he’d say. Or, “She kissed me! I was so drunk I barely remember it.”

On the phone last night, Alice had asked Missy whether she thought he would hook up with someone else over the summer, and she’d said, “Well, if he does, it’ll just be a fling.”

“Girls are probably swarming all over him on Martha’s Vineyard,” Alice said.

“So, who cares? You’re no wallflower. He’s lucky to have you, that schmuck. Go out yourself, and fling, fling, fling.”
But Missy didn’t know what she was talking about. She’d never been to Newburg.

Around eleven thirty, Linda got up and invited Alice to lunch at Arby’s. They stopped at a cubicle down the hall to pick up a woman named Harriet who was as thin and lanky as Olive Oyl. She had a large mass of brown hair that swirled up like chocolate pudding into a peak. She might have been a little older than Linda, but it was hard to tell for sure; an enormous pair of gold, wide-rimmed glasses obscured most of her face. On the walk over to Arby’s she went on and on about her cat, Brody. At the table, she unwrapped her ham-and-cheese sandwich, smoothed the edges of the tinfoil with her knobby hands, and pressed her white paper napkin into her lap. She stopped talking and bowed her head.

“She always says grace,” Linda whispered to Alice.

Linda had ordered two Arby’s Double-R Bar sandwiches, curly fries, a Jamocha milk shake, and a huge Coke. The more she purchased, the queasier Alice felt. By the time she reached the counter, the only thing she could stomach was the side salad.

“He was up all night yowling.” Harriet finished her prayer and made the sign of the cross. “And you know I’m already dealing with Max.”

“Tell Alice about Max,” Linda said, squirting horseradish on her sandwich.

Harriet wiped her mouth daintily with the napkin. “I have four cats,” she said, counting out on her fingers as if she was talking to a child. “Brody, Max, Malcolm, and Steve.”

“They’re all named after her ex-boyfriends,” Linda interjected, her mouth full of food.

“No!” Alice laughed.
“Linda, you are the worst,” Harriet shook her head. “Anyway, Max is getting old and he can’t find the litter box, so I don’t get much sleep these days.”

“Do you know what she does?” Linda turned to Alice, her mouth full. “She’s covered her entire bedroom with newspaper and every time that cat pees, she cleans it up.”

“All night long?” Alice looked at Harriet. “How many times a night does he go?”

“Three or four,” Harriet said. “I’m used to it, although I do get tired in the afternoon. Sometimes I just want to put my head down on the desk.”

“Have you ever heard of anything crazier?” Linda laughed. “All for a cat!”

“Two you he’s just a cat!” Harriet, obviously used to the razzing, shook her tiny fist at Linda. Turning to Alice, she said, “Do you have any pets?”

“We had a dog named Shane,” Alice said. “She used to pee on our oriental rugs too before the vet put her to sleep.”

“That’s too bad,” Linda said.

“Yeah, all that pee didn’t go over too well with my mom.”

On Friday, driving home from work, Alice lit one cigarette after another, her hands shaking. She felt marooned. It seemed like all of her friends had been teleported to more enviable locales where the guys were gorgeous and it was always dollar-beer night. The long weekend gaped like an open wound. She stopped at the Book Barn on the way home, looking for a romance novel. The shopkeeper, a middle-aged man with a mullet, only had two Danielle Steeles left and Alice had read them both.
Before dinner she decided to call Mike. Carmela was making fried catfish and the smell in the kitchen drove Alice out of the room before she could even offer assistance with the meal. She hadn’t heard a word from him since he’d arrived on the Vineyard the week before. He was staying with his uncle Rob and aunt Krissie and their four kids, who were all in college or graduate school. She dialed the number he had scrawled on a napkin. After the fourth ring, someone picked up, burped loudly, then hung up. She dialed the number again. “What?” yelled the boy on the other end. Alice put the phone down. If she had been there, she would have been laughing in the background, the way she laughed when Mike and his friends swallowed goldfish or blew beer out of a bong. From this distance, though, it didn’t seem funny at all.

After she hung up, she headed downstairs, where she found Bill and Marcy on the couch, singing along with a phone commercial: “Reach out, reach out and touch someone!”

When they saw that Alice was watching they really hammed it up, swaying and clapping along.

“Nice, guys.” Alice laughed.

“We don’t need much entertainment,” Marcy said, playfully yanking on Bill’s ear.

When Dan Rather came back on, Marcy leaned back over her solitaire game and Bill picked through the pistachio bowl in his lap. Alice plopped down in the chair next to them.

“So how is the Dustman?” Bill said.

“We don’t call him that anymore,” Alice said. “He stopped answering to that name when we went to college.” He had in fact literally stopped answering to the name, probably because the story behind it was too embarrassing to carry with him past graduation.
Bill held out the pistachios. Alice shook her head. “Does he have your number here?”
“I can’t reach him,” Alice said. “He’s out on Martha’s Vineyard.”
“Is he coming to visit?” Marcy asked, one card midair.
“I seriously doubt it.”
“Well, why in the world not?” Bill said.
Alice didn’t want to say that Ohio wasn’t exactly a destination. “He’s having the time of his life.”
“Oh, you’ll see,” Marcy said. “Pretty soon he’ll realize how much he misses you. If he doesn’t, phooey on him.”
“Hey, I have an idea,” Bill said, popping a pistachio into his mouth. “Do you want to see my statues?”

Alice and Bill moved to the living room. “African people come up with supernatural explanations for everything. For instance,” he said, picking up a small statue of a woman with a pocket book and high heels, who had her hair coiled up in an elaborate, snake-like bun, “this is my otherworld spirit lover. A diviner on the Ivory Coast went into a trance and told me he had met her and this is what she looked like.” He handed the statue to Alice.

“This was back when Peggy, your grandmother, was alive. He said I should spend at least one night a week with my spirit lover or she would get mad and wreak havoc on my house. Of course, it’s all rubbish, but when Peggy got sick a couple of months later, I did kind of creep around this old gal. Once or twice I even slept with her under my pillow, hoping for some divine intervention.”

He walked to the other side of the mantle and plucked another statue.
“Nigerian people believe that older women are the owners of the world. This is a fertility statue.” He held it up for Alice to see: a short, squat woman with a face like a walnut, eyes like saucers, and breasts that hung so low she looked like a potbellied man. “See how her breasts are slack. This is a life giver, a woman who has suckled many babies. The man who sold it to me thought she was the most beautiful thing in his store.”

Alice blushed. He put the statue down and moved around the room, pulling out walking sticks and masks and statues. Finally, he came to a tiny, bandy-breasted woman with big, hoop earrings and an elaborate, turquoise dress.

“This is a Nigerian Takindi,” he said. “She has the power to cure people. You owe her a sacrifice, a goat or some millet, if she fixes you.”

Alice turned the Takindi over and over in her hands. She closed her eyes and made a wish for peace of mind, for happiness, for an end to the panicky, empty feeling that kept washing over her. When she opened her eyes, Bill was staring at her.

“I was praying,” she said.

He took the statue out her hands.

“You didn’t do it right,” he said. “You go like this.” He bent down and positioned the statue by Alice’s left leg. Then he closed his eyes and whispered what sounded like “chee, chee, chee” as he traced the outline of her body with the carving.

“There,” he said, “you’re all better now.”

And, as if in answer, the phone rang.

“It’s for you, sweetie,” Marcy called from the other room.

“Told you.” Grandpa Bill winked.
Alice picked up the phone, which Marcy had set down on the card table. She glanced around the room to make sure that none of the adults were hovering before saying hello. The lake outside the window was as still as glass.

“Alice, this is Dr. Rooney. We just finally got hold of your mother’s housekeeper. She gave my nurse your number out there.”

“I’m sorry, who is this?”

“Dr. Rooney, your gynecologist. I’m afraid your thyroid has gone a little wonky.”

On Sunday, Alice’s mother called. Over and over again, she asked Alice, “What’s new? What’s new?” but, as usual, before Alice could tell her about Dr. Rooney or anything else, she launched into a monologue about her tennis partner Sally, her sainted coach Dan, and the size of the mobile phone she’d procured from Alice’s father. “It’s like hoofing around town with a frozen meatloaf in my bag.”

In the late afternoon, Alice played gin rummy with Bill. When they finished, she drove over to the pharmacy and then to Dairy Queen for a brownie sundae. Her stomach was so bloated afterward she decided to skip dinner and take a walk and think about her predicament. On Heather Road, she spotted Linda washing an ancient Pinto in the driveway of a small brick ranch-style house. Linda was singing along with Bob Seger’s “Running against the Wind.” While she worked she hopped and danced and shook her substantial behind. Alice crossed the street, hoping for a discreet escape route, but Linda turned to dip the sponge into her bucket and caught sight of her.

“Hey,” Alice said. “I didn’t know you lived here. I’m staying right around the corner.”
“I knew that,” Linda said. She plodded over to the boom box and turned down the volume. “When you said you were staying with Bill, I knew exactly where you were. Everyone knows Bill.”

“Mama! Tewephone!” A large, brown-haired boy of about ten or eleven appeared in the doorway flapping his arms up and down. He was too big to be making such a scene. Clearly there was something wrong with him. His eyes slanted downward and his mouth hung open, revealing enormous buckteeth.

“Who is it?” Linda yelled, but he just flapped his arms harder and jumped up and down, his mouth hanging open, his white undershirt too small for his gelatinous belly. He was wearing fuzzy, banana-shaped slippers.

“Oh, great,” Linda said, wiping her hands off on her pants. “That’s Philip, by the way.”

Alice waved at Philip. He smiled and flapped his arms in her direction.

“Tewephone! Tewephone! Tewephone!” he yelled.

“Well, I won’t keep you,” Alice said. “See you on Monday.”

“Hey, why don’t you come in?” Linda picked up the bucket and headed over to a pile of towels on the other side of the car. “My husband just sold his soul for this ginormous projection TV and the game’s about to start.”

“Well.” There had to be a way out, but Alice couldn’t come up with it fast enough.

“Come on. I’m making Skyline Chili—you’ve had Skyline before?”

“Nope,” Alice said.

“My husband Don makes the best Skyline Chili. It’s got cinnamon in it. You’ll think you died and went to Heaven.”
The front door opened into the living room, a tiny rectangle with a fuzzy pea-green armchair and a brown plaid couch. A cuckoo clock hung on the wall. They stopped in the kitchen so Linda could take the phone call, but there was no one on the line. Down in the basement, a skinny, bald man sat in front of an enormous TV. Philip had run over to the opposite side of the room and was standing in a play area sectioned off with piles of orange milk crates. Mountains of stuffed animals, a train table, and various Lego creations were scattered around him.

“Hey, come here,” he called.

“Wait a minute, Philip, I’m going to introduce Alice to Dad,” Linda said.

“Now! Now! Now!” Philip yelled.

*What a pain in the ass,* Alice thought and headed toward the toys.

“Hey, Don, this is Alice, Bill’s granddaughter, the one who’s working at the bank.”

“Hi, Alice.” Don swiveled around in his chair. Alice waved. Don looked tall and gangly enough to have made a great basketball player. There was a Budweiser in the cup holder of his La-Z-Boy and an ashtray on top of a stack of phone books beside it. The basement smelled of smoke and mildew. Philip took hold of her hand and dragged her toward a train set in the middle of his play area.

“You like trains? I got lots of trains. You got a best friend? I got a best friend named Eddy. I always let Eddy play with my trains. See I can play with them when you go home. I can share with you. I know how to do that.” He handed her a blue engine.
“Thanks,” Alice said.

On Monday she received a postcard from Mike with a picture of the Cape Poge Lighthouse on Chappaquiddick. On the back he had drawn an enormous smiley face and scrawled, “Miss you!” at the bottom.

It was pathetic, Missy agreed when she phoned the next day. “Listen,” she said. “Stephanie saw him at a party. She told me that—how’d she put it? I don’t want you to freak out, OK? He was drunk as a skunk, and she said, ‘He didn’t look like a guy who had a girlfriend.’”

“Thanks for telling me. That’s just what I need to hear right now.” Alice’s heart whoooshed and then fluttered. She struggled for breath. Perhaps it was psychosomatic; Dr. Rooney had mentioned a sluggish heartbeat was a symptom.

“What? I’m telling you for your own good. Go out and have some fun. Screw that no-good schmuck!”

The next night Mike called. Alice was lying on the deck reading People magazine.

“How’s my Buckeye?” he said.

“Fine.”

“I’m sorry I haven’t called. It’s just crazy out here. I have to be at work at seven, and then every night the guys are like, ‘Let’s hit The Crab Shack,’ and I’m like, ‘Guys, I can’t take it anymore. I’m going to fuckin’ die!’ But then we do it again. So even though I’m dying to call you, I never get a chance.”

“Well, it sounds like you’re having fun,” she said. A large rainbow-colored sailboat glided by on the lake.

“How about you, Ollie? Have you embezzled any funds? Maybe you should so you can buy a ticket to come see me.”
“Ha, ha. My dad thinks I should learn how to save money, remember?”
“Maybe I could buy you a ticket.”
“Or you could come here.”
“And do what?” He laughed. “Stare at the corn?”
“Maybe. Listen, I’ve got to run, there’s someone at the door for me.” That line had been Missy’s suggestion.
“If you’re not going to dump him,” she said. “At least make him think you’re up to something.”

Every day Alice ended up at Arby’s with Linda and Harriet mainly because she lacked an alternative plan. Linda turned out to be a maniacal sports fan. She filled their lunch hours with play-by-play analyses of Indians games, which didn’t seem to bore Harriet at all. The sports fixation was the reason they’d purchased such a large TV. It had cost Don, a truck driver, a month’s salary. Harriet also had season tickets to the Indians games. She usually went with members of her church group, a set of middle-aged people, single for various reasons.

Harriet and Linda made no bones about their contempt for Mike when Alice mentioned that she had a pseudo-boyfriend who had no plans to visit her over the summer.
“That’s right,” Linda said.
“Or focus on school,” Harriet said. “I made that mistake once, taking off, marrying a shit.”

According to Linda, the shit in question was Greg, who had been gone for years. California, possibly. Harriet had most recently dated a bicyclist named Wolf, but he, too, was long
absent. Cats had replaced men, according to Linda, for better or worse.

“What are you studying?” Linda asked Alice, before taking a final pull on her straw and finishing off her shake with a loud gurgle.

“That’s a tough one,” Alice said. For the most part her focus had been on partying and hanging out with Mike. Before she’d settled on the journalism major, she’d wanted to major in psychology, mostly to figure out what made her parents tick. Sophomore year she’d tried philosophy, but 101 was a joke. Mr. Dreiser, a Jesus look-alike, often sounded more like the Grim Reaper than a teacher.

“You think you’re in the prime of your lives, but you are decaying,” he would say, brandishing his pointer. “Your cells are now beginning that slow death march that will bring you low sooner than you can even imagine.”

“I’m a journalism major,” Alice said. “There’s no money in it. My parents were shocked, but my brother Ray thought I’d be good at it.”

“I wanted to be an English professor,” Linda said. “But—” She stopped and bit into her sandwich.

“I didn’t know that. What happened?” Harriet said.

“I went to my career counselor or guidance counselor or whatever you call them, and said that I wanted to go to college. I knew my parents couldn’t afford it, but I had straight As. I asked her how I could get a scholarship.”

“What’d she say?” Alice said.

“She said, ‘Funny, you just don’t look like a scholar.’”

“Yikes,” Harriet said.
Linda laughed. “I should have said, ‘Funny, you don’t look like a bitch.’ But I didn’t. I was too young. I just left.”

On Friday night Don, Philip, and Alice were in the basement eating popcorn when Don pulled Alice aside and asked whether she would watch Philip on July 8. It was their fifteenth anniversary and he wanted to take Linda to Luigi’s on the lake.

“Fifteen years! That’s great. How’d you two meet?”

The game came back on. Don rotated toward the TV.

“Blind date,” he said. “I always tell people I met Linda on a blind date and have been blind ever since.”

On the Fourth of July, Harriet invited Alice to her block party. Harriet lived in a tiny bungalow on a street about ten blocks from the lake. Most of the guests were small children, who spent the entire party screaming and running through sprinklers while devouring red-white-and-blue popsicles.

After hot dogs and pop, Harriet took Alice, Linda, and Philip in to see the cats and escape the relentless high-pitched shrieking. She had positioned a baby gate in front of her bedroom door so that Max, the incontinent cat, couldn’t escape. Alice was overcome with the hot, agitated feeling she had every time she’d visited her grandmother in the nursing home. Max was spinning around in the middle of the room. Harriet said he was chasing his tail, which was probably mystifying to him as he was almost blind. Around and around he went like a small planet rotating.

The next day Mike called, saying that he had bought her a ticket to come see him that Friday.

“I’m sorry,” Alice said. “I already have plans.”

“With who?”
“Philip.”

On the day before the anniversary celebration, Linda, Harriet, and Alice went to Arby’s. Linda pulled out a yellow legal pad on which she had written the babysitting instructions.

“One dessert, no matter how much he begs. You have to really help him brush his teeth. He’ll just run the toothbrush over his tongue and spit, unless you watch him. He has to pee before bed or he’ll wet the bed. Nothing but Dr. Seuss or he has nightmares. Routine is very important, so I’ve numbered everything. I don’t mean to be weird about it, but he’ll freak if you don’t follow the schedule . . .”

Alice took the legal pad and looked it over.

“Also, his medication. You don’t need to give it to him unless he starts to wheeze or seems to have trouble breathing.”

“Asthma?”

“Congestive heart failure, actually.”

Alice stared at the napkin holder on the table. Linda was trying to rip open her Double-R Bar sauce and didn’t look up.

“He doesn’t really have it . . . well, he has it on and off. The doctor says he’ll be fine as long as we keep his diet in check. Lots of Down’s kids have it.”

“Oh,” Alice said. She glanced through the instructions again. “Do you write this all out every time you have a babysitter?” she asked.

“We’ve never had a babysitter before.” Linda took a sip of her milkshake.

“Never?”

“Oh, my mom—when she was alive, but since then, no,” Linda said. “We kind of like staying home.”
Alice was flabbergasted. She’d had babysitters in all shapes and colors, a long, motley parade. She’d had nicknames for all of them: the Power Mower, Hairy Nostrils, the Mashed Potato, Hitler, Big Betty.

Harriet cleared her throat. “I know this is off the subject, but if you guys have extra newspapers, would you mind bringing them in? I’m running low.”

“Gosh, Harriet,” Linda said. “I’m going to do you a favor one day and smother those cats.”

When Alice showed up for babysitting the next night, Linda looked anxious, but Don dragged her out the door saying they’d be home around midnight. Philip led Alice down to play with his trains. Later, while they were eating Linda’s chili, he told her about his week at school and the developmental-disabilities program at the YMCA.

“So then Eddy decides he’s a steam roller and he gets down on the floor and he starts going like this.” Philip got down on the floor to demonstrate. “And he goes vroom, vroom, vroom, right into Mr. Sanders. Boy, was he mad. Then he tried to pick Eddy up by his ear, but Eddy kept going vroom, vroom, vroom right into the salad cart and all the salad fell down!”

“Oh, no,” Alice laughed.

“It was the best day. No yucky salad!” Philip clapped and then flapped his arms.

Over dinner, Philip pelted Alice with questions while downing a chili dog and dripping sauce all over the floor.

“You got a best friend?” he said.

“Yes, his name’s Mike.”

“You guys like trains?”
“Well . . .”
“You got a mom?”
“Yes.”
“You got brother?”
“Yup.”
“You got sister?”
Alice hesitated. “Used to.”
“Used to?”
“She’s in Heaven.”
“That’s good. She’s lucky.”
“Really?”
He nodded. “You got a mom? She’s got a name for you?”
“She named me Alice.”
“Yeah. My mom’s got the Phil Buster, the Phil Pill, Phil the Grill, and she’s got a song goes like . . .” And here he went into a long insensible song that Alice couldn’t follow, though she tried to look interested.
“You got other friends?” he said.
“Sure,” Alice said.
“They play what you want to play?”
“Sometimes.”
“No broccoli,” he added, pushing away his plate.
“Not even for a Dum-Dum?”
“OK.” He reached for the plate just like Linda said he would.
The bedtime routine was exhausting. Philip smeared toothpaste all over the bathroom, and tried to wipe some off in her hair. His prayer went on for ten minutes and seemed to include everyone in the neighborhood. While she read *Oh, the Places You’ll Go!* he bounced on the bed:
“You have brains in your poop!
You have feet in your poop!
You can steer your poop
Any direction you poop!”

When Alice finally got him into bed and leaned down to kiss him good night, he threw his arms around her neck, giving her a hug that was more forceful than any she'd ever received.

“I'll play what you want next time you come,” he said. “You can bring your toys.”

After Philip was asleep, Alice slipped back into his room. She pulled the African Taktindi out of her pocket and shook it over his heart.

“Chee, chee, chee,” she whispered.

On Saturday night, Alice's mother called again. She didn't bother with hello.

“Did Dr. Rooney reach you?” she whispered. Alice could hear the TV blaring in the background.

“Yes,” Alice said. “I spoke to him.”

“What in the world... well, oh my God, I'm sorry. I can't even get it out. What in the world... I know that's not good... a call like that... what did he want? You know they wouldn't tell me? They wouldn't tell your own mother... I mean twenty... they should still tell the mother... Oh my God, I don't even want to know...”

Alice waited. Many things were happening outside the window on the water. She could barely hear her mother's voice through the phone. It was as if a fault had opened up in the earth and her mother had fallen in, to remain wedged in that tight space in the ground forever.
Finally, her mother stopped babbling.

“I’m a little hyperthyroid,” Alice said.

“Holy Mother of Christ! Holy . . . phew, OK then! You can’t imagine what I was . . .”

“He called in the prescription. I’ve been taking it for a couple of weeks and I feel pretty good. I’ll go for more tests when I get home.”

“You? Oh, well, well. Thank God that’s all it is! He wouldn’t even tell me! You know you never know these da . . . Mary Jenkins’s daughter . . . I know—”

“I’m not pregnant, mom.”

“No, you’re too smart for that. I’m glad that’s taken care of. I’m coming out soon, by the way. I’ve got the Rain brothers here painting the house. It took me six months to get them so I have to do that first and then I’ll figure out a time to visit if I can.”

After she hung up, Alice went down to the deck, sat in a lawn chair, and watched the water, which had gone from crystalline to gray and fitful while she was speaking with her mother. The thing about Lake Erie was that a storm could come up out of nowhere at a moment’s notice. According to Grandpa Bill, boaters had to be very cautious, always on the lookout for a shift in the weather. Alice was reminded of her philosophy professor and his dire predictions. The sun was going down behind a cloud, the only sign a pink glow that permeated the edges. When she was older, there would be real problems. Who would help her through them? There had to have been a phone call when the doctor told Linda about Philip’s prognosis or when Harriet’s husband beat her for the first time or when Grandma Peggy died. Reach out and touch someone. The phone commercial made it seem so easy.
Mike started phoning incessantly, jealous of the mysterious “Philip guy.” But Alice, reading in the chaise lounge or disrupted in the middle of gin rummy, had started to wonder why she wanted him so badly. The conversations were inane: So and so was drunk and fell off the boat. So and so got hit by a car, but was so drunk he bounced like a ball when he hit the pavement. Meanwhile, when Alice told him about Linda and Don or Harriet and the cats, he laughed, as if Alice were describing sitcom characters, people too outrageous to be believed.

One day early in August, right before she returned to school, Alice told Mike she was going over to Lakeland Community College to pick up a course catalog for Linda. Maybe that would inspire her to return to school.

“She’d make a great teacher,” Alice said.

“Is she the one with the cats or the retard?” Mike said.

From then on whenever he called Alice said she had to go, even when the only thing pressing was a trip to Dairy Queen. One day, sounding desperate, he announced that he was sending her another plane ticket.

“I don’t know.” Alice was sitting next to Bill, who had dozed off with a bowl of pistachios in his lap. She reached over and put them on the table.

“I don’t think I can,” she said. “I’ve got a lot going on this weekend.”

“Really?” Mike said. “Like what?”

A sound like gushing water filled the room. Bill’s colostomy bag was filling up.

“You’d be surprised,” Alice said.