Prize-winning story collection charts “absurd territory of the illicit”

PITTSBURGH—Shannon Cain is the 2011 winner of the Drue Heinz Literature Prize, one of the nation’s most prestigious awards for a book of short stories. Cain’s manuscript, The Necessity of Certain Behaviors, was selected from a field of nearly 325 entries by acclaimed author Alice Mattison. The book will be published this fall by the University of Pittsburgh Press, sponsor of the prize.

“The power in this sparkling collection becomes more and more apparent as one reads,” Mattison stated. “You notice right away that the stories are funny and surprising; it takes a while to see how heartbreaking they can be. I loved reading about these vibrant, lovable, irrepressible women.”

The 47-year-old Cain was born in Denver, Colorado, and grew up in New York, Rhode Island, Maryland, Connecticut and California. Tucson, Arizona, is her hometown of 32 years.

The stories in The Necessity of Certain Behaviors chart the treacherous and often absurd territory of the illicit. From the mother who loads her children and her cannabis harvest into the minivan for a cross country trip, to the mayor’s wife caught pleasuring herself in the steam room at the Y, to the eco-adventuring urbanite who discovers a village in which bisexual non-monogamy is the norm, the characters seem destined to suffer—and sometimes enjoy—the consequences of their own restless discontent.

What does winning the DHLP signify for Cain? “To win this prize is an unexpected manifestation of a desire that’s been pacing restlessly in my fragile writer’s heart for more than a decade,” she said. “My joy lies in knowing these stories will find their readers.”

Cain’s stories have been awarded the Pushcart Prize, the O. Henry Prize and a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. Her work has appeared, or is forthcoming, in Tin House, The Colorado Review, the New England Review, American Short Fiction and Southword: New Writing From Ireland. Cain earned her MFA in 2005 from the Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College.

The co-editor, with Lisa Bowden, of Powder: Writing by Women in the Ranks, from Vietnam to Iraq (Kore Press, 2008), Cain is co-adapter of Coming In Hot, the stage adaptation of the book. She has taught fiction writing at the University of Arizona, Gotham Writers’ Workshop, Arizona State University, and as a private coach and workshop facilitator. She was the Picador Guest Professor of Literature at the University of Leipzig, Germany. She is the artist-in-residence for Tucson’s Ward One and the fiction editor for Kore Press.

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Shannon Cain

Winner of the 2011 Drue Heinz Literature Prize

Photo by Sarah Prall
the necessity
of certain
behaviors

shannon cain
One evening, Maury calls. Those public service announcements, he tells Frances, the ones about casual drug consumption supporting terrorism? Apparently they’re working. Now his customers insist their marijuana be grown domestically. He needs the entirety of her last two harvests, which Frances estimates at roughly twelve pounds, counting the supply that’s now curing in Mason jars in her basement. “These people buy organic produce, if you know what I mean,” Maury says. “They read the New York Times.”

He’ll pay her a thousand dollars a pound, but he wants her to deliver it. Here’s the trouble: Memphis is fifteen hundred miles from Phoenix, and her three kids are home from school for the summer.

At the dinner table, Frances says, “How about a road trip?”

The boys throw their hands in the air, cheering her. Todd, the six-year-old, her little sports freak, the kid whose Little League coach is already
planning his career, wants to know if they can sleep in a tent. The middle one, Robbie, who is eight and plays chess and computer games, says he guesses Memphis is cool. Emily inches one shoulder toward her ear, a half-shrug that is one of her few signals of approval. Emily is fourteen.

Frances doesn’t grow pot because she’s a desperate single mother, though she is. She grows it to pay off her half of the forty thousand dollars in credit card debt she and her ex racked up during their marriage. Recently her minimum payments have become unreasonable. On three separate credit cards the Amount Due squats resolutely above the ten thousand dollar mark, unaffected by the enormous sums she sends each month. At 19 percent interest, she figures, Todd will have graduated from college before she pays off the debt. She’ll still be wringing payments from her meager take-home as a per diem nurse on the oncology ward, digging herself fruitlessly deeper into the hole. In the memo line of her checks, she scrawls her account number followed by you fuckers, an act that offers diminishing satisfaction with each new check. Lately she’s had to rotate payments; she pays one bill, neglects the next. A shift in tone has occurred in the personalized notes printed on her bills: they’ve evolved from the tactful supposition of Frances’s forgetfulness to the sinister hint of third-party collections.

So there’s the money. Yet, also: there’s nothing else in her life that offers the same satisfaction as the squat plants, the cultivation of perfect, tight, and tender buds, the recognition that she’s expert at something. She grows weed and she grows children, but the weed doesn’t talk back. The children make noise and messes. The weed is reliable. She feeds, she prunes, she waters, and uncomplicated as the sunrise, it grows.

Some of it she smokes, but who needs that much pot? She reaps three ounces per square foot every sixteen weeks, a yield right up there with the big guys. The plants fill a walk-in closet in the basement she’s double-deadbolted against Emily, a kid who emerged from Frances’s womb demanding to know everything.
Frances uses the Screen of Green method, which requires careful attention to the training of each plant for maximum light on the buds and involves a complicated system of chicken wire, drip irrigation, grow lights, air flow fans, irrigation tubes, water pumps, thermostats, and exhaust pipes. Industrial-grade soundboard and weatherstripping ensure all this activity goes undiscovered by Emily. If she suspects anything, she hasn’t mentioned it.

The promise of a cross-country adventure has excited the boys, requiring more bedtime parenting than usual. When all three are finally asleep, Frances goes to the basement to smoke her excellent pot, empties the dehumidifier in her drying cabinet, then pads barefoot to their bedsides and stands over their sleeping bodies. She bends close to their faces to peer at them in the dark. The eyelashes! The lips! She wanders from bedroom to bedroom. Their faces are never, during the day, as still as this. Emily’s scowl is absent; she looks like she did in kindergarten, before Frances married the boys’ father. Emily would hate to know her mother stares at her like this, big teenage girl that she is; she’d accuse Frances of invading her privacy. Frances absorbs the impossible beauty of her children. She gets teary with the joy of their existence and the delirium of primo homegrown.

The day before their trip, Frances purchases an aerodynamic cargo carrier and a serious padlock. Inside the garage, she straps it to the top of the minivan and packs it with cardboard boxes of clothes the boys have outgrown and toys they’ve ignored for months. Together with these items she places two small nylon duffel bags purchased on sale at Target, one decorated with retro daisies and the other with soccer balls. Each contains six vacuum-sealed packages that weigh one pound each. She stayed up most the night before with her vacuum sealer (purchased last year via infomercial), sucking the air out of Ziploc freezer bags and wrapping them in duct tape. She closes the carrier and walks around the car, sniffing.

The next morning she assembles them in the driveway. On the front
lawn, the boys are engaged in a vigorous game of Slug Bug, undaunted by an absence of Volkswagens on their street.

Emily points to the cargo carrier. “What’s in there?”

“Empty!” Frances says. “In case we want to do some shopping. In Memphis.”

“We have malls here, Mom,” Emily says.

Frances lets her gaze fall to Emily’s torso. “What is that you’re wearing? Some sort of dress, or what?” Some mornings it appears to Frances as if Emily’s breasts have become larger as she slept. “Never mind,” Frances tells her. “Come on, boys, let’s hit the road.”

In the car there are significant stretches of quiet. There is so much to see through the windows. Emily and the boys have their heads down, occupied with books or GameBoys or DVDs. Frances is struck with melancholy that no one in the car is in diapers anymore.

“You’re missing this country!” she says. “Look outside, kids!” They must be climbing in altitude, for the landscape has become a hybrid of prairie and desert, long grass dotted with cholla cacti. Winds that don’t seem to know which direction they’re headed whip the grasses flat in great wide swaths of motion, exposing white underbellies, then toss them upright, green again. Given all the gusting energy outside, it strikes Frances as strange that the interior of the minivan is so utterly without breeze. How completely a person can be insulated. “Look, guys!” she says. “Look how the grass is like waves!” Three blonde heads turn to the left. Six green eyes register a view that fails to hold their interest.

“That’s real nice, Mom,” Emily says. She’s reading *Herland* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

“Yeah, Mom, real nice!” yells Todd.

Frances remains silent for ten or twelve miles until Todd informs her it’s time to stop for lunch and besides he needs to poop. This sets off a round of butt jokes. From the back of her throat Emily offers a loud sigh.
“They can’t help it,” Frances tells her.
“Later on you’ll love them,” Frances says.
“Extremely doubtful,” Robbie says. Robbie was named, regretfully, after his father. It was still in the first year of Frances’s marriage to him, even as she suspected the guy was fucking Emily’s soccer coach. The little twerp won’t let Frances call him Bob, Robert, or even Bobby. Todd, on the other hand, was a save-the-marriage baby, a fact for which she is only now on the verge of forgiving herself, thanks to expensive biweekly therapy.

At the Burger King in Gallup, Emily studies the carrier and says, “Why don’t we put the suitcases in there? We’d have more room inside the van.”

“Plenty of room all around, sweetie,” Frances says. Todd is grabbing for Robbie’s milkshake, held maddeningly by Robbie out of short arms’ range. Todd’s face has that pre-eruption expression. It’s evoked so often by Robbie that Frances suspects he’s trying for a record: how many times in one day can he make his brother wail in frustration? “Whoa, little dude,” Frances says, and steers him toward the minivan. “You don’t want that anyhow. Cooties on the straw and such.”

Todd wiggles in satisfaction. He’ll take the comment as evidence she loves him more than she does his brother. Which isn’t true, of course. Before the boys were born she couldn’t bear the thought of loving another child the way she did Emily. But there they were, and she does. She searches the rearview mirror to give Robbie a wink but he won’t meet her eye.

Frances needs to make a decision about lying to Emily. The kid’s inquisitive nature has been bolstered lately by a sharpening sense of logic—that’s what Frances gets, she realizes ruefully, for sending Emily and the boys to decent schools—and an increasingly distrustful outlook on the world in general. Either Frances has to get much craftier about her
basement activity or she needs to give up the deception entirely and tell Emily everything.

But it’s the job of a mother to reveal truths to her children in increments they can handle. Last year when some kid on the playground called Robbie a math dweeb and he came home wanting to know what that meant, Frances didn’t tell him about pocket protectors and rejection by girls and how high school is hell for kids like him. She told him only enough so he understood that the kid who called him that name was confused and jealous and sad. Emily, though, is getting to the age when subtleties are important. At some point soon, Frances is going to need to explain to her that the stuff they’re teaching her in school about drugs ignores important shades of gray. As it is, she’s learning there’s pretty much no difference between pot and crystal meth. Frances would like to tell the zealots that champion the D.A.R.E. curriculum—the cops and vice principals of the world—about the cancer patients on her ward. How grateful the family members are when she pulls them aside in the hallway and tells them she can get them top-grade marijuana to ease the unbearable, humiliating nausea and build the appetites of their loved ones. How, handing her a hundred bucks—a substantial discount—for a baggie containing twenty joints, they sometimes cry with relief and gratitude. They hug her, the big, suffering hugs of people whose nightmares are unfolding before them, and they tell her she’s an angel. That God should bless her.

Robbie, on the other hand, would take in stride the truth about her basement endeavors. For a few miles, Frances engages in a fantasy in which she and her grown-up son work together in a mother-son business. She’d do the cultivating; Robbie, his gift for numbers honed in Advanced Placement math and an MBA from Yale, would handle the management side.

She looks at him in the mirror on the back of her visor. He is quietly placing tiny wads of chewed-up paper in Todd’s hair.

“Emily,” Frances says.
Emily sighs and saves her page with her finger.
“I knew it.” Emily smiles. It’s so easy, Frances thinks. Their trust is always there, right at the surface, waiting.
“I’m giving a bunch of your brothers’ old things away.” She looks behind her, unnecessarily. “You remember Maury, my friend from college? He lives in Memphis now and he has a son and I told him I’d bring them some toys and clothes. Don’t tell Todd and Robbie.”
“Just as long as you don’t try to give away Todd’s baseball stuff,” Emily says, her voice low. She opens her book and smiles into it.
Frances’s supply of cheap tricks cannot, apparently, be exhausted.

There is no shortage of law enforcement patrolling the American interstate system. Emily has empowered herself with a range of front-seat responsibilities, one of which is monitoring Frances’s speed. “It’s a construction zone, Mom,” she says. “Fifty-five.”

Normally Frances would arch an eyebrow and remind her who’s the mother here, but she figures for the sake of harmony she can swallow a little teenage interference. At home, Emily digs through the recycling bin to make sure each of the yogurt containers bears a number two triangle symbol. When the electric bill arrives in a pink envelope, the sign that it’s overdue, she pulls it from the stack of mail spilling out of the wicker basket on the countertop—the basket Emily organizes on a regular basis, throwing out junk and sorting bills by their due date—and shakes it at Frances accusingly. “How can you forget to pay a bill, Mom? How is that possible?” Once Frances came home from work early and found Emily at the kitchen counter, frowning over a stack of credit card statements. The genetic source of all this angst is a mystery: like Frances, Emily’s father—whom Frances hasn’t seen since she was nineteen and pregnant—wasn’t especially concerned about fiscal responsibility. She never knew him well.
enough to understand whether Emily’s neuroses could have come from his side of the family. It doesn’t much matter, though: Frances long ago gave up the struggle to get Emily to relax and act like a kid.

Given the odds, given a 1500-mile road trip with the distraction of the boys in the backseat, it is bound to happen, and it does, in the early afternoon of day two, just west of Amarillo. Emily sees the flashing lights first. “Mom! Oh my God, it’s a police car right behind us! What were you doing, ninety? Mom, he’s pulling you over. Pull over! I can’t believe this!”

“Emily, honey. It’s just a cop.” She does wish, though, that they weren’t in Texas.

“What about that ticket when I was in sixth grade? You got points on your driver’s license, didn’t you? How many will you have now? I swear to God, if you lose your license my life is ruined.”

“Deep breaths, sweetheart. Not a big deal. Not the end of the universe.” She looks in the rearview mirror. The cop hasn’t yet emerged from his car.

“Mom’s in trouble!” Robbie sings.

“Shut up, butthead,” Emily says. She’s already going after her fingernails. Frances cranes her neck to check on Todd. His mouth is in a serious line, his little forehead furrowed. “It’s okay, lovey,” Frances says. “Mommy was just driving a little too fast. I guess.”

The cop is friendly enough. Emily looks straight ahead and grips her armrests. Frances had, it turns out, not seen a sign that required slowing down for a high wind area. Not able to miss the action, Robbie rolls down his window. The cop looks in the backseat. “How’s it going, boys?” he says. They squeak out a couple of tiny okays. They’re such little ones, Frances thinks.

He hands her the citation. “What’re you carrying up top?” he says.

“Just luggage,” she says. “Camping stuff.” She puts her hand near her jaw to hide the throbbing of blood through her jugular vein, then realizes
touching your face is nervous body language and places it casually, she hopes, on the steering wheel.

“Look out for these winds,” he says. “Sometimes these carriers can throw off your balance. A gust hits the car sideways and the extra height makes things tricky.” He gives the carrier a knock with his knuckles. “Especially in these minivans. Slow down, ma’am. Have a nice day, kids.”

They find a campground east of Oklahoma City called Lake Eufaula. The boys indulge in another series of irritating wordplay jokes. Frances finds a spot near the water’s edge, uncomfortably far from the parking lot, up an embankment, but at least a distance away from a family of speedboaters and a group of spirited college-age students with a huge cooler. She decides not to worry about leaving the weed in the carrier overnight. The boys attempt to pitch the tent, give up and spend two hours smearing themselves with mud from the bottom of the lake, washing it off and smearing again. Frances and Emily figure out the tent stakes and poles and loops. They all roast hot dogs and marshmallows and Frances wishes her father were alive to meet his fine grandsons. They could use a grandpa, to play chess with Robbie and catch with Todd. She resolves to learn how to fish, to take them to a pond someday, give them poles and worms. She waits until she’s sure the kids are asleep—the boys go down fast and solid but Emily tosses for a while—before she lights a joint and melts into campfire and stars and the lap of lake water.

In the middle of the night, she wakes up to Emily groping around in the dark. “Where’s the flashlight?” Emily whispers. “I have to pee.”

“Damn, honey. I left it in the car,” Frances says. “My keys—”

“They’re in your jeans pocket,” Emily tells her. The moonlight makes the tent nylon glow greenish. Frances finds her jeans, crumpled in the corner of the tent, and hands the keys to Emily. “It’s in the far back—”

“I know where it is,” Emily says, and zips her way out the door.

“Can you see? Is it too dark?”

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“I’m all right, Mom.” Emily’s tone is designed to inform Frances she doesn’t know a damn thing about her daughter and never will.

The boys are asleep on their sides, mouths open, Robbie’s eyeballs active under his lids. Frances thinks about Emily making her way through the dark campground, considers climbing out of her sleeping bag to go with her to the cinderblock toilet structure. You never know when drunken college boys are lurking in the woods. She could pretend she has to go, also. Her mattress is softening from air loss, but she’s still comfortable and sleepy and doesn’t particularly want to get up. In the distance she hears the chirp of the minivan’s alarm disengaging. Two weeks ago, doing the laundry, Frances found a letter from Emily to her most recent best friend, Breanne. It described a moment after band practice with a boy named Miguel wherein Emily’s breasts were touched. Only the top half, her perfectly tidy handwriting was careful to note: no nipple.

That hardly counts, Frances found herself thinking. When Frances was twelve, her sixteen-year-old cousin Henry grabbed her breasts at an Easter picnic, zeroing in and twisting, and in return Frances whacked him on the temple with the hard edge of a tennis racket, a move that got her in huge trouble, given that the injury over which she retaliated had left no evidence of equal harm.

Emily’s letter indicated nothing about the incident with Miguel being non-consensual, a fact about which Frances feels both relief and foreboding. Her therapist later informed her that fourteen-year-old girls do not leave notes to their friends in the pockets of their jeans unless they’re trying to tell their mothers something.

Wide awake, she waits for her heart to come back to her from the dark woods. Finally she hears Emily’s footsteps. “Sweetie?” she whispers. “Is that you?” Frances unzips her bag, gropes for her shoes and leaves the tent. Emily is standing at the edge of the water.

“Hey, baby,” Frances says. “Not tired?”
“Todd was snoring,” she says. “I rolled him over but then I couldn’t get back to sleep.”

“What are you doing with your backpack?” Frances says.

“I was going to sit here and read.” She shrugs. “Only the flashlight just died.”

“Rats,” Frances says.

“Why did you lie to that cop?” Emily says.

Frances sighs. She’s still feeling the effects of her bedtime joint. “I couldn’t exactly tell him the truth in front of the boys. Plus cops are always suspicious. He’d only have kept us sitting there longer, asking questions.”

“Yeah, all those questions are real inconvenient,” she says.

“What’s that supposed to that mean?” Frances says.

“Nothing. Whatever.”

“Honey, listen, I wanted to talk to you about something.” From across the lake she hears a jet ski. Some people don’t know when to end the party. “Your school counselor called last week.”

Emily expels a puff of air through her nose.

“She told me you brought a condom to school,” Frances tells her.

“It was a dare.” Emily sticks her bare foot into the lake. “That’s the truth.”

“Are you sure, sweetie?” You need to open these doors slowly, Frances thinks. Rushing headlong into a conversation about a certain boy and where his hands have been is a recipe for shutdown.

“That counselor is a bitch, Mom. She’s out to get me.”

“I wasn’t terribly impressed with her, either. But watch your language.”

“She lies. Plus she thinks all girls are boy-crazy.”

“Because you can talk to me about sex any time you need to.”

“Okay, all right. Just, okay. Gross.”

She gives Emily a one-armed hug around the shoulders. It feels good to have broached the subject. “Okay, then,” she says. “What about school, otherwise?”
“It’s fine,” Emily says. She grabs her hair as if to form a ponytail. She’s done this since she was a little girl, as a way of occupying her hands. She’ll smooth it and form it, work out the bumps, then let it go and start again.

“Classes okay? Teachers?”

“Why are you interested all of a sudden?” Emily’s fingers catch on pillow-knots.

“Here,” Frances says. “Let me give you a braid.” She takes Emily’s hair out of her hands and begins to work it into a French braid, as if they’re getting ready for a recital or someone’s wedding. They face the water, Frances standing behind Emily. Her hair smells of green apple shampoo.

“Can’t beat moonlight on a lake,” Frances says.

“You aren’t even using a comb. It’s going to come out crappy,” Emily says.

“Somebody you’re looking to impress, out here in the woods?” Frances says.

“Why are you always making fun of me?” Emily says. She starts to jerk her head away, but her hair is entwined in Frances’s fingers. Reflexively, Frances tightens her grip.

“I’m just teasing, sweetheart,” Frances says. “But you’re right. I’ll try to stop doing that if it hurts your feelings.” How did this child turn out so touchy? Frances wonders. She begins a mental catalog of her own relatives, searching for someone prickly. Someone from whom Emily might have inherited all this sensitivity.

“Why didn’t you get an abortion?” Emily mumbles, softly.

“What? You mean when I was pregnant with you? Emily! Aren’t we done with that question?” Frances says. She stops braiding and tugs Emily’s hair to the side so she can see her face.


“I wanted you, that’s why,” Frances says. There’s no reason for her to tell Emily that she nearly went through with the abortion; that she’d cancelled her appointment, thinking her boyfriend might stick around if
there was a baby. No reason for Emily to know her mother was as typical and unoriginal and youthfully deluded as any other pregnant teenager in the history of pregnant teenagers.

“How did you know you wanted me if you didn’t even know who I was?”

This child knows a lie, Frances thinks, and sighs. “I just knew, Emily.” She needs to rethink her parenting strategy. She needs to adapt.

On the road the next afternoon Todd says, “I want to call Daddy.”

Frances believes in not withholding their father from them, so she hands back her cell phone and tells him to go ahead and call. Also, she wants the guy to be reminded that his sons think about him almost constantly. And that Frances is the kind of mother who goes to the trouble of taking her children on family adventures.

She doesn’t remember, until it’s too late, that Robbie knows the significance of Memphis. All those alarmists screaming about marijuana and memory loss might actually be on to something. “Mom,” says Todd. “Daddy wants to talk to you.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me, Fran,” Robbie says. She hears music in the background, and voices.

“Where are you, in a bar?” Frances says into the phone. “At one o’clock in the afternoon?”

Emily unbuckles her seat belt and climbs back to sit with the boys.

“It’s an office party,” he says. “Someone’s birthday. Why do you say things like that when the boys can hear you? Jesus Christ. Tell me you’re not going to see Maury. You’re not bringing the boys to Memphis to see Maury.”

“Oh, we’re great,” she says, brightly. “They’re having a great time.” Frances peeks at Emily and notices she’s trying to get the boys to play “I Spy.” Lately Frances has noticed Emily’s worry attaching itself to the boys, especially when Frances talks to their father within earshot.
“I swear to God, Fran.” Phone reception notwithstanding, Robbie sounds so much like himself, the kind of guy that women smarter than Frances happily take to bed but never marry. When they’d been dating for a month or so, he’d brought her to a spot in the Coronado National Forest where he’d been cultivating a plot of marijuana plants. It had taken them two hours to hike in, stepping carefully to avoid leaving a path. They’d had a picnic at the edge of his plot, the dense buds, backlit by the low sun, looking like multiple furry penises protruding from each stalk. He’d explained to her that they were surrounded by females: that in the world of cannabis, women are the only desirable sex; that the male is mostly leaves and doesn’t grow those dense, resinous floral clusters. “A male,” he said, “carries genes that influence the quality of his female offspring, but on his own he’s worthless. You grow him only to evaluate his potency. If you can use him to pollinate yourself some kick-ass girl plants, you keep him around.” He lit a joint. “Then you clone your best girls and away we go.” They got carelessly high, lying on a cotton blanket in the shade of his bright green plants. “Yep,” he said, after they’d had the kind of slow-motion sex made more intense by the hypersensitivity of their mucous membranes, “the value of the male is defined by the quality of his daughters.”

Listening to that voice now on the cell phone, Frances reminds herself that in the end she hated him too much to fuck him no matter how high she was. It had taken her years to discover that his counterculture attitude was nothing more than a cover for a lifestyle supported by credit cards and a refusal to take anything seriously, including their family.

“Just don’t do anything stupider than you’ve already done,” Robbie says. “I hope your goddamn barracuda divorce lawyer knows a thing or two about criminal law, because if you get busted, everything’s going to hell.”

She flips the phone closed. For a brief beat in the visor mirror she and Emily look into each other’s eyes.
Whatever happened to the good old-fashioned truck stop diner, Frances wonders. She envisioned root beer floats, milkshakes in metal mixing cups, she and the boys and Emily sitting in a row on chrome barstools. But for dinner they’ve ended up in a convenience store truck stop that houses a series of miniature fast food franchises. Emily wants a fish sandwich, Robbie a hot dog. These places, Frances is sure, are purposefully designed to split up the American family, and as an added benefit to cause mothers the special kind of anxiety that results from their children scattering in a public place. She follows Todd to a self-serve Slurpee machine and lets him pull the handle, releasing the slush into a plastic Arkansas Razorbacks cup.

They reconvene in a booth constructed of bright orange laminate with sticky brown soda rings on the surface. Robbie chose the spot, making a beeline for a table as close as possible to two Border Patrol agents sucking on tubs of soda, hunched over quantities of fast food. Great, Frances thinks: a new fascination with cops. She sips halfheartedly on a diet Pepsi.

Emily holds out her hand for the car key. She needs her backpack to go to the bathroom.

“What for?” Robbie says, loudly. “You need a tampon?”

“Shut up, butthead,” Emily says. Her period started only six months ago, later than all of her friends. Shortly thereafter Robbie pulled a Kotex out of the box in the hall bathroom and ran around the front yard with the pad stuck to his forehead. Frances can’t tell whether his age-inappropriate fascination with menstruation is based on scientific curiosity or purely on the joy of infuriating his sister.

Frances and the boys have finished their refreshments by the time Emily emerges from the bathroom. She’s walking slowly and has an oddly serious look on her face. Frances begins to scoot out of the booth, to see what’s the matter, when Emily opens her backpack and pulls out something wrapped in duct tape. A Ziploc bag. Emily stops five booths away, looking Frances in the eye. The two Border Patrol agents are seated exactly
between them. She’s openly holding the package of weed, but has kept the backpack positioned to block it from their view.

“Robbie put ice in my hair!” Todd yells.
Frances meets Emily’s gaze. She stands up.
“Mom!” Todd says. “Tell him to quit it!”
“Hush now,” Frances says. The boys crane their necks to see what she’s looking at.

Emily hasn’t moved. “Emily?” Frances says. “Honey?”
One of the Border Patrol agents raises his head.
“What, Mom?” Todd shouts. “What’s wrong with Emily?”
Emily stuffs the package into her backpack. She continues to look directly at Frances. Apparently Frances’s lectures on the importance of maintaining eye contact have not gone unheeded. On the way to the car, her knees threaten to buckle.

Emily herds the boys into the van, gets them settled into the farthest seat back, the spot Todd calls the wayback. They hook into headphones with a Jackie Chan movie.

In the passenger seat Emily cries, quietly, for at least twenty miles.
“How did you get to it?” Frances finally says. On the opposite side of the interstate, headlights approach, then race on. All those people inside all those cars, hurtling across the darkened landscape.
“Last night. At the campground,” Emily tells her. “I wanted to make sure you weren’t going to give away any of my stuff. I just was looking for my stuff, Mom.”
“I told you, Emily, I wouldn’t give away your things.”
“Why should I believe you? You lie to me all the time.”
“I do no such thing, Emily. And we’re not doing this right now. The boys.”
“The boys, right. The boys.” But Emily looks back at them too. She can’t help herself, Frances thinks. This is a kid who needs to be in charge.
“I’m warning you, Emily. I swear to God. You have no idea. You
think you’re such a grown-up. Such an adult. Such the responsible one. Let me tell you. Let me say this.”

“Shush, Mom,” Emily says.

“Do you know anything at all about credit cards?” Frances says. “Do you know about 19 percent interest? Do you know how much, in dollars and cents, it would cost a single mother of three to pay off twenty thousand dollars? Take a guess. How many pairs of new sneakers is that? How many pounds of hamburger?”

Emily’s mouth opens unattractively. Her jaw is being pulled down, Frances thinks, by the dead weight of all that ignorant righteousness.

“Would you at least whisper?” Emily says.

“Take a guess! How about mortgages? What do you know about mortgages?” It’s possible Frances is now yelling. “What do you know about personal bankruptcy? And while we’re at it, how about divorce? What happens, exactly, when the custodial parent is deemed financially insolvent? Any answers yet, missy? Anything else you want to add? Anything you can do better than me here? Maybe you’d like to drive this car? Get us to Memphis?”

It occurs to Frances to check the rearview mirror. The boys have removed their headphones and are peering over the seat in front of them at their crying sister. Two wrinkled brows, two pairs of startled eyes, two furry heads edged in light from the cars on the road behind them.

“It’s okay, boys,” Emily says. “I’m okay.”

“Nothing to see here,” Frances says. “Enough gawking.”

At ten o’clock, Frances pulls over at a rest stop outside Little Rock. While Emily and the boys are in the bathrooms brushing their teeth she calls Maury. “I can’t meet you in friggin’ Arkansas, Fran,” he says. “Jason has one of his god-awful violin recitals first thing in the morning. If I miss another one Eileen is going to divorce me. You’re only two hours away, give or take. Ring the bell when you get here, wake me up. We’ll have beds
ready for you and the kids. Tomorrow we’ll grill some burgers, the kids will go for a swim. Hang tough.”

Emily and the boys climb back into their seats and Frances forces the car eastward. Were there a bridge over the interstate right here, a convenient way to turn around, she might have yielded to the urge to head back home. She tells the boys to take out their pillows and lay down. They drape a blanket over the seats and make a fort, which means she can’t look at them sleeping. She lets them curl up with seatbelts buckled around their waists and tries not to think about the reasons this is unsafe. Emily reclines the passenger seat and falls asleep, or pretends to. She’s such a little girl. Such a small, fatherless thing.

By midnight, pretty much the only vehicles on the road are tractor-trailers. Frances drinks coffee and thinks about life as a long-haul driver, how uncomplicated and free of strings it must be. How quiet.

She takes the first exit after the enormous bridge across the Mississippi into Memphis. Mud Island Park is nearly deserted. She finds a spot under a burned-out streetlight at the far edge of the park. She wants to be close to the water, to watch the current under the bright moon and appreciate its vast wideness. Suddenly she’s no longer in a hurry to get to Maury’s house. She’ll sleep for an hour or so in this quiet van with her tousled children, their mouths open, their bodies having begrudgingly adapted to these makeshift beds. The boys’ fort has collapsed; Emily’s pillow has fallen to the floor. She is dreaming. Todd stirs, and raises his head. “Are we there?” She shakes her head, puts her finger to her lips, and he’s asleep again, too tired for curiosity.

Frances slips from the car. She walks down a short path to the edge of the water. The river is flat and slow and wide, entirely as she expected. A barge passes, its lights distant and comforting.

Emily has never been good with life’s gray areas. She’s a child: children feel most comforted in the presence of clarity about right and wrong. Had Frances’s marriage worked out, it’s possible that Robbie’s easygoing
nature might have had a positive effect on Emily. During the final years, Frances thought the two of them were even starting to develop a mild respect for one other. But she’s not Robbie, and she’s not about to try parenting her daughter the way Robbie might have done. Tomorrow Frances will take a walk with Emily, maybe take her to lunch, leave the boys with Maury and Eileen. They’ll talk. She’ll clear everything up.

She smokes a whole joint. She needs to sleep soundly, needs to dull the effect of the coffee and the discomfort of the driver’s seat and the heaviness in her gut. In the morning she’ll feel fuzzyheaded and drained, but for now she needs the familiar numbness of her own finely cultivated weed. A little smoke helps her, it really does, to put things in perspective, to keep the despair manageable. She stands there for a long time, watching the stillness.

Emily opens her eyes and watches her mother at the river’s edge. She does not need to see the joint to know what’s going on. And when the idea to toss her mother’s marijuana into the actual Mississippi River comes into Emily’s head, there is no chasing it out. Nothing else can be done. She thinks and thinks and thinks about it, and finally she cannot imagine their future unfolding any other way. After a while, her mother returns to the van and Emily keeps her eyes closed and waits for her to fall very soundly asleep. She waits a long time. For a girl her age, Emily has an unusual capacity for patience.

Lately, at home, when Emily wakes up in the night, she experiences a desire to go to her mother’s bedroom and climb into bed with her, like she used to do before the boys were born. It’s strange how strong the feeling is. The night before they left on this trip, Emily even got so far as her bedside. When her mother’s asleep she looks older, and just as impatient as she does when she’s awake. Emily didn’t, last week, get into bed with her mother, and now she wishes she had.
In the driver’s seat her mother sleeps with her head thrown back, looking like nothing could wake her up. Her stale, smoky breath fills the car. Certainly the soft click of the keys slipping from the ignition doesn’t disturb her. Emily is careful to turn off the dome light before she opens the door.

She moves quietly, looking where she steps to avoid snapping twigs or sending a loose rock skittering. She’s a careful girl; she’s always been careful, and not very well appreciated.

For the hundredth time that day, she thinks about Miguel. It’s nearly ten o’clock back home; he’ll be in his room, playing video games. When her mom was at the river’s edge, Emily swiped her cell phone from the glove box. When she’s done with the duffel bags she’ll call Miguel, who will tease her about sneaking off to call him. He says she needs to quit being so good. She should skip doing her homework once in a while, for example. Also she should let him do more than she currently allows. Let him put it in other places; let him do it in different ways. He’s seventeen, he’s reminded her. He needs to experiment. She’s always thought her goodness is the thing about her that keeps him around; that he wouldn’t find her so mysterious if she weren’t so good, but maybe she’s been wrong.

The lock on the cargo carrier opens easily. The two duffel bags are just where she found them last. They aren’t really that heavy. She pulls them out and sets them in the dirt. As she’s easing the lid shut, she looks in the van’s window and there’s Todd, awake. He opens his mouth to say something and she puts her finger to her lips. Obediently, he shuts up. She moves quickly to the passenger door and motions him forward. She smiles at him, and raises her eyebrows. He loves adventures. He’s really not such a horrible kid, when you get him alone.

She holds the duffel bags in one hand and Todd’s elbow in the other, helping him quietly down the path, away from the van. At the water’s edge she gives him the daisy duffel bag; he’ll be reluctant to throw away
anything with soccer balls on it. She tells him it’s full of zucchini and carrots. He believes her; he still trusts people. “But it’s wasting vegetables!” he says, delighted. He tries to swing it, to get some momentum. “It’s heavy,” he says, his little-boy forehead wrinkled in seriousness.

“Do this,” Emily tells him, and she swings the other duffel around in a full-armed circle, a comic display of softball-pitcher enthusiasm. Todd laughs aloud.

In her pocket, the phone rings. Emily slings the duffel bag over her shoulder and fishes the phone out. Miguel wouldn’t call her mom’s cell phone, would he?

“No, she’s asleep,” Emily tells him. “It’s late here, you know.”

“Is it daddy?” Todd says too loudly, forgetting they’re on a secret mission. “Let me talk to him!” He drops the daisy duffel in the mud and reaches for Emily’s arm, tugging at her shirt.

“Is that one of the boys?” Robbie asks. “What are they doing up? Where are you?”

Todd dances in circles around Emily, trotting like a pony. “Daddy! We’re by the river!” he yells.

“We’re fine,” she tells him, and hands the phone to her brother. “Keep your voice down,” she says, and for good measure knits her eyebrows in exaggerated seriousness.

Lately Emily has begun to understand the tricky nature of mistruth, of roundabout deception. In real life people don’t lie to you straight up. Miguel doesn’t lie to her, not exactly. It’s up to her to discover things. She has a gift for recognizing a half-truth. Last Friday Emily was alone with him on the couch in her basement and he swore he didn’t mean to put it all the way in, not without the condom she’d laid on the table—and when they happen, these halfway lies, when she confronts him, he smiles at her,
confesses, and is chastened, genuinely. She holds the power then: she’s the one who decides whether he’s forgiven. But what if she got pregnant? Would she end up with more power, or less?

Todd chatters into the phone. The kid doesn’t get enough time with his dad. Emily sits on a rock, her back to her brother, and opens the duffel bag. She pulls out one of the bundles, smells it, turns it over in her hands. She thinks about the time and energy her mother put into creating this tidy parcel of drugs, and examines the package, how neatly and carefully it’s been assembled. She did a nice job, Emily thinks, and then wonders why this is surprising. She zips it back inside the bag.

“Here,” her brother says, handing her the phone. He canters a few steps away, bends to pick up a stick, and begins poking at a patch of mud illuminated by moonlight.

“Emily?” his father says. “What’s going on there? Todd says your mom and Robbie are asleep in the van? And you guys are near a river somewhere?”

“The Mississippi,” she tells him.

“Is everything all right?”

“Sure,” she says. The bag of drugs on her lap weighs, she guesses, a little bit more than a sack of potatoes.

“Are you crying? Sweetie?”

Emily tries to calm her breath. “She’s such a liar,” she finally says. Juxtaposed against all those years of thinking of this guy as an interloper between her and her mother, and the despair, then resignation, she lived through after the arrival of one baby and then a second, Emily’s disloyalty is both liberating and horrible. She remembers a day at the mall, when Robbie convinced her mother that Emily was old enough to have her ears pierced. While the girl at the Earring Hut prepared the piercing gun, he winked at Emily, evidently trying to establish some sort of conspiratorial rapport. But she rolled her eyes, refusing to give him the satisfaction even as she bounced on the chair in anticipation.
Robbie sounds now like he’s holding his breath. “What do you mean?”
“You know what I mean. The pot is what.”
“Oh, Emmy. Damn.” She heard the impatience in his voice.
“How much is all of this worth?” she asks.
“Honey, this isn’t appropriate. Why don’t you wake up your mom? I’d like to talk to her.”
“I’m sitting here with two duffel bags full of marijuana,” Emily whispers. She glances over her shoulder. Todd is still occupied with his mud project. “Looks like each one has six packages in it, and each package is about the size of a brick. Like the red bricks on our back patio, only not so heavy. Just tell me. How much?”
He coughs, clears his throat. “Emily, listen to me. Put your mom on the phone.”
“I’m about to throw it all in the river,” she says.
“About twenty thousand dollars,” he says. “Maybe twenty-five.”
Emily inhales, but quietly. “Listen,” Robbie tells her. “You know your mother. Sometimes her judgment . . . well. She loves you, you know that, right? But she doesn’t think things through. She goes headlong, consequences be damned. Responsibility isn’t her strength.”
“Like it’s yours,” Emily says.
“Okay, now—”
She cranes her neck to check on Todd, who is behind her, gripping the daisy duffel at arm’s length, whipping it in a circle parallel to the ground, his little body the fulcrum of a centrifugal spin. He stops, staggers, gives her a dizzy grin. “Put that down,” she tells him. “Don’t touch it.” He grimes at her and returns to his mud and stick.
The muddy river glows orange in the Memphis night. “You people think I don’t know anything,” she says into the phone. “Mom thinks I have no idea. I can read, you know. I understand things.”
“Would you wake up your mother, Emily? Would you please just put her on the phone?”
“I know how to balance a checkbook, for example,” she tells him. She also knows how much money he sends them and when it’s not enough and when it’s late and what happens when her mother can’t make a deposit. She taught herself how to go online and examine the bank accounts and credit card statements. After school, before her mother gets home from work, Emily logs in using the password she created and watches in dismay and sometimes panic as interest compounds and checks bounce and the late fees pile up. Last month she sent MasterCard two hundred dollars from her own savings. She went to the post office and converted her babysitting cash into a money order. Her mother didn’t even notice.

“I’m not all that awful, you know,” he tells her.

“I didn’t realize we were talking about you,” Emily says.

Robbie sighs into the phone, an irritating burst of static. Emily wonders if he’s a little bit high right now. Wouldn’t a sober person realize it’s the middle of the night in Memphis and wait until morning to call? “Are you all right?” he says. “Have you spoken to your mother about this?”

“We’ve been talking plenty.” But last night at the lake in Oklahoma, when Emily tried to confess she’s been having sex with Miguel, when she tried to bring up the subject, her mother purposefully misunderstood. What’s a kid supposed to think when she asks her mother, What would happen if I got an abortion? and the woman pretends she heard a whole other sentence? Is a kid supposed to believe the weed is to blame?

Behind her, up the path, Emily hears the car door slam shut. At the same instant there is a splash in the river. She turns to see Todd jumping gleefully on the shore. “What a pitch!” he yells, and cups his hands over his mouth, exhaling noisily to create the sound of cheering crowds. “Ladies and gentlemen! The kid does it again!”

“Todd?” Emily’s mother calls. “Emily? What was that?” She runs down the path, toward the water. Robbie emerges from the van, barefoot, following gingerly behind her.

A pocket of air inflates the round end of the duffel Todd has just
thrown; it looks like a pink-daisy lily pad bobbing lazily downriver. He must have had real momentum behind his fling to have gotten it so far.

Emily’s mom stands helplessly at the water’s edge, her hands on the top of her head. “Oh no, no, no,” she says. She crouches in the mud. The resignation on her face, Emily notices for the first time, is that of a person for whom despair is part of the everyday. “Shit,” she whispers.

Todd claps his hands over his ears.

Emily drops the phone, kicks off her sandals, and steps firmly into the river, wet silt slimy between her toes, the cold a surprise. She flops into the water belly first, and in five certain strokes downstream catches the bag in her fingertips just as it loses the last of its air and slips under the surface.

When Emily turns toward the shore, eyes bleary with the Mississippi, her mother’s moonlit face holds a curious mixture of admiration and terror. Which seems just about right.