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CRASHING AGAINST THE WOOD

by

JESSICA RYAN
B.A. University of Central Florida, 2007

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for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of English
in the College of Arts and Humanities
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ABSTRACT

In this collection of short stories, the characters struggle to recover equilibrium in their lives that have been turned upside down. They struggle against one another, against change, and against the loss of loved ones. No matter what bonds hold the characters together, the underlying tension of change and reaction permeates their relationships and threatens what they know to be true. A theme of discontent runs in these stories. Something beneath the surface is not right, and the characters struggle to climb out of the mess their lives have become.

Some of them have been stifled, like the narrator in “Resounding Gong, Clanging Cymbal,” who’s being pressured on all sides to marry. Some of them are toeing the line of fitting in and being independent, like the teenagers in “Hibiscus Boulevard,” who, caught up in the last days of summer, are more concerned with being adults than being kids. In the title story, the teenagers in a small town find a way to memorialize one of their own by performing the act that caused him to die. The cautious bonds between the characters are continuously being worked by one another, by oppressive scenery and location, by the aftereffects of dysfunction, or by unrequited love. No matter what the context or situation, something is always just a little bit off, or wrong, in each story in this collection, and the characters must do their best to correct the situations.

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PEAS

When I walk outside of the office building, and the sun shines directly in my eyes as it has every weekday for the past thirty-three years, I expect to be happy. Happy that I never have to see the sun exactly from that space ever again, happy that I am officially retired. But I can't muster happiness. I'm not even relieved. My wife, Elaine, is throwing a surprise party tonight, and my daughter is bringing her new boyfriend.

This boyfriend is the one she met at the dry cleaners. The fact that Lucy even owns clothes that require dry cleaning makes me nervous. Two years ago, she was in AmeriCorps. She wore T-shirts, jeans, and sneakers every day. For Christmas Eve last year, she wore a halter dress made from old red T-shirts. My wife was mortified when I donned a red T-shirt—with a Margaritaville logo on the back—and gave my daughter a high five. We sat in the fourth row of the church and when a few church-goers gave us withering stares, I leaned over and whispered to Lucy, "Solidarity, sister."

When my wife told me Lucy met Stuart at the dry cleaners, I asked, "What, does she work there?"

I duck my head and walk to my car. My arms are empty—I started cleaning out my office weeks ago. For the past few days I have sat in an ergonomically correct chair, at an expansive cherry desk. For the past few days I have mastered Spider Solitaire and traced shapes in the dust-lined holes where picture frames, a pencil cup, and my nameplate used to be. For the past few days when I've been bored with sitting, I've been roaming the office and getting in the way of everyone else's work. For the past few days I have dreaded this surprise party.

I drive home in silence. My mind doesn't stray at all in the eleven-minute drive. I try to focus on the cars ahead of me. These cars are all hybrids or SUVs that claim to be fuel efficient,

of course, and relatively new. I am still driving the Ford Taurus that I've had for eight years. It's been in three fender-benders, and the paint is chipping off in spots. It's the car in which Lucy learned how to drive. While she had her permit she caused three accidents by swerving into neighboring lanes and slamming on her brakes—but she usually managed to drive away and leave the accident part to other drivers. Because she was only on record for being physically involved in one crash, she was able to get her license without too much trouble. I took great joy in this, mostly because she set a new record in the family: Caused Most Car Accidents in a Twelve Month Period. Every once in a while, if I'm driving and Elaine is in the passenger seat, she mutters things about me taking the title back. When Elaine worries about Lucy's driving, Lucy dives right into a monologue from the Comedy Driving School she attended. Elaine worries too much, but I figure one of us has to worry.

When I pull into the neighborhood, I see vaguely familiar cars parked along the road. Elaine went to so much trouble, inviting people to this party, reminding them to keep it a secret, asking the neighbors if it was okay that people parked in front of their houses. Elaine has been repeating the phrase “a small, family get-together” for weeks now. I'm pretty sure that means she invited people I went to high school with.

The closer I get to our house, the more cars are parked bumper to bumper. But suddenly, there's a break, and there are no cars in front of our split-level. It's a sturdy little house that now looks completely conspicuous. Our next-door neighbor, Annie the kindergarten teacher, is currently in the yard between our two houses. Judging from her new occupation as the statue holding a casserole dish, I assume she thinks she's ruined the surprise. I wave at her from the curb, and a smile spreads across her face. She waves, then turns to look at the orange tree a few

feet to her right. She touches a blossom or two and holds the casserole out to her side as though it's a spade or a gardening glove.

I pull into the driveway, next to a strange little Toyota Yaris, and take the keys out of the ignition. I sit in the driveway and stare at the car next to me. The Yaris is the size of a piggy bank. If this is the guy's car, I'll be damned if he drives Lucy anywhere in it.

Annie is still standing in the front yard. I look at her through the window, and she finally moves toward her own front door. The casserole dish is now being passed back and forth between her hands, as though she's finally realized that it is not an appropriate gardening tool.

I hear voices coming from inside the house as I walk to the front door. Before I touch the welcome mat, I take my jacket off and drop it on the rocking chair by the door. Roll up my sleeves, loosen my tie, and undo the top two buttons of my shirt. I'm going to need air in a minute, I can feel it.

The door opens before I touch it, and Lucy stands in front of me. She grins and throws her arms around my neck before I can say anything. She didn't push herself up to do so, and I look down. She's balancing on one leg, and the one that's sticking out behind her has a high heel on it. "Happy retirement, Daddy," she whispers. I peer into the house behind her. It looks empty, but I hear muffled laughing. Lucy pulls back and holds me at arm's distance; it's like our roles have been reversed, and now I'm the one to twist away. "You look tired."

"Thirty-three years behind a desk will do that to you." Maybe I do look tired, but I don't care about that. I look at Lucy. Those heels have a good three inches on them. She wears a black cocktail dress. Maybe that's what gets dry-cleaned. She works at The Limited, and she's mentioned a few times the quality clothes they sell that are perfect for the "up-and-coming young professional woman." This dress looks young, and it makes her look slightly professional.

Professional could read as “dry clean only.” Her blonde hair is pulled back into a bun. She looks like an adult. I want to ask her where the jeans are, and what happened to the flip-flops, but I’m worried she’ll say she left them at her boyfriend’s apartment.

That’s the one thing I’ve been able to ignore for a long time now. Once, when Lucy was in town visiting, I heard her on the phone with a friend. She joked about being laughed at by neighbors during the “walk of shame” as she returned home in the morning in last night’s dress. I kept telling myself that it was an all-night party, and not because she had crashed at a boy’s house. When Lucy calls us from an unfamiliar phone number, and I can hear a deep voice in the background, I pretend it’s a friend’s boyfriend. Surely it’s not Lucy’s.

The boyfriend and the dry cleaning are just more things I don’t understand about Lucy, more things that push her a little farther from me.

Lucy smiles again. “Are you going to get a hobby now?”

I smile back, because the idea is almost laughable. Much to my wife’s chagrin, I have never picked up a hobby. Elaine knits; I sit on the couch next to her and watch TV. Elaine plays tennis at the club; I sit on the sidelines with a gin and tonic. Elaine dabbled in painting for a while; I watched her paint speckle the floor. When Lucy was a child, her interests were constantly changing. One week she liked baseball, and then she wanted to take up swimming lessons. She painted and took piano lessons and even took some knitting classes. I was with her every step of the way. My hobbies have always been my wife and daughter. I’m not quite sure how else I could live.

Lucy reaches behind her and shuts the door. “I’m supposed to distract you. Mom’s not all set up yet.”

“She is a perfectionist.”

She's quiet for a moment, and her lips purse slightly. This happens when she thinks about something serious. I used to make fun of her for it. I used to tell her to play up her looks, and downplay the thinking thing. It always made her smile. Whenever a boy would break up with her, she would come to me and—in a half-hearted attempt to get herself over him—tell me that I'm the only man who loves her for her brains. I feel like she might be trying to introduce the new boy—one who apparently does love her for her brains—so I take her hand and move for the door.

“Let's ruin the surprise, kid.”

“Dad, come on—”

But it's too late, and I open the door. I see familiar faces: neighbors, old friends, a few relatives, some coworkers that I actually liked. They're all standing on the stairs and in the living room, and they look completely surprised that Lucy couldn't keep me out there. Elaine moves to the front of the group. No one says anything. A rehearsed “Surprise” seems to want to escape from everyone, but these people look too confused to speak in unison.

The door shuts behind me. Lucy stands next to me and pats me on the back. I turn my head and see her shaking her own, with an odd expression on her face. Is that disgust? Disappointment? “Congrats, Dad.” She walks past me and I hear her say to someone in the crowd that she needs a drink.

Elaine comes up to me and smiles. “Surprise.” A few of the people behind her repeat it, but it's pathetic. As though they realize it, they disperse up the stairs to the kitchen and living room. Elaine pulls on my tie, and she kisses me. “Everyone's here, Jack.”

“Really? Pretty sure Annie's hiding in her own house.”

She swats my arm. “Come on. You need a drink.” She takes my hand and leads me up the stairs. Halfway up, she pauses and says briefly, “Lucy’s boyfriend’s name is Stuart. Be nice to him.”

“I’m always nice to her boyfriends.”

“You’ve hated them all, and you know it,” she says. At the top of the stairs, she leads me to the kitchen. A makeshift bar is set up, and she fumbles her way around. Elaine is not a big drinker. She tried Cosmopolitans when *Sex and the City* was big, but they made her limbs go numb. The last time she had two drinks was at her fifty-fifth birthday dinner. After the second vodka-cranberry, she stood up from the table only to slump right into me. She likes to say that I laughed raucously and said, “Weebles wobble, but they don’t fall down.”

I was four gin and tonics in.

I don’t remember saying anything.

Through the din of people, I see Lucy talking to a young man. Stuart. He’s wearing a polo shirt and khaki pants. He dressed up for this thing. He’s even height with her, but she’s got those heels on. I’m taller than him, hands down. If we went out back, and if I ever really played, I could probably teach him a little something on the basketball court. I make a mental note to practice and invite the kid back.

Elaine pushes a drink into my chest, and holds a bottle of water in her other hand. Before I can ask her anything about Stuart, some of the neighbors surround me. Edward from down the street asks, “Do you miss work already, Jack?” and claps me on the back. His wife laughs next to him and clinks her glass to mine. I raise it in a slight toast and take a gulp before I answer.

“No, Ed, not yet.”

Behind him, Melinda from across the street jokes, “Have you started looking for part-time jobs?” She pushes a piece of paper towards me. I take it in my hand. An application for McDonald’s. Edward sees it and laughs. He moves away, and I hear him telling someone about it. I press the paper against my chest and fold it awkwardly.

“Thanks, Melinda, I may need that. Is seasonal hiring still big?” She laughs and continues to stand there, as though we have things we need to talk about. I’m almost pleased to see Thomas and Gretchen from the club come up.

“Are you bored, yet?” Gretchen grins.

“Not yet.”

Thomas leans forward. “Where are you going to retire to if you already live in Florida?” His question is followed with sharp laughter, as though he simply cannot believe that joke came out of his own mouth.

I mumble, “Oh, that’s a good one, Tom.” He shakes my hand, pumps it a few times, and meanders away. More neighbors approach. My gin and tonic is gone by the time I’ve talked to seven people. I scan the crowd for Elaine. When I catch her eye, I hold up my drink and call, “More gin this time.”

Every time I get closer to the corner where Lucy and Stuart are smiling at each other, another person comes by and takes me somewhere else. I don’t enjoy parties. I never have. I don’t like to hear about my neighbor’s recent LASIK experience, or his wife’s addiction to Botox. Douglas, a man who retired two years ago from the same company I just left, stopped by just to tell me how much the pension sucks and how he’s working two part-time jobs. I see Annie and compliment her on her orange tree. She tries to change the subject by talking about the woman with the Botox addiction. Two people tell me how charming Stuart is.

It's then that I stop trying to approach Lucy. If Stuart is really all that charming, maybe I don't want to talk to him. As though he can read my mind and know that we've switched positions, I see him coming my way. I weave through the crowd, on the defense, searching for someone who surely hasn't met Stuart yet, and therefore can't introduce the two of us when he finally corners me. If he corners me. The third drink I'm working on assures me that I can be quite sneaky.

My sister-in-law, Nina, finds me, and all of a sudden Stuart doesn't seem like such a bad person to talk to. Nina looks like Elaine, with about twenty more pounds packed on. She clinks her glass against mine in greeting. "So, you're retired. Bored yet?"

I smile at her. "At the moment, yes."

Nina smiles back. Rudeness has always slid right off her. I resolve to try harder.

"Stuart's lovely. Looks like Lucy finally found a good one." I empty my third gin and tonic. I look for Elaine, but I don't find her. "Do you have enough saved for the wedding?" Nina asks.

"What wedding?" I raise my glass in the air, high above my head, and swirl the ice cubes around. If there's any chance that Elaine has a homing device embedded in her, I hope this is it.

"Lucy's. She seems pretty serious about Stu," Nina says. I bring the glass back to my mouth and suck the alcohol from an ice cube. Nina rests a hand on my arm. "Lily's wedding cost twenty thousand. We only had fifteen set aside. You've been thinking about it, right? You have, haven't you? Jack, this is your daughter's only wedding we're talking about."

"*You're* talking about," I correct her. I sniff my glass, searching for any remaining booze. "Anyway, Lucy always struck me as the two wedding kind of girl. Who knows, she might even go for three."

“That’s an awful thing to say.”

“She’s always been an over achiever.”

Elaine appears. I gesture to Nina with one hand and hold out my drink with the other. Elaine smiles at her sister and asks her to come meet one of our neighbors. I am left to my own devices with the drink. Over her shoulder, Elaine’s eyes plead with me. This small, family get-together took a lot of planning on her part. After thirty-three years of working at the same place, I really just want to take a nap on the couch, or go get ice cream with Lucy, or watch Elaine cook dinner, maybe help by slicing a few tomatoes or something. There isn’t much else I could ask for.

Dinner is being passed around when I happen upon Lucy and Stuart. They’re sitting on the floor of the study. A dictionary is in between them, to hold their drinks and save the hardwood floor from condensation. Lucy’s high heels stand neatly in front of them. Holding his plate, Stuart sits cross-legged. Lucy’s legs are stretched out before her, and her plate is in her lap. Her stockinged toes wiggle. She’s laughing, and he looks pleased with himself.

“Hey, this is my hideout,” I say.

Lucy smiles and says, “We found it first.”

I walk into the study with my plate held out awkwardly in front of me. “Why did your mother serve food we have to eat with a fork and knife if most people are standing?”

Lucy takes the initiative. “Stuart, this is my dad, Jack. Dad, this is Stuart.”

Stuart hands his plate to Lucy, who seamlessly takes it. He stands, and I know what kind of man he is. The kind who stands at a table when a woman excuses herself to leave, the kind who circulates at parties, the kind who tries damned hard to make sure everyone is enjoying

themselves. Not that there's anything wrong with that kind of person. I've respected people like him before. He holds his hand out to me. "Man of the hour. Nice to meet you."

I shake his hand and sit on an ottoman a few feet in front of them. Their conversation has stopped, and I don't let myself think that I'm the reason for it. Maybe Lucy has gotten all of his anecdotes and jokes out of him. He does look boring.

"Daddy, Stuart works at an ad agency."

I look at him and say, "I worked in insurance for thirty-three years. How long have you been in advertising?"

"About ten months." He says this slowly, as if he can't judge my character yet, and adds, "Sir," as though it's an afterthought.

"Ten months," I repeat it to him as I cut a piece of grilled chicken. "It's a long time for someone as young as you."

Stuart pats his mouth with a napkin. "Well, I am twenty-six. I'm trying to settle down. I know it's a habit with my generation to have jobs now, and not careers. I'd like to think that this is my career. I want to be there for the long haul."

My eyes widen. I look at Lucy. "Well, that's boring." Her mouth opens and she looks like she's in the beginning stages of having a horror-movie, shocked face. I try to rope her into a conversation. "Have you talked to Amy or Jennifer recently?"

Her face is blank for a moment. When she processes where I've taken the conversation, she shakes her head. "Not in a few weeks, I guess."

"Why is that?" I cut a piece of steak. "That happens a lot with young women, right? After college, the roommates you've had for four years just drift off? I think I read an article in *Time* about it."

“I read *Time* too. Did you catch the article last week about the recovering tourism in Thailand?”

I ignore Stuart’s question and look at Lucy. “Why have you stopped talking to them? They’re nice girls.”

She tugs on a lock of her hair and says, “Amy’s backpacking in Europe, and Jennifer moved to Seattle. They’re both a little busy. So am I, Dad.”

“Doing what?”

Lucy looks at Stuart and then back at me. Her expression says it all. Stuart is what she’s been busy with, and here I am, not even caring about it. I resolve to not care some more, but Lucy’s fingers are tugging on Stuart’s hand, begging him to speak. I can’t imagine what he has to say about *Time*, so I speak first. “So do you drive that Yaris out there?”

Lucy knows my feelings on her being a sitting target in small compact cars and jumps in fast as though her words can cover mine. “Stuart and I met at the dry cleaners.” She pats Stuart’s leg. “Tell him, honey, it’s a funny story.”

Before Stuart can begin, I say, “Yeah, that’s been bothering me. What do you own that requires dry cleaning?” I ignore the expression on Lucy’s face and continue. “Last I checked, you were a jeans kind of girl. When did you start wearing dresses? Or trousers?”

Lucy pauses, and her lips purse again. Finally, she says, “I can’t wear jeans forever, Dad.”

“Sure you could,” I say. I pat my own mouth with a napkin and turn to Stuart. “Stuart, let’s think of some jobs that Lucy could have that don’t require her to wear... well, fancy things.”

Having been edged out of a conversation so easily before, Stuart speaks with caution. “Sir, I think Lucy’s pretty happy at her job right now. She loves her coworkers, and the hours are flexible.” When he’s done, he smiles at Lucy, as if he’s done a terrific job of explaining her life to her father.

I nod. “Sounds like Stuart thinks working at The Limited might be the career for you, Luce.” I stab a few peas with my fork and chew slowly. “Man,” I say, “you can’t beat these peas.”

I look at Lucy. She deftly picks up a single pea between her thumb and index finger. She places it on the dictionary. She meets my eye and without flinching, her fist crashes down on the pea. The drink tumbles off the dictionary onto the floor. She lifts her hand; the pea is a green circle smashed into the cover of the dictionary. She wipes her hand on her dress and leaves a smear of green. She puts her plate on the floor and walks out of the study.

Stuart stares at the dictionary. I look at the peas on my plate and say, “Well, maybe you can.”

“Excuse me, Jack,” Stuart says. He says my name with a tinge of disgust on his tongue. It makes me wonder what Lucy has told him about me. Lucy and I used to share the same wit, the same pleasure in making dry remarks about the people around us, or the situations we were in. But this is different. With that one sentence, he acts like he knows I’m a jackass, and that he has been more than obliging to come to Lucy’s father’s retirement party. Maybe he didn’t want to come, but she begged, because it’s her father, and even though he thinks I’m a moron, he did it anyway, because it’s Lucy.

We cannot ignore what Lucy wants.

He leaves his plate on the floor too, and leaves me to finish my dinner in the study. I stay in there for about ten more minutes. I can't eat anything. I'm not that hungry. I look at the remnants of the pea and wonder what happened to my Lucy. When did she start thinking that working at The Limited was good enough?

When I walk back out to the kitchen and living area, no one seems to notice that I've been gone. I look around, but I can't see Lucy. I don't know why I'm looking. I don't want to apologize. I don't want to talk. I want to pretend that nothing happened in the study, and that if we just stand in the same room for a while, we'll have our silent communication down pat again, and we'll know exactly when to move to the exit to escape the ridiculousness that this party is.

I find Elaine first. She asks me if I want another drink. I don't.

"Jack, do you know what's wrong with Lucy? She and Stuart left a few minutes ago."

I look around again. The party does look empty. "They left? For good?"

"Yeah," Elaine says. "She didn't look well. Did she say anything to you?"

"No," I say. "Not a word."

RESOUNDING GONG, CLANGING CYMBAL

The ice sculpture lost its definition well before the reception started. It was not a natural occurrence. The ring bearer saw it and he rounded up the flower girls. Standing on their tiptoes, they leaned over the peeled shrimp and pressed their small hands into the carved waves to suck on the dolphins' fins and bottlenoses. Their parents took pictures with the disposable cameras left on the tables. I watched them from the second floor of the country club, in what Kyle and I had dubbed the holding cell.

"You know, when your mom and Ike finally get here, all that's going to be left are lopsided bodies, stunted fins, and dented waves." Kyle looked over the balcony into the banquet hall. Most of the guests were still in the foyer—eating the hors d'oeuvres that had been set out—and therefore no one could see him. The guests surrounding the ice sculpture were too busy to notice us.

"You should really be helping me," I said. "I have to give this speech in less than an hour. Are you sure it's bad taste to use the one I used last time?"

"Pretty sure," he said. He took the few steps back into the holding cell and looked around. It was a small room, with sage green walls and two old couches that seemed out of place even in the backroom of a country club. Two vanity sets sat in the far corner, and I was perched on one of the stools. I stared at him in the mirror. He looked handsome in a tux, with his brown hair slicked back. Tuxes always reminded me of proms, but Kyle looked natural. He smiled at me, and I looked back down at the blank piece of paper in front of me.

"What's worse? Using clichéd quotes about love or making jokes about her previous marriages?"

"They're both wrong, just on different levels."

“I don’t know,” I said. I tapped the Bic pen against my chin. “Throwing First Corinthians in there may put a downer on the reception. It doesn’t have enough spunk. Giving Ike a crash course on how to survive a marriage with Mom might be more of a crowd-pleaser.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Kyle’s reflection walk away from me and back onto the balcony. From out there, he said, “You need to write a serious toast. Your mom is finally happy. Be happy with her.”

Sometime in the past three years, Kyle had grown accustomed to my mother’s tones and moods, almost as much as my own. “She sounded happy with Bill, too. You remember that, don’t you? Before she realized how bad at golf he was?” Kyle came back into the room, and this time I turned to smile at him. I saw his eyes crinkle as he fought laughter. “When his handicap jumped to twenty-three, she filed for divorce—” I snapped my fingers. “—like that. ‘Irreconcilable differences.’”

“Nothing like a bad round of golf to break up a marriage.” He walked into the room and leaned against the vanity. He pushed his finger under the strap of my tiered, silk organza dress. He pulled the strap a little and smiled. “You look nice.” He leaned over and kissed me softly. “No matter how awful you are at golf, I will never divorce you.”

The tone in his voice had changed lately when he mentioned marriage. It used to be whimsical almost—or at least hopeful. There was an edge now that I’d never heard before. When Mom announced she was getting married to Ike after only four months of “courtship,” as she put it, I didn’t know how to tell Kyle. We had been dating for three years, and he had bought the ring around year two. I found it in a drawer before he had a chance to propose, and I begged him not to ask me, saying I wasn’t ready. He had broached the topic a half dozen times since then, and

every time I asked him to wait. Kyle thought it was romantic how my mother kept trying to find happiness. I thought her procession of husbands was a bad joke.

I couldn't tell him we would never be in the position to get a divorce—instead I lightly pushed his hand away, looked back down at the paper, and asked, “What about Shakespeare?”

“Keep thinking,” he said.

Kyle had been asleep for ten minutes when the wedding planner ushered my mother and Ike into our holding cell. I folded the paper and pushed it into the top of my dress. I gently threw the pen at Kyle's shoulder and he jumped. He rubbed his eyes and I helped him off the couch. Ike approached me with outspread arms and said, “Kristen, my new daughter.”

I froze and felt Kyle's hand push me forward. Ike wrapped his arms around me and squeezed. “Beautiful ceremony, don't you think? The string quartet was a little off at times.”

“It was great, Ike,” Kyle said. Ike released me and clasped hands with Kyle. I stepped past them and walked over to my mom, who was deep in conversation with the planner. This petite woman was the daughter my mother always wanted—someone who was willing to plan seating arrangements, call the caterer, and fawn over napkin colors. I think she liked my mom almost as much as Mom liked her.

“Just remove it,” Mom said. “I don't want to see it.”

“What's wrong?”

“Have you seen the ice sculpture?” she asked. “It's horrendous.”

“Melted?”

“The kids have been using it as a lollipop,” she said. She looked over my shoulder at Ike. “I swear, if those kids weren’t his grandkids...” She smiled at me. “Stand up straight, honey, we’re about to walk downstairs.”

The wedding planner asked Kyle to leave since he wasn’t a part of the wedding party. He squeezed my hand as he walked out the door. Ike’s youngest son had been the best man, and the wedding planner had sent one of her workers to the bar to round him up. “Have you found him?” she said into her headset. She paused for a moment, glaring at the floor, before groaning. “Excuse me,” she said to us. “Hang tight here for a moment. I’ll be back with Michael.”

Ike sat on the couch. “Kyle is a good man,” he said. “Kyle and Kristen are my favorite young couple.”

I frowned at him, and my mother turned to me and straightened the straps on my dress. Before she could say anything, I said, “You look beautiful, Mom.” After being the only bridal party member the last two times, I knew how to handle her. “It was a gorgeous wedding.”

“Did Kyle enjoy it?” she asked.

“Every moment.”

“You know, Kristen,” she said. I cringed and my hand went up to my chest, pressing against the paper tucked into my dress. If she went into a discussion about my own future, I would have to write scathing comments for the toast. I had hoped she would be too distracted by her wedding to bug me about the possibility of my own. “Kyle is a wonderful man. I don’t understand why you won’t marry him. Hasn’t he asked you?”

“I should introduce Kyle to Mitchell Wood downstairs,” Ike said. “He would fit right in at Mitch’s company.”

I was tempted to throw all the blame on Kyle, send him running for the hills once my mother got a hold of him and yelled for not proposing to her daughter. “No, he hasn’t.” I sighed and fiddled with the layers on my dress. I may not want to marry him, but I loved him. “But we’ve talked about it, and he knows it’s not what I want.”

“What do you want?” Mom walked behind me and rearranged the loose curls hanging down my shoulders and back. We faced the full-length mirror on the wall. She smiled at me. “Every little girl wants to get married. Where’s your shawl?”

“I don’t know where it is. I’m not a little girl. I’m twenty-six.” I felt her stick her fingers down the back of my dress and tug at it a little. I was glad I had insisted on straps, because the dress was almost too loose. I had eaten like crazy for two weeks, hoping the dress wouldn’t fit and I wouldn’t have to stand in front of another congregation. No such luck. “I have a bachelor’s degree and a pretty good job. I’m working on my master’s degree. There’s more to me than getting married.”

“Yes, but you’re twenty-six. Almost thirty. I married your father when I was twenty-three.”

“I know.” He had also walked out the door when I was four and she was twenty-nine. In all my life, and all the times she had used that particular fact in the debate about marriage, I had never found an appropriate response.

“Kyle’s a good sport to hang around up here while the party’s downstairs,” Ike said.

Mom took a step forward and looked over at Ike to see if he was listening. Even though he kept talking to us, he was on the couch, flipping through a golf magazine. He looked completely disengaged. “I hoped this would be a double wedding,” she whispered. She rested her chin on my shoulder. I met her eyes in the mirror. She looked sad. This was another wedding,

another man to distract her from how much she loved my father and how heartbroken she was when he left so unexpectedly. I knew that she didn't want to be entering her fourth marriage at the age of fifty-one. I just wish she realized it enough to know that she would be fine on her own.

I squeezed her hand and stepped away. "Do people even do that?" I leaned down and adjusted my shoe. The wedding planner was walking up the stairs with Ike's son in tow. Before Mom could say another word, the planner had us lined up to go downstairs.

"Hey, you didn't trip." I was relieved to hear Kyle's voice. I turned to see him walking towards me. "Told you there was nothing to be worried about." I took his hand and led him away from the dance floor, where my mother and Ike were talking to some of their friends. I had to write the speech before it was time for the toasts. We took two of the seats at the bar. Kyle ordered two gin and tonics.

I pulled the paper out of my dress and held out my hand. He took the pen I threw at him out of his jacket. "So after you left the holding cell," I said, "Mom cornered me. She thinks we should get married before the word gets out that I'm almost thirty."

Kyle grinned. "God forbid you turn thirty in four years."

"And Ike kept talking about how wonderful you are. Seriously, you are their favorite child," I said. "And that's a lot, out of me, my mother's only child, and the million children from Ike's previous marriages."

"Stop overreacting. He has two."

"Five originally. Only two are here," I said. I looked over my shoulder to point out Ike's daughter, but didn't see her. "Five kids out of three marriages ain't bad, though. I guess after the

third wedding, most kids choose not to go to another one.” Kyle pushed my glass closer. “He is the divorce champion. And he filed the second one based on fraud. That shows ingenuity.”

He took a sip from his drink and smiled. “You look nice.”

I felt my lips curve up, but I didn’t smile wide. “You already said that.” I tapped the paper. “And I left the shawl at the church. Help me write this.”

His smile faltered, and something shifted in his eyes. I had deflected another compliment. “I’m not sure this is a dress you could wear anywhere.” He reminded me of the dog I had when I was a kid, whose eyes darkened every time she understood that I would rather leave her tied to the fence than take her around the neighborhood with me and my friends. “Did you tell them I’m going to marry you?”

“It didn’t come up,” I said, scratching some trite words on the paper. “And I don’t tell anyone that.” The other people I worked with at the real estate office knew I had a long-term boyfriend. Co-workers and friends asked me sometimes why I wasn’t married, and I always fell back on the excuse of not seeing the point. If you loved someone, why did you need a piece of paper saying that you did? Truth was, I felt like I had a sign on me, one that read: “Not Marriage Material.” It would be worse for people to know that Kyle desperately wanted to marry me, and I was too scared to go through with it—just in case it ended in divorce. It was okay to be scared about how long it was taking me to get my master’s degree, and it was okay to be scared about the real estate market in Florida, but it was not okay to be scared about marriage. Little girls who believe in cooties were scared of being married. Grown women were not.

Kyle hooked his arm around my shoulders and brought me closer. His lips brushed my ear and sent shivers down my spine until I heard what he had to say. “I’m right here. I’ve been right here for three years. I’m invested in you, Kris.”

I knew what he meant, but I couldn't help myself. "I'm an investment. How lovely."

His grip tightened on my upper arm. I wondered if I had the shawl still, would I have been able to slip out of his grasp. "Kristen. We need to figure this out. I can't beg you for the rest of my life." The bartender looked over at us, and I smiled to let him know everything was fine. He took another customer's order but continued to watch us.

"I never asked you to beg," I said. I jerked again, but his hold hadn't loosened. I wondered what I looked like to him at that moment: like a woman desperate to run away, or like a fish struggling against a burning hook? "I wouldn't put you in that position."

"You don't think I'm in a position?" He stared at me until I looked away and relaxed my muscles. "Is it going to be a secret until the day we get hitched?" There was a lilt in his voice, and he dropped his arm from my shoulders. Our familiar white flags were waving: me going limp like a toddler, him becoming lighthearted again.

"Hitched? I don't even have the ring." I wiggled my left hand in front of his face. With that, I imagined the tension drifting out of the hallway and settling on some other unlucky couple in the ballroom.

"Because you won't let me put it on you," he said. He kissed my hand. "It's in the top drawer of my dresser if you want to look at it again."

It was a pretty ring—one carat, round, on a white gold band. For the first time in my life, I was obsessed with something that sparkled when the sun hit it just right. It didn't sparkle in his drawer, though. In there, the ring and I were safe from each other. I smiled and said, "You are a wonder."

The DJ tapped the microphone and said, "Well, all right, folks, let's get—" I jumped up and waved my hands in the air. From across the room, he saw me past the sea of all the seated

guests. I shook my head and held up my open hands. He nodded and said, “Just wanted to let you know that we’re having a few technical issues, but we’ll get things underway in ten minutes. Ten minutes, tops.” He glared at me and looked down at his laptop.

I sat back on the stool. “Shit.” I looked at Kyle and pouted a little. “Please, please help.”

“First Corinthians. Just do it,” he said.

“It’s so expected.”

“If you take much longer, the DJ might kill you,” he said. “Just do it.” He gently pushed my arm and looked past me. I looked down at the paper and heard him greet someone who walked up behind me.

“You must be Kristen’s fiancé,” the woman said.

“Boyfriend. Kyle Stewart,” he said. “And you?”

“Maggie Fischer. I used to live next door to Bev when Kristen was just a little girl.”

“That’s so nice,” he said. I smiled as I wrote something down on the paper. I felt Maggie staring into my back. Kyle stood next to me and said, “Maggie, could I escort you to your seat? Kristen’s trying to make sure her speech is perfect. She’ll catch up with you after the toast.”

“Oh, that’d be lovely,” she said. I chuckled as Kyle walked away. I had to give him credit for being a great deflector as well.

Before I knew it, the DJ was back at the microphone. I cursed and hurried over to edge of the tables. The DJ crossed the dance floor to hand me the microphone. I wove through the tables and took it from him. I stood in the middle of the tables—not anywhere near the one Kyle was sitting at—and cleared my throat, gripped my notes in my left hand, and raised the microphone to my mouth.

“Mom. Ike,” I said. I looked at them, sitting at their sweetheart table for two, and smiled. The talking died down in the room and I felt hundreds of eyes on me. I hoped to God that I didn’t look awful in lavender and that I wasn’t turning splotchy from being so nervous. “I am so honored to be a part of this day. I’m not good at talking in front of people, so I got a little help.” A light laugh crossed the room and I looked down at my notes. ““May your mornings bring joy and your evenings bring peace. May your troubles grow few as your blessings increase. May the saddest day of your future be no worse than the happiest day of your past.”” I lowered my notes and raised my glass. Ike smiled, but my mom just stared at me with a sad smile. “To Beverly and Ike.”

The crowd echoed me and clapped. I took a gulp of champagne from an unattended glass at the table next to me before slipping through the tables to Kyle. The DJ intercepted me and handed the microphone to Ike’s son. I sat next to Kyle. He whispered, “An Irish wedding blessing? You cheated.”

“I couldn’t think of anything original. I’ve done three of these now for her. Only the first one was original.”

“What did you quote last time?”

I laughed and took another sip of champagne. “First Corinthians. Of course.”

One of the women at the table across from us hushed in our direction. Kyle shook his head. He lowered his voice. “You don’t take anything seriously, do you.” He focused on Michael, who was wrapping his speech up. I stared at Kyle’s profile. I took a deep breath and leaned forward.

“Ask me how I memorized that blessing.” He didn’t move for a moment. “Ask me,” I stressed.

“How?” he whispered.

I raised my glass and took a sip with everyone else in the room. Michael handed the microphone to Ike, who stood to give a small speech. I whispered, “My dad had a wall hanging that said that. My mom hid it after he left, but I found it when I was a teenager. It was in this little box in the attic. It had his name on the back of it, and his mother’s and her mother’s. It had been passed down in his family. It meant something to him.” Kyle looked at me, and I resisted the urge to glare. I looked at Mom and Ike, and she was smiling again as Michael told a long story about growing up in Ike’s household. Maybe I didn’t take weddings or toasts seriously. It’s difficult to believe in something that ends in failure half the time. But I believed in the things that mattered, like family. And if he thought that was such a character flaw of mine, he had plenty of opportunity to leave me behind.

Mom insisted I mingle before the dancing started. She believed any fight could be cured with a few good spins around the dance floor, and I knew she thought Kyle and I would be dancing all night. I started to fulfill my duty, and after talking to a few relatives, Kyle began jumping in. As I spoke with my second cousin who lived in Ohio, Kyle approached me. “Sorry to interrupt, Kris,” he said, smiling sweetly at my cousin. “Your mother asked if you could come over for a photo.”

My cousin shooed me away and Kyle escorted me to the vicinity of my mother and Ike. He looked over my shoulder and noticed she wasn’t paying attention. “You’re in the clear,” he said.

“Good job,” I smiled. “Keep it up.”

We played the meet and greet game with Frank Sinatra crooning in the background. I walked through the tables, and every once in a while Kyle would interrupt me. Then he would meet a few of the relatives with me, deflecting any marriage questions and quickly reminding me of phantom relatives who wanted to see me next. We used Maggie Fischer as an excuse quite a lot. We were a well-oiled machine. When the DJ invited all the couples to the dance floor, he took my hand and said, “Finally.”

Before we had been on the floor for two minutes, Ike cut in on Kyle and me. “Excuse me, Kyle, but I’d like to dance with my new daughter.”

Kyle smiled. “Are you sure about that, Ike? She’s got two left feet.” I rolled my eyes.

“I can handle myself,” Ike said. He took my hand and steered me away. “How are you enjoying the reception so far, Kris?”

“It’s very lovely, Ike.” It was different dancing with Ike than it was dancing with Kyle. Ike knew how to lead, how to move me around the dance floor, while Kyle and I just turned slowly in circles, unaware of how to properly negotiate the floor.

“Bev tells me that we’ll be at your wedding soon.”

I pulled back to look at him. “Sorry, Ike, but she misinformed you.” I searched the crowd for my mom. She was talking to a table at the back of the ballroom. I tried to settle the small ball of anger in my stomach. “Kyle and I won’t be getting married anytime soon.”

“May I ask why not?”

“Honestly?” I said. He nodded. “Because it’s pointless. I love him. That should be all that matters.” It was not a lot, but it was part of the truth, and it felt good to finally say it.

Ike nodded and spun me. I came back to him and he pointed us in a new direction. After a moment of just listening to the DJ play yet another Frank Sinatra song, he asked, “What’s the real reason?”

I glanced up at him. He didn’t look overly concerned and he didn’t seem angry. I saw Kyle dancing with one of my cousins on the other corner of the dance floor. “I don’t believe in it anymore,” I said. It made me sad to bring this up at his wedding to my mother, but it seemed like the people in my life didn’t know how to leave well enough alone anymore. “The examples I have in my life aren’t exactly stellar. Look at Mom’s divorces. And yours, for Christ’s sake.” I took a deep breath. “I don’t think I can go through that. I don’t want to get anywhere near that.”

“Won’t it be just as painful if you and Kyle break up?”

I shrugged, but refused to open my mouth. It would be painful. And I had a feeling it was coming, but I didn’t know how to make it stop. I felt a warm hand on my shoulder. I turned to see Kyle there. He grinned and said, “Okay, Ike, your time’s up. Give her back to me.” Ike smiled and let me go. He squeezed my hand before he walked away.

Kyle pulled me close against him and kissed my cheek. We started rotating in a very slow, small circle. It felt right, even if it was a bit dizzying. Over three years, I had backed myself into a corner. No amount of talking, fighting, dancing, or spinning in circles was going to get me out of it.

I insisted on missing the bouquet toss. I told Ike’s daughter that I was going to decorate his car. She said she would cover for me. Instead Kyle and I escaped into the dark night and onto the golf course.

We walked from the ninth green over the tenth tee to the fairway. It was located on a small hill. When we were halfway up, I pulled on his hand. “Turn around.” We looked behind us. The clubhouse had white Christmas lights circling the roof and the balconies. The reception hall was lit, and I could see the pastel prints of some of the older guests’ dresses. At one point, I saw Mom’s wedding dress flash past a window. The building looked like it housed the happiest people in the world at that moment. “It’s beautiful, right?”

“Kristen.”

I turned to look at him. He was on one knee, and he was holding a small box in his hands. I said his name and looked at his eyes, those eyes from my childhood animal shelter mutt, and felt a twitch inside my chest. The twitch couldn’t be classified as love or as excitement, but it was there, and that had to count for something. He smiled and grabbed my floating hand.

“Kristen, I know we’ve talked about this,” he said. “But it’s time.”

“Maybe it is.” I looked at the ring again. Something about it reminded me of how I had always meant to live in New York City after my first bout of college. I was going to go with girlfriends and struggle for a year before giving up and coming home. We never did it. Maybe it was a good time to struggle as an adult, to be miserable without Kyle for a year, and then come back and try to be good at what he thought we were already good at. I was only twenty-six. The fact that I had spent three years with Kyle so far didn’t mean anything. I still had time.

“We’ve been doing this for years, and I’m tired of being stagnant, Kristen.” His assertive tone kicked in. It’s what attracted me to him originally—him arguing with a friend at a bar over who had ultimately won a drunken night of poker that had been played years before. I knew I could probably love a man like that. A man with a purpose, a man with ideas, a man who probably viewed meaningless vows and certificates as a waste of time. “I want more than this.”

I should have kept a running tally of how many times he had said that over the past year.

I kept thinking of the ways I could misconstrue what he meant, of how I could screw it up and make it sound like he was doing the “right” thing as opposed to what this really was—that he loved me and wanted me as his wife. I twisted my hand in his, but he held on tight. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the back door of the clubhouse open and light flood the ninth green.

“Marry me, Kris.” As a child I had imagined being proposed to. Not once had it sounded like that. Usually it was a question, but always the tone was hopeful. The edge was in his voice again. The edge unnerved me more than anything in our entire situation. I looked back at the clubhouse and stared into the open doors. I knew my pupils were getting smaller from the bright light. After a few seconds, the doors fell shut against one another. There was nothing romantic about this—commanding me to marry him, in the middle of an empty golf course. I didn’t even like golf. Kyle only did it because the men he worked with liked to take clients there. This was not who we were.

The heels of my shoes kept sinking into the grass. My mouth opened, and I said something, but I couldn’t hear what it was. Suddenly, a ring was pushed over my knuckle and his mouth was on mine. I stumbled backwards as he kissed me. He held us up and kept us from falling.

“Come on, Kris, let’s tell everyone.”

Kyle held my hand the whole time we jogged back to the clubhouse. I tried to slow down, but it didn’t work. He tugged on my hand and kept me at an even pace with him. We climbed the steps leading up to the clubhouse. There was a couple on the porch, sitting on one of the rocking chairs, making out in the darkness. They didn’t even move when we rushed past them. I stared at them a little too long as we passed. Our entrance caused a few people to look at us, but it was

like Mom had a sixth sense for engagements. She was in the middle of the tables, and she turned around as soon as we burst through the doors. Kyle grinned at her and she let out a short cry of excitement.

“You’re engaged,” she cried. She rushed towards us. Some people started to clap. I watched as she swooped upon us and immediately wrapped her arms around me. Ike slowly walked towards us. Mom kissed my cheek, and then moved onto Kyle. They started talking about how it happened and how he convinced me. Ike placed his hand on my shoulder and squeezed. He pulled on me, just slightly, but I obliged and snaked my arm around him for an embrace. Someone took a picture with one of the disposable cameras. People laughed behind us, and I turned quickly. They didn’t notice what was going on and they walked past us. When they moved, I saw the ice sculpture. It was in even worse shape than before.

IN THE TERMINAL

Something about her catches your eye, and at least twelve seconds pass before you realize what you must do. What about her that triggers you isn't clear, but you can guess. A faint smile plays at her lips and you wonder why someone would be happy when they're about to fly from Portland to Albuquerque, because, really, who the hell wants to go to Albuquerque? A black lacy bra calls out from beneath a pale pink tank top. Her shirt rides up as she walks, and the tanned, flat stomach underneath calls to the men lining the terminal. Strings hang off the denim miniskirt in that fashionable way, and they tickle her toned thighs.

Twelve seconds is more than enough time for this.

Enough time to catch the trail of lustful gazes following in her wake. Suddenly, the terminal is a movie set, and the close-cropped and balding heads turn in slow motion. You almost expect lolling tongues and drool dripping off chins. While most of the women keep their eyes straight ahead, a few of them turn to look as well—in envy, disgust, desire.

To feel something inside you stiffen. Maybe the something that remembers being in your twenties, being sunkissed and carefree, being so narrow that your boyfriend swore he could wrap his hands around your waist. He couldn't, but it was close. Maybe the something that can't really grasp the eighty-two pound difference between the you then and the you now.

To notice your husband shift next to you. His left ankle falls from his right knee and his shoes rub the carpet, like he's a horse preparing to spring from the gate.

To think that he may turn to you and whisper like he used to. He would murmur the words, "She's nothing compared to you," and rest his hand way up on your thigh and you would blush. The blushing always got to him.

To see the whites of your husband's eyes as his pupils move away from the headline news on CNN and follow as much of her as he can without being noticeable.

But you notice. You always do.

She sits in one of the closest rows to the ticket counter. You can watch her, because you're a woman, and women are allowed to judge other women. Hell, it's practically expected. That's why all those plastic surgeons are in business. Her legs cross, showing the metallic straps that grow from her sandal to wrap daintily around her ankle, and you catch a glimpse of a dark purple fabric underneath her miniskirt.

You're walking before you realize you've stood, and you park yourself in front of the ticket counter. You look back at your husband, but he seems to be too busy pretending that he wasn't eyeing another woman to see where you've gone. There are two attendants standing before you, and they both smile politely. They could be twins: matching uniforms, thick brown hair pulled into buns at the napes of their necks. They're made to look boring and professional; no one is supposed to lust after the women who take your tickets at the gate. They will understand. One asks what she can do for you, and you point. It's not discreet, and some of the people around you notice.

"See her?" you say. "I hope that she will not be on this plane. Her attire is inappropriate." You lean forward, dragging the attendants into your agenda. "There are children."

Your whispered tone in the last sentence causes one of the women to look around. There are children, to be sure, but none of them seem to mind. They're busy being pacified by portable DVD players, handheld games, and whatever else young parents use to disengage their children. The adults are the ones getting riled up; men are staring, and some women are listening to you,

and they nod with looks of repulsion on their faces. The other woman at the counter says, “Ma’am, I’m not sure what the problem is.”

“Surely there’s a dress code.” Your voice is shrill. You can feel a heat enveloping your hands and face, like when that bitch who lives down the street tried to change the homeowners’ association’s rules on parked cars in the street. There is a code in every situation, and when people ignore these codes, you can’t even begin to think of the pure chaos that could result.

Both young women in front of you look at the girl you’ve singled-out, who’s sitting on a plastic chair, bouncing one sandal-clad foot in the air. They are probably her age, and you see how they are torn between placating you and respecting everyone’s God-given right to dress how you damn well please. Obviously, they are not who you thought they were. These girls probably wear worse things on their free time, you think. Hot shorts and tube tops. Shirts without bras. Four inch heels with red soles. Things worse than a mini skirt and a skin-tight tank top.

You begin a lecture on respect—how this tramp obviously doesn’t respect herself and how she’s causing a disruption. Have you seen the men in this terminal, you ask the girls. They look around and see that most of the eyes are on the slut. But they don’t do anything.

And so you lie.

“She isn’t wearing anything under her skirt,” you hiss. You’re not sure you meant to, but it just came out, and it works. Both girls turn to look at the girl again, and from this angle they can’t tell that you’re lying, and you know they won’t double-check this inaccurate fact in public. It was a necessary lie. You keep going. Role models. Civic responsibility. One of the girls reaches for the phone and calls her supervisor. You even reference Tipper Gore and the Parents Music Resource Center because this is just as serious.

You mean it. With every fiber of your body, you mean it.

Within four minutes, the supervisor is there and the whore in question is pulled aside. They mention something about her ticket, a lie that they surely thought was necessary to remove her. She is escorted away, and you practically preen as you return to your seat. You hear whispering behind you and you ignore the supervisor's hushed apologies for the inconvenience. The tramp looks confused, too confused to balk at her sudden removal.

You sit beside your husband with the wandering eyes and he says he heard the commotion, and he asks you what happened. You watch her walk down the corridor, her heels clicking against the tile, the straps pressing against her ankles with every step. He watches, too. Your legs used to be like that. Instead of being caressed by the straps of designer shoes, your ankles and calves were caressed by six men before you met your husband. You wonder if he knows that, if he knows he's not that special.

She and the supervisor disappear around the corner. Just like that, the anger inside you begins to dissipate. But your husband shifts in his seat, and his hand comes to his lap to adjust himself. The anger rises again with that single, not-so-deft movement, and you know you did the right thing and that every woman in the terminal is thankful. He asks once again what happened, and you claim ignorance because he wouldn't understand. They never understand.

He's always had a tendency to look at passing girls, but you never thought you'd be stuck in a tin can with one of the girls he admired. The thought of squeezing down that narrow aisle, with your carry-on and your pocketbook, past the tan sticks she calls legs, her warm brown eyes, and perky, hopeful, surely fake breasts, makes you sweat in the most un-lady-like way.

HIBISCUS BOULEVARD

Just beyond the circle of lawn chairs and parked bicycles and skateboards, Ethan Miller lit matches against the pavement only to throw them at the steady stream of ants crawling by the group. The other ants, the living among the dead, paused in front of the crisping exoskeletons of their comrades before twittering around the bodies and continuing on their way. Ethan laughed. Stevie Smith dared him to use a lighter. Mona Bartram averted her eyes from the carnage.

The sun cast a warm glow over the neighborhood and in the east, darkness already enveloped the first few houses on Hibiscus Boulevard. The teenagers lounged in their circle, waiting for the sun to set and bring the first day of high school closer. Only three days were left in the summer, and the early August heat forced them to keep their action to a minimum.

Instead of playing soccer in the streets or riding their bikes the two miles to the beach, they lay on their front yards with thin beach towels protecting them from the thick St. Augustine. Most of them congregated on Erin O'Hara's or Stevie's front yards. The boys played Tetris on their bulky gray Game Boys, and the girls painted each other's nails Tangerine Dream or Pretty in Pink. Music from the ice cream truck resonated throughout the neighborhood and gave them at least forty seconds to scrounge up any loose change they could find on the spur of the moment in their parents' empty jackets and pants' pockets to buy just one more Boom Pop.

Miranda Harburn perched on her worn lawn chair. The metal frame cut into her burnt back if she reclined, and if she sat too far back in the seat, she would sink through the frayed weaving. She rested her hands on the tops of her pink thighs and restrained herself from letting her fingers skim over her smooth skin for too long. She was still unused to the feeling of her shaved skin. She hoped no one else, especially Ethan, noticed the bloody nicks that speckled her knees.

Among the six girls surrounding her, Miranda felt that she stuck out horribly. She had turned fourteen on June sixteenth, and she was the youngest girl by four months. They treated her like the baby, like the fly on the wall. The girls didn't often speak directly to her, but she knew a lot about the kids in her neighborhood from spending her summers on the outskirts of their circle, watching. Erin O'Hara had access to her older sister Becky's *Cosmopolitan* magazines and the girls giggled for hours over what they said about men. After two Creamsicles each afternoon, Hannah Silverton was having problems squeezing into her cut-offs. The four boys whispered about Ginger Montgomery and Poppy Carlson, and Miranda thought it might be because they wore threadbare tube tops and Candies heels. Mona disapproved of Ethan's affinity for burning ants. Stevie would punch any one of the boys or girls who disagreed with anything she said. Miranda was sure no one else had that much stock information about one another.

The other girls attracted attention from the boys in their neighborhood. Miranda, however, wobbled in her knock-off Candies. She hadn't mastered the art of seductively pulling some of her Doublemint out of her mouth and twirling it around her index finger. Her nail polish chipped within the afternoon and her fingers didn't look as sexy as the others' with flaking polish. She could never think of the proper noun or verb or modifier when the boys played MadLibs. She didn't know if she could muster up the courage to kiss any of the boys, and she knew she was behind in that game: she had already witnessed Erin kissing Mark in the park one night.

“Mirand! Give me a verb ending in ‘-ing.’”

Miranda turned toward Tyler. She thought, but not for too long, before replying.

“Skipping.”

Tyler penciled in her answer. When he asked Hannah for an adjective, she replied “sexy.” George had a sudden laughing fit. Mona’s noun was “boyfriend” and she gave Ethan a pointed look as she called it out to Tyler. Poppy flipped Tyler off when he asked her for an adverb and she promptly dissolved into a fit of giggles at her rebellion. Tyler cleared his throat in preparation for the *MadLibs* recitation. Miranda pushed herself off the chair to get a soda from her house across the street.

They lived in a small neighborhood with sixty-seven houses, located two miles from the Atlantic Ocean. Miranda’s home was just one in a long line of houses that looked exactly the same. Even from their neighborhood, the smell of the ocean permeated everything. All of Miranda’s clothes smelled like salt and seaweed. Her hair smelled like the lavender from her shampoo and the salt from her time at the boardwalk and the jetty. Sand littered the floors and furniture of all the homes. The vacuums whirred and coughed in protest of little specks of shell. The inability to get away from the beach paradise was one of the reasons her father cited for his desire to move away—away from the beach, away from them.

In the garage Miranda opened the refrigerator door and smiled. The burst of cool air flowed over her body like silk. She felt the sweat slowly fading from her burnt skin. She leaned against her mother’s battered Toyota Camry and pulled at one of the straps on her white halter-top. Her mother worked two jobs and her older brother was a pizza delivery boy. She got a ten-dollar allowance every week. She had saved up throughout eighth grade and in the beginning of the summer, she had bought herself two new bikinis, two pairs of shorts, six shirts, and the fake red Candies. Miranda was determined to look like the other girls at the very least.

“What are you doing?”

Miranda shoved herself off the tan car and her heel slipped off one of the platforms. She wobbled but refrained from balancing herself on the car. She whirled around and grimaced when strands of her brown hair hit her in the face. Ethan stood in the entrance to the garage with his hands stuffed into his pockets. “Soda.” She blushed. She tugged on the stringy hem of her shorts. “Do you want one?”

“You got any Orange Crush?” Ethan walked toward her and the refrigerator. She turned and shoved her arm into the fridge. In the back, she found a single can nestled among the Grape Crush that no one in her family seemed to care for. She held it out to him but she did not look. “Thanks.”

She picked a cream soda out of the door for herself. She slowly turned around. He fiddled with the pop-top, but he didn’t puncture the can. She wiped her left arm where the condensation from the can had trailed down her skin. She spoke at the same time he did: “How are the ants?”

“I like your shoes.”

Ethan laughed, but she did not. He brushed the blond hair hanging in front of his eyes. They both looked toward their friends, who were laughing at Tyler’s *MadLibs*. Miranda thought she could see Poppy and Ginger looking toward the garage, searching the darkness for their two missing companions. Ethan popped open his drink. She couldn’t find the strength in her fingers to do the same.

“Your skin is red.”

Miranda looked down at herself. She could barely see the color of her own skin, let alone the minute details of his form in the flickering light of the garage. She did, however, know that his hair had been to his shoulders until the previous week when his mother had forced him to

trim it to his ears. His eyes were brown. Behind his smile, one of his front teeth was chipped. She shrugged. "I'm outside a lot."

"I got a real wicked burn last summer," Ethan said. "Third degree. The skin on my right shoulder bubbled. It was a crisp. I put aloe vera on it, but you know... Anyway, I have a scar."

"Oh," Miranda said. "Cool."

"Yeah." He slurped his soda. She snuck a glance at him from the corner of her eye. He stood in the empty space of the garage, right next to the strung-up tennis ball that marked where her father used to stop his car. It had been nineteen months since his departure, and yet the tennis ball still floated in the vacant spot. Ethan was still in his bathing suit and white T-shirt. His mother must not have made him change clothes for dinner. The other boys wore jean shorts and T-shirts. "Who do you have for homeroom?"

"McNally."

"Me too."

Miranda brightened. "Really?"

"Yeah." Ethan paused, and then he took a step closer to her. "That's cool."

"Yeah." She would see Ethan every morning of their ninth grade year for twelve minutes. She would start off her day hearing Mrs. McNally yell out his name. She would have a locker in the same block as him. He might even sit by her.

"Thanks for the soda."

Ethan kissed Miranda in her garage, on the last Thursday of summer. His lips were chapped and his nose was smashed against hers. Her mouth sealed itself off to something she wasn't used to, and so his tongue licked her lips. She smelled the Orange Crush. His hand, the one not holding the can of Crush, rested against the white, eyelet fabric of her halter, just below

her small chest. His other arm wrapped around her shoulders and the cool aluminum of the Crush chilled her bony shoulder blade. He tried to push his hand into the opening of her halter and she jumped. He stepped away.

She looked out to the road. In the looming darkness, it was hard to tell which boys and girls were chasing one another in the street and were oblivious to the car waiting to get around them. She didn't know what to say, and apparently Ethan didn't either.

He walked out to the circle.

A black racer glided between blades of emerald green grass. It was small, maybe twenty inches. Its eyes of brown glass surveyed the girls sprawled on New Kids on the Block beach towels and the boys throwing a Nerf football on the driveway. Miranda, on her own stomach, stared back. It stopped slithering about six feet away from the piercing voices and moving limbs. The flesh beneath its delicate spine fluctuated with the beat of its heart; the scales rippled, catching flashes of violet and indigo in the sunlight.

“Snake!”

The shriek startled Miranda. She had trouble realizing Ginger was screaming about the harmless racer. She pushed herself up to her knees. The girls had scrambled to one of the far towels and were continuing to scream. The boys came running. The snake reared itself into an S position before finally fleeing. It had only moved maybe four feet when a blunt-ended shovel flew into the ground and caught the snake in its middle. The tail jerked awkwardly twice and then only twitched, barely moving the grass. Ethan placed his foot on the shovel and drove it further into the ground. The snake's body wasn't fully separated—it only was driven further into the soil with a deeper cut.

Ethan left the shovel upright in the yard. He glanced over at Miranda. She stared at the dying snake as the boys slowly moved back to the street. The girls sat on their towels and stared at the surrounding grass. Their eyes, usually wide and excited, were small and wary as they searched for other intruders.

Miranda reached over and picked up one of Becky's magazines. She tried to ignore the snake pierced to ground just feet away. She scanned the glossy cover, bent and folded from use. Miranda flipped to the table of contents. She didn't see an article on kissing; she supposed that would be the subject of magazines such as *Seventeen*. Anyway, it didn't matter if she knew how to kiss well. Ethan liked her. He had killed a snake, albeit a non-venomous one, before it got to her. If Ethan liked her, then the girls might start accepting her more; she would no longer be the girl who lives on the same street. She would be a friend.

"Does anyone know what classes Ethan is in?"

Erin's whispered question caused Miranda to raise her head. She looked at the group of girls behind her. They were huddled in a messy circle—on their backs, reclining against one another, or sitting upright, at full attention at Ethan's name. Miranda lay just outside of their group. Poppy said, "I think we might have biology together."

"I have homeroom with him." Miranda's voice floated out among the girls, but none of them turned to acknowledge her input.

Stevie leaned forward and her long red hair hung around her face. Miranda could only see her eager blue eyes. "Did you know that there's a dance in September? A high school dance!"

A collective squeal erupted from the girls. Miranda looked beyond the girls to the boys. Ethan was running alongside Tyler, trying to steal the football. He would certainly ask her to the dance. He would wear a tie and he would buy her a corsage. They would have pictures taken,

and she would have a souvenir of his chipped-tooth smile forever. She would let him kiss her again, and maybe this time she would find the courage to open her mouth.

“He kissed me, you know.”

Miranda heard the sentence that had been running through her head all day, but she was not the one who said it. It was Ginger who was suddenly older and better than the rest of the girls. Ginger knelt on her towel with her hands resting lightly on her thighs. Miranda felt that Ginger was acclimated to the absence of fuzz and that surely she no longer nicked herself with a Bic disposable razor that had flowers painted on it.

Stevie gasped. “Shut up!”

“It’s true.” Ginger smiled and looked over at Ethan before continuing. “Three days ago. We went to the matinee and snuck into an R movie. We were sitting there and then, all of a sudden, he kissed me.” She circled her hands around her mouth to hide her words from the boys. She whispered, “He tried to put his hands up my shirt.”

“Second base!”

Hannah clamped her hands over her mouth, as though to trap any other stray comments that might escape. The girls dissolved into a heap of laughter. Miranda looked at the six girls, her friends, laughing over Ginger and Ethan. The boys continued playing football. She didn’t like that they were talking about Ethan while he played football without a clue. She wished the girls were whispering about her run-in with Ethan, and not Ginger’s. Nothing about this afternoon was anything like she had imagined.

The distant melody of the ice cream truck rolled into the neighborhood, far ahead of the actual vehicle. This time, the girls were too distracted to lift themselves off the towels and one

another. Even Hannah resisted the charming tune. Miranda pushed herself to her feet and walked across the street to her home, making sure to avoid the football game.

Inside the garage, Miranda stood on her tiptoes before a storage shelf. She reached into an old plastic children's cup from a Chili's restaurant. She pulled out some dimes and nickels and fingered through the change until she found sixty cents' worth. She dropped the rest of the change at her feet and calmly walked out to the street. She stood beside her mailbox and waited for the ice cream man.

The sun beat down on her and she imagined her SPF 10 slowly evaporating off her body. She was getting burned, and she was so hot she was dizzy, but this ice cream truck was bringing cold salvation. The ocean smelled closer that day. The scent of salt and fish was almost overwhelming. Without a breeze to refresh anything, the air smelled like the beach when you first step onto the sand. If she closed her eyes, she imagined she could hear the waves breaking in Erin's front yard instead of the girls gossiping. The change in her hand became sweaty and sticky. She moved it to her left hand, then squinted against the hazy day across the yard. Her plastic, white-rimmed sunglasses were abandoned in the grass.

“What do you want?”

Miranda turned her head to the side. The ice cream truck was there, and the teenage boy inside was leaning out the side to talk to her. She slowly walked up to him and shoved out her hand. “Boom Pop, please.” She dropped the change into his open palm. Moments later, he presented her with her red, white, and blue Popsicle.

The truck rumbled away and the music faded. Across the street, Erin's sprinklers turned on. The girls screamed and gathered their belongings. Miranda crossed the street. She walked through the shower of reclaimed water and stood next to the snake; it was still writhing

underneath the shovel. She dropped the Boom Pop to the grass. She grabbed the shovel with both hands and pulled hard, wrenching the shovel out of the grass and soil. The snake's body flopped against the grass. Ethan had not killed it. It was only dying slowly.

With one swift strike, Miranda undid what Ethan had done. She dropped the shovel to the ground beside her. The girls were all watching her now, after her outburst of violence, her moment of compassion. She picked up both pieces of the snake and tossed it into the bushes in front of Erin's house. Ethan stood at the edge of the yard. Miranda met his eyes briefly before she sat on her damp towel. She wiped the wet clumps of hair off of her face. She put on her sunglasses, lay down with her arms spread out at her side, and let the sprinklers wash away Ethan's kiss.

GETTING BACK TO GOOD

Jeanette realized the barbeque was a bad idea when the third group of guests arrived. The group included Zephyr, Nate, Jonah, a six-pack of Heineken, and a bag of steaks as fulfillment of the party's "bring your own beef" rule. She watched as Andrew put their bag in the fridge and then showed them out to the patio. She stayed in the doorway to the bedroom.

The barbeque was just as stupid as moving in with Andrew had been. It had been an accident, like an unlevel slab of pavement that she had tripped over. If there had been an endless hole on the other side of the concrete, that is. But she had done it, with or without concussion, and now she was living with Andrew, whom she had only been dating for four months. Andrew, who loved Guitar Hero, Bud Light, clothes from Abercrombie, and the slight dip at her waist. Nate, on the other hand, didn't love anything but liked acoustic guitar, whiskey, clothes that lasted longer than a season, and the extra bit of flesh on her thighs.

Nate should not have been invited.

Jeanette fixed the straps on her dress and walked out of the bedroom. She had gone in there under the pretense of getting something for her sister Paige, but she couldn't remember what. The doorbell had rung and when she peeked out to see who else Andrew had invited, her mind blanked. Nothing was quite as bad as that in the face of an ex.

About ten people milled around the small back yard of Andrew's townhouse. It was close quarters, like the rest of the place—squished between two other townhouses in a long line of identical homes in the suburbs of Atlanta. After renting for close to eight years, she didn't think a tiny room in a miniature townhouse sounded so bad. She sidled up next to Andrew at the grill and asked if he needed her to get anything.

“No, babe, you go ahead and have fun.” He grinned, and his crooked teeth made her like him a little more than usual. He was charming. It’s why she had warmed up to him the fastest when Nate first introduced her to his roommates. “The guys just showed up.” He kissed her cheek and pushed her to the side.

Of course Nate had shown up. He and Andrew had been roommates for three years in college, before Andrew got a real job and decided to prove his adulthood by purchasing real estate. Jeanette had hung out with Andrew for years in the den of the shithole the guys rented by the university. She had even run into him in the hallway a few times, dressed only in a towel and still steamy from the shower, with Nate right behind her. He never seemed unnerved when he saw her like that. They played video games together and cooked meals for everyone. Their relationship as a roommate and another roommate’s girlfriend felt natural. When she and Nate broke up, he waited six months and then gave her a call. As though right on schedule.

Zephyr raised his hand in the air to get her attention, and she headed over. As she walked, her eyes darted to the people around her, searching for someone to rescue her. But Paige was talking to someone, and her friends—who were still not talking to Nate—were on the other side of the yard. Those mere ten yards felt like an eternity.

As far as her sister and friends knew, she was excited about moving in with Andrew. The offer had come out of nowhere. She had left her makeup at her apartment for the third time, and as she stormed around Andrew’s bedroom, collecting her clothes in a huff to get back to her apartment before work, Andrew said, “Why don’t you move in? You can’t forget your stuff if it’s all here.” He held her purse out for her and smiled.

She froze and stared at him like he had suggested they move to South Africa, or go to the animal shelter and adopt all the dogs. It sounded ridiculous. Andrew mistook her shocked look

for excitement. Jeanette quickly learned that the small misunderstandings between them would be one of the foundations of their relationship. When she told her sister about Andrew's idea, Paige laughed. But Jeanette didn't, and Paige quickly warned her about the sheer stupidity of it. Jeanette spouted information from the self-help books she hid under her bed.

"I think this will be a great learning experience for me. This will be an opportunity for me to find myself, to identify who I am again." She ignored that all of those phrases requested that they be done by herself and not with her replacement boyfriend. But she couldn't be perfect right away. It would take time to make right decisions, and at that point, any change was better than none at all.

Zephyr was holding a beer out to her.

"Congrats on the living in sin, Jeannie."

She smiled and took the bottle. "Thanks." It was hard to look up at Nate, and when her eyes passed swiftly over his, he was looking at her like she was a puzzle he was trying to solve. She focused on Zephyr but could feel Nate continue to stare at her. This was worse than she expected. "I have to tell you," she whispered to Zephyr, as though keeping a secret from the entire backyard, "it's a little like babysitting."

Zephyr laughed. "You're going to start doing his laundry, aren't you?"

"Probably."

"You hate doing your own." The sound of his voice surprised her but it didn't bring back the flood of memories she expected it would. She looked at Nate and, though he continued to stare at her, his eyes seemed to register her as the ex-girlfriend now. His lips curled into a smirk as he said, "You wait until you have nothing else to wear. And then you do laundry. But you always mess something up. Bleach your jeans. Throw in red underwear."

“Yeah, didn’t you flood our garage one time?” Jonah asked. He craned his neck trying to get a good look at Jeanette’s friends on the other side of the yard.

Jeanette took a deep breath, while keeping her chest still and a smile on her face. “I don’t do that anymore,” she said to Nate. She deliberately looked into his eyes—because she would not back down in her own backyard—and then turned back to Zephyr. Jonah was too busy to notice her. “Excuse me, guys. Have fun.”

It was like she had the self-help books right there in front of her. She had done everything that she had been instructed to do: *Smile politely and be endearing. Act self-assured. Mention the new people you’ve met and the new experiences you’ve had.* Those secret books had helped her get past Nate. After dating for a few weeks, Andrew noted how well-adjusted she seemed. “You haven’t even mentioned Nate at all,” he had said as they sat in a darkened movie theater, where most secrets tend to get shared, just before the lights dim all the way. “It’s like it never even happened, like the past three years haven’t affected you at all.” He squeezed her hand and reached for the popcorn.

And she had smiled then because the coaching made it easy. *If you must cry, do so for no longer than ten minutes; then promptly press ice cubes beneath your eyes and reapply makeup. Resume your daily grooming habits. Buy a new coffee maker. Don’t let laundry sit for more than five days.* All those things were the little suggestions that pushed her in the direction of less Nate, and more Anybody Else. Andrew also didn’t know about the four Anybody Elses who formed the bridge between the Jeanette who loved Nate and the Jeanette who liked Andrew because he reminded her of Nate.

As she walked across the yard, Paige turned and held out her hands. “Where is it?” Jeanette frowned and shrugged. “My jacket!”

“Oh, right,” she said. “I’ll be right back.”

The steaks sizzled on the grill. One of Jeanette’s friends, the only vegetarian in the group, watched with an eagle’s eye to make sure that her veggie burger never came near the meat. The doorbell rang and Jeanette hurried into the house. But the door was already open and two guys Andrew worked with were in the foyer. They greeted her and gave her a bottle of wine as a house warming present. They hadn’t brought steaks. Jeanette didn’t want to tell people they had to bring their own food, but Andrew insisted it was commonplace for most barbeques. “Beer is cheap, babe,” he said. “We can get lots of it. We can’t afford twenty steaks.” He was right and most everyone had followed through. She showed them to the patio and they joined the other guests. She heard someone out there call her name but she ignored it.

Boxes still littered the bedroom. She had been out of her apartment for three days and had not yet managed to get unpacked completely. Every time she set a book on his bookshelf, or crammed another DVD onto his DVD rack, she felt like she was one step farther away from making it back. She didn’t know where she was trying to get back to, but she knew that it was far from where she was at that moment.

She placed her beer bottle on top of some boxes and tossed the bottle of wine on the bed. Her clothes were unpacked, and she pushed through the overstuffed closet to find the cardigan Paige wanted. She heard Andrew’s voice bellowing outside. She knew she was being a bad hostess, constantly flitting between groups and ducking indoors whenever the opportunity arose. It was easier. Falling back into the couple groove, let alone fitting herself into someone else’s home, was harder than she imagined.

When she walked back out with the cardigan in hand, more people had arrived. Jeanette officially knew less than a third of the guests. She stayed by her sister’s side, but Paige was

oblivious to her anxiousness. It was times like these when she wished she and her sister were closer, like the sisters who knew everything about each other instead of just surface information.

Nate and Zephyr stayed on the far side of the yard and watched Jonah hone in on Andrew's female neighbors. Jeanette sat with Paige and feigned interest in watching the girls' attention in Jonah rapidly dwindle. When he retreated to his corner, Nate and Zephyr laughed about whatever pickup line he had used. And Jonah was soon scoping the yard again. Jeanette kept the smile on her face, half-listening to Paige and her friends talk. *Make him think you're having a wonderful time without him. Make him sorry that he left.* Jeanette tried to think of a funny anecdote that fit into the conversation—anything to prove she was enjoying herself.

A sharp clanging sound rang throughout the yard. Jeanette looked up to see Andrew knocking two beer bottles against one another. He waved her over to the grill, but she stayed firmly planted at the table with Paige. The yard was quiet, and everyone was looking at her. Her smile faltered. *Be the center of attention, the star of the party. Create the fun you want to have!* She took a deep breath and willed herself to smile brightly.

“Well, everyone, I want to thank you for coming,” Andrew announced. He made his way over to Jeanette and stood next to her. He was warm, in the cool spring day, and she leaned into his leg. He placed his hand on her shoulder, and the sweat from his palm made her skin feel slick. “This is such a great day, to be able to celebrate Jeanette moving in. We're so excited. Right, babe?”

She forced herself to nod. She looked over to Nate and saw him briefly shake his head. He knew something was wrong, and all of her self-help books didn't explain what to do when the ex-boyfriend saw through your bluff. When they had dated, she had been adamant about being called “Jeanette;” she was not “baby,” “babe,” “honey,” “my girlfriend,” anything. She was

Jeanette. Obviously, she had failed to tell Andrew how much she hated that. How did he not know that, after being in the house with her and Nate for so long?

“Do you want to say anything, Jeanette?” Andrew removed his hand and took a small step to the side, giving Jeanette the floor.

Paige poked her side, and Jeanette forced herself to stand. She felt like she should raise her glass, but she had left her drink in the bedroom. Instead, she folded her arms over her waist and smiled at the guests. “Thank you all for coming. Enjoy the party.” A smattering of applause sounded, and Jeanette turned to Andrew. “I have to get my beer,” she said. He started to hand her his, but she shook her head. “No, it’s okay. That’s yours. I left it inside.”

He kissed her cheek. “Don’t be long,” he said.

Jeanette smiled and slipped from his grasp. Once again, she entered the townhouse. *Collect yourself before encountering your ex. Be confident and calm. Don’t let anything get under your skin.* She stepped into the bedroom and plucked the beer from the box. From the window, she could see the movements of some of the guests. She heard their laughter and muffled voices. It was pleasant, to be near the action, but not be an active part of it. She settled on the floor and leaned against the bed. With her eyes closed, she absorbed the party from the safety of the bedroom. How wonderful life would be if every situation came with observation rooms, where you could collect yourself and get ready for what was next. It could be just like the observation seats overlooking operating rooms.

“You know, ‘I have to get my beer’ is a pretty lame excuse.”

Jeanette smiled. “Yeah, I know. It may also be one of the signs of me being a drunk.” She opened her eyes and looked over the top of the bed.

Nate stood in the doorway with his head shaking. “Nah. You’re not like that.” He walked into the bedroom and looked around. “You have eleven boxes in here.”

“We’re building a fort.” Jeanette stretched her legs out in front of her and looked back toward the window.

“If that’s what you’re into.” He dipped his hand into one of the open boxes, and sifted through her belongings. It was a box of knick-knacks. He raised a figurine of Cinderella’s pumpkin coach. He touched the silver horse connected to the pumpkin, and it moved under his thumb. She had left it in the box because she didn’t know how Andrew would feel about her small things. The things that made her feel like a complete person, the things that said more perfectly who she was than any self-help book could make her understand. That one figurine had been a gift from her father for her high school graduation. It seemed silly to keep things like that when she was in her mid-twenties now. “Are you hiding?” he asked as he put it back in the box.

“I didn’t think so,” she said, “but I never actually planned on leaving this room.” She took a sip of her warm beer and said, “I mean, really. A barbeque? I can’t do that.”

Nate laughed and sat on the edge of the bed. He was about a foot away, and while everything she had learned in the past ten months was telling her it was too close, it seemed okay. “What, you don’t like barbeques, babe?”

Jeanette groaned and gently pushed his leg. With that small connection, between her hand and his shin, she felt like things were back to good. At that moment, there was no barbeque outside, and no new boyfriend who had dragged her and her boxes into a townhouse. “Can you believe that? He calls me ‘babe.’”

“It was funny.” Nate ducked his head a little and squinted. Jeanette looked forward as saw the figure of someone running through the backyard. There was a loud crash and a

triumphant cry. She had planted impatiens by the side entrance to the yard that morning and she hoped that no one was trampling them. “The one time I did it, you lectured me about ownership and respect. And you wouldn’t have sex with me for a week.”

“And I only did then so that you would stop saying ‘Jeanette’ after every single sentence to prove your point.” As she talked to Nate, she was pleased to find that it wasn’t weird to recall their sex life. She didn’t particularly miss it, and she didn’t wish they were in bed. Out of the blue she couldn’t remember Andrew ever being around while they dated. She had a vague sense that someone was there—in that hallway as she stood in a towel, in the den playing video games, in the kitchen washing dishes—but at that moment it felt like he had just appeared one day.

It wasn’t how she wanted to feel.

“It was a good point.” Nate slid to the floor and placed his beer on the carpet next to hers. He stretched his legs out in front of him. His feet touched the wall. “Do you remember that party we threw on Columbus Day?”

“Yes,” Jeanette said. She laughed as she rotated the bottom of the bottle into the carpet next to her, creating an indentation. “We celebrated the most worthless holiday in the world.”

“Yeah. You looked nice that night.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re doing well.”

“Yes. Are you?”

“Yes.”

“I’m glad.”

“Why are you doing this?”

Jeanette knew what he meant but didn't think any excuse would appease him. The boxes she had yet to unpack probably answered his question more than anything she could possibly say. When she turned her head to look at him, he mistook it for confusion. Another misunderstanding between her and a man. She could build statues with all the unspoken mistakes she had accumulated.

“Moving in with him. Dating him at all. You always, I don't know, ignored him. I guess. When we were together. But now.” He took a sip of his beer. “You may be well, but you're not happy. Why?”

But she didn't know, and he couldn't guess. Nate touched the neck of her beer bottle before resting his hand on his lap. Jeanette tried to think back to the time when Andrew stood out to her, but maybe he had always been on the periphery. Had she ever really seen him in the hallways of the boys' house when she was fresh out of the shower—her skin glistening and her wet hair plastered to her neck like snakes? Had they ever really cooked dinner together—her focusing on what Nate wanted to eat, Andrew maybe watching the way her hands moved a knife through an onion. She couldn't pick Andrew out from her past. When she remembered another person being there—another presence in the house—it was just a blur. Nothing made sense. So Jeanette and Nate watched the people outside through the slits in the blinds, and waited for someone to find them.

CRASHING AGAINST THE WOOD

I never thought I would be invited to Big Tree. I wasn't one of the teenagers who went to places like that, mostly because I wasn't with the in crowd. Only the cool kids went to the tree and jumped the twenty feet into the lake below. It was simple, and I'm sure there were many lakes and trees like it around, but it was also special. Big Tree was a rite of passage—the place that was handed down from graduating class to graduating class, and usually only seniors were welcome. If you were lucky, you got to go in your junior year. If you were pathetic, you came back after your senior year when you had nothing else to do after dropping out of college. From what I heard, the best parties were there. Not only was it where Jason Sheer died, it was his favorite place to go on the weekends. We went to commemorate his death.

I went with Erin Montgomery. We carpooled, just like they said. We parked at the 24-Hour Wal-Mart so the cops wouldn't get suspicious of all the cars in the parking lot of a closed building. Then we jumped off the foundation behind the store. If those four feet freaked you out, you really shouldn't go any farther. The trail into the woods was easy to find once your eyes adjusted to the dark. Erin got so nervous after the jump and then from being near the woods that she hitched herself back onto the pavement, went into Wal-Mart, and browsed the makeup aisles until I called her to tell her I was back from the lake. After I followed the trail into the woods, I came across the clearing soon enough. I didn't keep track of time, but it couldn't have been long. A small pond, maybe only ten or twelve feet deep, rested in the middle of the clearing. Its shallowness proved a good enough reason for us not to jump. What happened to Jason was proof of how stupid it really was.

I hadn't talked much to Jason since middle school. He was my first big romance, even though our relationship never made it out of the roller skating rink. That's how I see him—the

seventh grade him, with wavy brown hair, brown eyes behind smudged glasses, baggy jeans, and scraped elbows from learning how to skateboard.

In a small town, something like Big Tree is important. But when I finally saw it—the murky pond and the lone tree towering above it—I had mixed feelings. Maybe it was the atmosphere, maybe it was the circumstance. Maybe it was like those movies that you hear about for so long that by the time you see them, the anticipation outweighs the experience. Sure the tree was big, maybe three stories tall, but it seemed so much grander in the stories I heard whispered throughout the hallways at school. I remember hearing about Taylor Jenkin’s sixteenth birthday party, and how two of the boys on the football team were too scared to jump. Rumor was that the student council vice president lost her virginity at Big Tree. And no one goes without a guy ever since Erica Forge and Jennifer Calvin were approached by that homeless man last summer. I wanted to be so much more excited about Big Tree than I was.

After Jason drowned there, a memorial at Big Tree only seemed fitting. The entire senior class was given the information through word-of-mouth so no adult could see an invitation and put a stop to it. Parents asked some students, and they lied—“Why would I go there? It’d be too hard to go there now, after what happened.” The administrators at school interrogated us in the hallway. Just walking to class, you were sure to hear at least two excuses, ranging from the simple “I don’t know what you’re talking about” to the elusive “I heard someone talking about going there the day before the funeral.” We lied every day. Unlike the existence of the tree and the parties that occurred there, this event was kept hidden. His funeral was at four o’clock on Thursday. That night, at two o’clock, we would honor him at Big Tree.

We were a small senior class—only about two hundred and fifty students. In all honesty, I’m not sure if some of the quieter students, like Jonathan Kleer or Bryan Botwin, showed up.

Those guys kept to themselves. But most of us were there, and Jason would've liked that. I think he was nice to everyone. I had known him since first grade, and he was always nice to me. He was my first real kiss. We had practiced spins in the kiddie rink at the year-end roller skating party. I fell and crawled to the edge, where I leaned against the carpeted partition that blocked it off from the rest of the room. My knees hurt from pounding against the floor. He dropped beside me and caught his breath. We hunched down there, trying to stay out of the eyes of the "referees" who would make us move. Jason held one leg up in the air and got the wheels on his skate rolling with the palm of his hand. He leaned over and took my hand, placing it on the laces of his skate. I felt the vibrations from there—how the wheels were slowly stopping, where they skipped a beat from cuts and chinks in the plastic. We smiled because we both felt it, and it seemed more like a secret than the realities of rented roller skates. He let me go and put his foot back on the ground. After a few moments, his hand rested on my knee. He didn't rub it or anything, just kept his hand there. Warm and steady. Before he got up, he leaned over and kissed me. He tasted like cherry Slushee. We never talked about it, and we never dated, but it was nice to think about later. When we walked past each other in the hallway, he said hello and smiled, like he maybe remembered it too.

Our procession was organized. Jason's closest friend Ben Walker told us what to do. He went to the tree first and climbed about eight feet up. Someone had nailed on boards every foot or so. He held on to one of the boards and turned to face the group. "Thanks for coming, everyone. This would have meant a lot to Jason." A few people sniffled up ahead. A lot of us huddled together, our arms wrapped around one another. I was surprised the wind could blow through the trees that hard. Vanessa Greene, from my history class, stepped closer to me. I heard her teeth chatter. "This is going to be fast and simple. One at a time, we're going to jump into the

lake. No diving.” He paused after that, and a low murmur erupted through the crowd. Vanessa sighed next to me. What could Jason have been thinking when he did that? Ben cleared his throat and said, “When you’re done, swim out and go back to your car. That’s it.”

A girl from the front of the line called out, “Think about something nice while you’re up there.”

Ben nodded. “Yeah. That’s a good idea.” He took a deep breath and looked up at the tree. His right leg moved, and he reached for another block. Slowly, he ascended. Another person in line began the climb. I kept my eyes on Ben. He was the one who’d pulled Jason out from the bottom. There were lots of rumors at school about what had happened out here. We heard Jason had been under for almost a minute before anyone reacted. From the medical reports on the news, we knew that Jason had some sort of trauma to his head. The coroner said that he must have dove into the lake and smashed his head against a log or rock at the bottom. Ben had been drinking with Stephanie Miller a little past the clearing. When he heard the screams, he came running. I heard it took him forever to find Jason. The coroner said forever was actually around three minutes. In any case, Ben must have hated climbing that tree.

The boards stopped at about twenty feet up. That was the last stable branch able to hold a person. He sidestepped onto it and grasped the trunk. There used to be a branch about six feet higher, so we heard, but when one of the linebackers in the class of 2002 stood on it, it cracked beneath his feet and he had to shimmy down the tree trunk to a safer branch, the one six feet below. That could be a rumor, though, because how would he have even gotten up there without boards?

We liked to believe these stories.

Even though it was the middle of the night, the clearing of the trees helped the moon shine through. We got some of the light from the Wal-Mart parking lot. I saw Ben's eyes close. He only hesitated for five seconds, and then he jumped. Ben fell faster than anything I've ever seen fall, and he disappeared into the brown water. He came up seconds later, spitting out water and wiping his nose. He trudged to the bank, shook his hair, started on the trail, and faded into the woods.

After he jumped, people started getting out of line and going home. Vanessa reached out, squeezed my arm, whispered, "Good luck," and walked away quietly. Not everyone can handle a jump from twenty feet up.

I watched the things that were tossed from the branch—car keys, cell phones, shoes, watches that wouldn't last underwater—and counted falling students. Most looked nervous. Many cried. I could tell that some, like me, were excited to be there, excited to be a part of something that just screamed unity. Some girls giggled behind me. But then I had to remember Jason and how it felt when his teeth knocked against mine at the roller rink. I had to remember the rumors that had been floating around school, like the one that when Ben pulled Jason out, he was already bloated and his eyes were tinted brown from the tannin in the lake. The warmth of his hand on the crisp denim of my Jordaches. How no one knew what to do after they got him out. Ben started CPR, but everyone was scared to call 911 because we had been warned for years to not go to Big Tree, it was dangerous.

I took a deep breath as I walked up to the tree. The boards were rough-looking, but not splintery anymore. Thousands of teenagers had gripped those boards and pulled themselves skyward. That'll wear anything down. Henry Williams was above me, pulling himself onto the branch. He took me to junior homecoming, and we hadn't talked much since then. He and Jason

went to preschool together. He'd been a zombie in the hallways ever since it happened. When I was about halfway up the trunk, he went falling past me. His splash sounded more like a crack. I was too scared to look down. My hands and feet trembled. I didn't know how to maneuver myself to the left, but I somehow ended up on the branch. It bounced beneath my feet. I remembered that I didn't want my shoes to end up in the lake, but I didn't know how to kick them off without falling myself—and I wasn't ready for that yet.

The moon could have been a spotlight on us. I felt like a giant, on the top of the tree, gazing down at a pond so small that it couldn't hold all of the life we were throwing at it. We were defiant. We were angry. We were a mass of ants on the ground that wanted our friend back. I felt something up there, on the wiggling branch, that I hadn't felt before. Freedom, maybe, but more likely it was the power of a memory. I danced on the tops of the pines, cypresses, and live oaks. I threaded my fingers through the mangroves. I tasted the crisp breeze and let the humidity clean my face. I took one step out, and raised my hands above my head. I plummeted to the water, and it felt a lot like crashing onto the wood floor of a roller skating rink.

WHAT ISABEL SAID

When Sara was fifteen, her father Raymond walked out the door and never came back home. Sara had been standing in the kitchen when Raymond finally made his way to the front door. Her mother Isabel stood between him and his escape route. For the first time, Sara realized how small her mother was. Isabel was only five foot three, and her skinny arms were shivering with anger and distress. Raymond was almost a whole foot taller than she was. He stood silently, as he had been doing for hours, and Isabel continued to scream. The rasp in her throat made Sara's skin crawl.

Raymond took a step for the door. Isabel insulted the woman he was leaving her for. He paused. His arm barely lifted, but it came down with such force that Sara felt her own cheek sting. His head bobbed, and Sara saw Isabel wipe spit off her neck. He whispered something then, something that made Isabel slump to the floor.

Raymond left and Isabel cried on the tile in the foyer until she fell asleep. Sara walked through the house to see if it looked any different in his absence. He didn't even come back for the trophies from his All-Star years of high school baseball. When Sara saw those still sitting on the dresser, she had hope that he would be back, that this was a temporary fight. When she saw the trophies there two months later, still freshly polished, she knew Isabel hadn't given up hope for his return, even though by then Sara had.

Sara believed it was her entrance into the dating world that fixed Isabel. A guy from Sara's chemistry class came over one day—he said to study—but ended up kissing her on the couch. Isabel saw it. When he left, she couldn't stop talking about how this was going to be the best phase of Sara's life. She had said that for every phase. That was the night Sara learned that

even though her dad had only left her mom seven months earlier, he had left her bed years before.

“Years, Sara,” Isabel stressed as she ripped open a bag of popcorn. Kernels and puffs of white fell to the floor. “Do you know how lonesome that can be for a woman?”

Within a week of Sara’s first kiss, Isabel had lined up her first date as a deserted, and therefore mostly single, woman.

Sara heard Isabel rooting through her bathroom. She was trying to iron the hanger marks out of a shirt for her date with Ethan, and her next stop was the bathroom to straighten her hair. Sara left the ironing board and went into the bathroom to see Isabel removing the straightener from under the sink. “No. No way,” Sara said. “I need it.”

“Your hair looks good, honey.”

“Mom.”

“Fine,” Isabel said. “We’ll both use it here.” She plugged it into the wall and leaned forward to inspect her eyebrows in the mirror.

It unnerved Sara a little that Isabel was going on more dates than she was. She kept reminding herself that Isabel was an adult who was going through a divorce, and she was only a high school junior. But Sara hadn’t been prepared to enter the dating scene alongside her mother. Because she thought Isabel had moved a little too fast, Sara stayed up the whole night of that first date, worrying about her mother, and didn’t fall asleep until three o’clock in the morning. A few hours later Isabel came home. Sara spent the morning holding Isabel’s hand as Isabel cried about how she had never expected that she would have to date again. Things like this shouldn’t happen, Isabel said. You get married, and that should be the end of it. You stay together, no

matter what, and you deal with each other. Isabel hugged a pillow to her chest and said she should have cheated on Raymond with that guy from her office when she had the chance. As she waited for her mother to calm down, Sara missed the first three periods at school.

But Isabel rebounded from the first date well, and she had found a large pool from which to choose men. Sara only had the boys in her school, and the guys she met while ringing up customers at the grocery store. This night, however, Sara was distracted from her smaller love life by Isabel standing in her robe, wearing a lacy bra and panty set.

“Seriously, you’re wearing that?” Sara said.

Isabel looked down at herself, and then looked back up at Sara. “What?”

“It’s a first date.”

Sara’s mom shrugged and reached down to test the straightener’s heat. “It’s not about what you’re going to show them,” she said. “It’s about how it makes you feel inside.” She looked at Sara through the mirror. “Remember that.” Sara nodded. Isabel began straightening the ends of her hair. “Where are you going tonight? Don’t go to Louie’s. We’re going there.”

“Okay,” Sara said. “I don’t know where we’re going.”

“Is this the boy who was here a few months ago?”

“No, that was Sammy. This is Ethan. He’s from my physics class.”

“You really get them in those science classes, huh, kid.” Isabel smiled and steam rose from her hair. Sara watched it disappear inches above her mother’s head.

“They ask me for help. I have the highest grade in our class.”

“Now, listen, Sara,” she said as she placed the straightener on the counter. She turned to look at her daughter, and she folded her arms across her chest. Sara looked away as the robe separated and showed her more of her mother’s leg than she ever wanted to see again. “It’s

important to be independent. Guys like that. It's a challenge. But be a little reliant upon them. Have problems in math or something. Let them help you. And for Christ's sake, stop looking so embarrassed, it's the human body. How are you ever going to have sex if you can't even stand to look at me in my underwear?"

"What does that have to do with me having sex?" Sara groaned. She still couldn't talk about sex with Isabel, and she had no desire to after the conversation she'd had with her cousins over Easter.

Sara spent the two hours before the dinner in her cousin Hannah's bedroom. Hannah, Sara, and Hannah's older brother Thomas lay on the floor and watched *The Ten Commandments* play on one of the local channels. Thomas had managed to sneak some beer out of the refrigerator. They split two bottles between the three of them.

After Hannah teased Thomas about his new girlfriend, she turned to Sara. "Have you ever had a boyfriend?" Hannah asked.

"No," Sara admitted. She had only gone to second base on a couch with Sammy instead of actually going out to public places with him.

Thomas laughed and said, "Must suck to not have a boyfriend when your mom has like five."

During the dinner, Sarah moved her food around her plate without eating much of it. She watched Isabel laugh and talk with their family. Their roles should have been reversed. Her cousins should be envious and gossiping about her, not her mother. She thought about how much of Isabel's life she didn't know, and how much she wished she were her mother.

Isabel sighed and picked up Sara's brush to change her part. "It's just the—"

“Human body, yeah, I know. Please, are you done?” Sara leaned into her room to check the clock. “He’ll be here any minute.”

“Never be completely ready when a man shows up.” Isabel kissed Sara’s cheek as she walked out of the room. “And if you are ready, let them in, go up to your room, and wait three minutes before coming back downstairs.”

Once during her senior year, Sara tallied up all the men she and her mother had dated. Isabel’s count blew hers out of the water, for sure, but Sara still liked to see it in print. She had dated Ethan for a few months, but that ended when she saw him holding another girl’s hand at a soccer game. She had fooled around with Owen for a couple of weeks, but rumors started that he was maybe gay, and Owen didn’t deny them when she asked him. Sara had mentioned that to Isabel, who had responded, “Experimenting is an important part of securing your adulthood and maturity. Sorry, baby, but good for him.” Now she was dating Logan, and that was fine with her.

She wrote down all the names of the men Isabel had been on dates with. In one year, there were fourteen men. She had a new column: Men Who Had Come Back to the House. There were six names on that list. Finally, she squeezed one more onto the paper: Men Who Stayed Longer Than Two Weeks. Only two: David and Stephen. Out of all the advice Isabel kept spouting after failed dates and two-week relationships that fizzled, nothing ever resulted in how to get a man to stay around.

Every so often, while at college, Sara would get a phone call from her mother in the middle of the night. She listened, silently, ready to say, “I love you, Mom. Sleep well,” as soon as Isabel was ready to stop crying and go to sleep. Sara learned a lot about her mother during

those phone calls. Isabel's first love had been a little boy named Henry. When Henry was six, and Isabel was five, he let her borrow his G.I. Joe whenever no one was looking. He kissed her in the tree house one afternoon when she was supposed to be cleaning her room. The wind pushing its way through the leaves was louder than the sound of her mother calling her home. Isabel yelled, "Gross," when she felt the spit he had left on her lip.

"Can you imagine that?" Isabel whispered into the phone. "I must have scared him to death. He ran right home, and he took his G.I. Joe with him. I was five, but—" She sighed. "—I was in love."

Isabel swore that she had not slept with most of the men that came home while Sara was in high school. Sara laughed at that, and Isabel said, "No, really. I'll tell you who."

"No, it's okay," Sara said, breaking her vow of silence. "I believe you."

"You were always like that. Scared by sex," she said before plowing into the reason why she had called that night—a client she met at work had asked to meet her for drinks and then never showed. Isabel talked, and Sara thought how surprised her mother would be by her now. How Sara had taken most of the unusual advice passed down to her—*always give each and every man who asks you out a chance; it's polite to kiss someone on the first date; you need to get tested after every single boyfriend because they lie, baby, they lie*—and ran with it. She didn't sleep around, but she wasn't the prude her mother believed her to be. She didn't want to depress her mother with the story of her boyfriend Lucas who had pursued her for two months before she gave in, and how she was happy. It just didn't seem fair.

Isabel talked about Raymond a lot over the phone. She told Sara stories of her childhood, ones that Sara had grown up listening to, but she never interrupted. Isabel remembered when Sara asked Raymond to marry her. "And he scooped you up in his arms, told you Mommy had

already snagged him, and kissed your whole face. You just laughed and laughed. And I knew that I loved him so much.” Sara could picture her mom, tucked against the kitchen cabinets on the floor. When Isabel thought about Raymond, she gravitated to the place that held the happiest memories of their marriage: the kitchen. Sara wasn’t sure which part of that scenario was the part that caused the memories, but the two—Raymond and the kitchen—always coincided. Sara could see Isabel sliding her feet against the tile until they reached the island, and then pulling them back to her body. Repeating the sliding motion, over and over.

After almost five minutes of silence one night, the only words Isabel said were, “He never came back. I always thought he would come back. I never thought.”

But the two women never spoke of the stories and conversations. They were secrets that remained nestled within phone lines, surrounded by the dark.

Raymond invited Isabel and Sara to his wedding. When Sara received the invitation, she drove the two hours to her mother’s house, to find Isabel staring at her own invitation in the kitchen. They sat on Isabel’s couch, with the invitations propped up on the coffee table, and discussed the hidden motives. Isabel hadn’t heard a lick in six years. The last she had seen of him was Raymond walking out of the courtroom, whispering to his lawyer. Sara received birthday cards and a phone call and a one hundred dollar check at Christmas. For her twenty-first birthday, he had sent a pint of Jack Daniels. Sara knew the sudden extension of a wedding invitation scared Isabel.

“Her name is Gina.”

“That’s what it says.”

“I thought he was with someone named Carrie.”

Sara shook her head. “That’s the original woman. They got married in Vegas about three years ago, remember? Carrie had it annulled the next week. I don’t think he’s seen her since.”

“How do you know all that?”

“Aunt Lara heard it from someone and she told Hannah and Hannah told me.”

“What about me?”

“I wouldn’t tell you that,” Sara said. She looked at her watch. Isabel seemed stunned, scared, but okay overall. Sara had a job interview in the morning and wanted to get back to her apartment to make sure her résumé was in good order. “Are you going?”

“No,” Isabel said. Her hands twitched on her legs. “You should, though.”

“You sure?”

“Yes. Bring Nathan with you. You’ve been with him for almost a year. He should meet your father.”

After the wedding, Gina insisted that Raymond keep in touch with his daughter. They lived in a neighborhood only thirty minutes away from Sara’s apartment. She went over for dinner once every other week. Gina seemed happy to have Sara be a part of Raymond’s life again. Sara let herself fall back into the father-daughter routine. He asked her about school and if she was dating anyone. She told him as much as she could without feeling like she was betraying her mom. She never told Isabel about the dinners.

Isabel suggested the double date. Sara ignored it until one night Isabel handed the phone to Joshua and had him plead her case. “Hi, Sara,” he said, almost like he was embarrassed. Sara didn’t blame him—she had only met him once briefly. “Your mother would really like it if you and Nathan would meet us for dinner. This Saturday.”

Sara heard her mother call in the background, “Tell her I’ve already made the reservations. She can’t back out.”

“Just think about it, Sara,” Joshua said. “It would mean a lot to her.”

When Nathan came over that night, Sara waited until they were in bed to bring up the topic of dinner. She smoothed out the comforter under her hands as she gave Nathan the details.

“Sure, that sounds fine,” he said. He rolled onto his side and pressed his face against her shoulder. She felt his nose twist to the side. Hooking his arm over her chest and pulling her close, he seemed to settle in for the night. “Can’t be any worse than the wedding, right?”

“I don’t know,” Sara said. “She’s interesting.”

“How interesting?”

She took a deep breath. “Remember when we first started dating and I was really spastic about when I let you pay for dinner?”

“Yeah. Sometimes you refused to let me even look at the check and once you practically shoved it at me.”

“And how I would ignore your phone calls for a week at a time, but then talk to you every day for a few days in a row?”

He sat up and looked down at her. “You were always late getting ready, too.” He looked pointedly at her, and she smiled. One time he got so tired of waiting, he walked down the hallway and knocked on her door to let her know they really did need to leave to get the reservation. When he knocked, the door swung open, revealing Sara sitting on her bed, hands in her lap, tapping her feet on the floor. Waiting.

“Her advice,” Sara said. She swung her arm to the side, as if to suggest that their entire world was part of Isabel’s plan. “All of it.”

Nathan leaned back against his own pillow. “That is interesting.” They lay in silence for a few minutes and thought about the things Sara had done since they met. Sara wished she could take back what she had just confessed. If she thought about it hard enough, she could still feel his nose pressed against her shoulder. She would remember that for years, long after Nathan was gone. “Well,” he said, reaching over to squeeze her hand, “you don’t do stuff like that anymore.”

“Because it’s stupid.”

He closed his eyes. “Dinner with your mom is fine. Tell her we’ll be there.”

Isabel invited Sara over to the house to help move in Joshua’s belongings. They had rented a small U-Haul on a foggy Saturday morning. Sara brought iced coffee. Isabel swooped in and took hers from the tray. She hugged Sara tightly and asked, “How are you doing? Have you heard from him?”

“I’m fine,” Sara said. “He came by last week to get some of his stuff. But that’s it. We’re fine. It’ll be fine.” Sara didn’t blame her mother for causing her relationship with Nathan to end. Nathan swore up and down that he loved Sara and even liked her family—he just thought that she was regressing, that her ideas of love and relationships were overwrought. “You can’t pin it down to little things,” he said. When Sara asked for him to show her how she was regressing, how she was becoming more and more like a copy of her mother, he just shook his head and left.

Isabel squeezed her daughter’s shoulder and took a sip of iced coffee. “You hang in there. Don’t call him. You’ll look weak. Don’t worry, he’ll come back to you.”

After an hour of arranging boxes and the extra furniture in the garage, Joshua paused by Sara. “Do you think your mom’s happy?”

Sara nodded. “Yeah. I do.”

“We’ve been talking about this for a long time.”

“I’m glad you finally did it, then.”

Joshua nodded. “Thanks for coming over here on your free time.” With his hands on his hips, he surveyed the garage. He looked like most of her friends’ dads—a little overweight, happy face, and balding. He seemed like he was nice.

“It’s fine,” she smiled. “Really.”

He took a few steps away before turning around. “I love her.”

“Good.” She looked away from Joshua and pushed one of his boxes further into the garage.

In the space of a day, Sara saw her mother ignore most of her own advice. Isabel asked Joshua’s opinions on where he liked the plates in the cupboard, instead of keeping it the way she had it. She let him make the decision for where to order lunch. After watching Isabel listen to Joshua tell her how to properly break down boxes, Sara wondered if that’s what happened when you really loved someone—you let the rules fly out the window and you just let it happen.

Sara had extended her mother’s invitation to her father for the third time, and again he declined. “No, Sara, it’s okay,” he said. He stretched out on the couch, remote in hand, bowl of popcorn by his side, with a football game blaring on the television. “Go, have fun. I’ll be fine.”

Sara was not accustomed to her new living arrangement. She had been out of college for not even six months when her father called, requesting to live with her for a few months, just until he could bounce back after his divorce. Raymond telecommuted, and when he wasn’t sitting in front of her computer all day—Gina had refused to give theirs up when he moved out—he was watching ESPN on her television or drinking at the bar three blocks away. He had made

the guest room his own. After four months with her father paying her a small fee for rent and food that he had suggested to make the arrangement seem fair, Sara still did not see how this would ever attract a boyfriend, never mind a husband.

“It’s Thanksgiving, Dad,” Sara said. She buttoned her pea coat and checked her purse to make sure she had her cell phone and her wallet. “I don’t think you should be here alone. Please.”

“It was just a formality, sweetie,” Raymond said. He changed the channel to a different game. “Your mom wants to enjoy her first holiday in the house with her new husband. Let her. I’ll be here when you get back.”

Sara watched the kicker on the screen miss the field goal. Raymond always referred to Joshua as the “new husband,” as though his own place in Isabel’s past still counted for something. Her parents never spoke. Sara sometimes wondered if her mother even remembered being married to him.

“You going to the bar?”

He paused before saying, “Maybe later.”

She thought back to all the lessons and advice Isabel had given her over the years. *Be independent, seem unattached, but throw in an edge of reliance: have him fix a broken faucet or set up your Internet. Make him feel useful. Surely, Don’t let your father move in fell under the “appear independent umbrella.”* Sara had been on three separate dates with separate men ever since Raymond moved in, and once she let slip her current living situation, they never called again. As one of them, Noah, said, “It’s a little hard to hit on your date when you know her father’s crashing in the other room.” Sara picked up her purse and looked around the room. Someday, soon maybe, her father would be out and a new boyfriend would be in. And her love

life would be moving along, just like Isabel's. Even after all this time, she wasn't sure why Isabel seemed to fare better than she did.

"Okay, Dad," Sara said. "I'll be back later tonight."

"Be safe driving," Raymond said. He looked up at her. "The highways get icy and no one's paying attention."

"I know."

Raymond stared at her for a moment, and Sara squirmed a little under his gaze. She started to leave the room when he said her name. She turned to look at him. He smiled and said, "I'm proud of you. You've become such a wonderful young woman. And you're going to meet that one guy sometime soon. It will be the best part of your life. Love you, kid."

She smiled and walked out of the condo. The autumn air had grown brisk over the past few days, and she pushed her hands into her pockets as she walked to her car. The leaves from the maple trees lining the sidewalk crunched under her boots. She started the car and waited for the heat to kick in before pulling out. Like she did so many times, Sara ran through her catalogue of everything Isabel had said as she drove to her house. When she added up all the advice, and took away all the cold and broken relationships, she was left with nothing that told her the best part was coming.

CLIMBING TREES

Izzy fell out of the oak tree in Charlotte Scott's front yard and died on a Thursday evening. The bark was slippery after hours of rain all afternoon. What had happened seemed so simple in Charlotte's eyes: she had been hanging upside down on another branch, called Izzy's name to show her, and then Izzy had fallen when she turned to look. This is what she told the police when they arrived in a blur of red and blue lights after her neighbor's frantic phone call. Two police cruisers, a van from the coroner's office, and an ambulance were parked erratically in the cul-de-sac. One of the police officers sat on Charlotte's front stoop and asked her, "Is there anything else you want to tell us?"

Charlotte shrugged. He knew that she had seen Izzy fall. After that, nothing she had seen really mattered. Her neighbor, Mr. Beasley, had been working on his car's engine in the driveway. He saw Izzy fall, too. He came running and his wife called the police. Now, the Beasleys were standing in the small gathering of neighbors in the yard next door. Charlotte heard one of them say, "What a pity. Such a pretty girl."

The coroner shut the van's door and walked over to the EMT, who had already checked Charlotte over. They spoke softly and laughed about something. The EMT hadn't listened to her when she'd said, "I wasn't the one who fell. I'm fine." No one wanted to hear anything other than the story of the fourteen-year-old girl who fell out of the tree and broke her neck.

It was on the news that night. Charlotte heard it on the television as she lay on her bed. The news anchors' voices floated down the hall, growing louder as her parents turned up the volume to hear what people were saying about the girl who died in their yard. One reporter said Isabel Thatcher's parents were suing. Another said the local council was going to start an Isabel

Thatcher Remembrance Day; no one knew if it would be on her birthday or the anniversary of her death. Charlotte stared at the ceiling, at the glow-in-the-dark stars she and Izzy had pasted there when they were in fourth grade. They had lost their glow long ago.

Charlotte's mom peeked into her room every hour, to check and see how she was holding up. Charlotte's dad hovered in the hallway. At one point during the night, Izzy's parents came by. Charlotte's mom asked her to come out, but she stayed in bed.

School was cancelled on Friday. So was the football game at the school; this made almost as much news as Isabel's death. Florida high school football was cancelled for nothing, let alone the death of a girl who wasn't even one of the cheerleaders. Charlotte spent the weekend in her room, listening to the radio and trying to do her homework. She didn't go to the funeral. On Sunday night, she slipped out of the house. Her parents had been whispering all weekend about her mental state, and she couldn't stand to listen to them anymore.

The neighborhood was quiet. She jogged down the center of the street. The muddy puddles sloshed over her tennis shoes. With her arms pumping at her sides, she focused on the holes and dips in the road. She didn't need to look to see where she was going, but it didn't matter where she ran. Once in a while, when she passed a particular house, she could hear the noises of Sunday night dinner or the muffled voices on a television. She focused on her feet and the soft pounding each one made against the bricks.

When she had circled the neighborhood a few times, she finally raised her head. She was a quarter of a mile from her own home. The streetlights flickered on, casting strange yellow hues on the cars and puddles. All the trees spread out before her had lavender ribbons tied around them, like beauty queens lined up for the crowning moment. Charlotte looked back. The ends of

lavender ribbons floated in the breeze, scratching all the trees she had passed. She walked up to one of the trees and pulled off the ribbon, plastic and awkward in her hands.

She walked home with the ribbon hanging from her left hand. Tears wet her cheeks, but she didn't feel an overwhelming sadness or anything. When she reached her house, she recognized the feeling was anger—a large lavender ribbon, the biggest one yet, was squeezing the tree in her own yard. Charlotte was surprised people weren't putting flowers and candles underneath it. She came into the den and stood in front of her parents, who were sitting on the couch, watching a show on the Food Network. Her father sat up straight. "Charlotte, were you outside?"

"When did you leave?" her mother cried.

Charlotte dropped the ribbon on the coffee table. "Who's putting these up?"

Her mother gingerly touched it. "The city council wants people to remember Isabel."

"It happened three days ago."

"Now, Char," her father said, "it's a nice gesture. I'm sure Izzy's parents appreciate it."

"No one knew her. Why does everyone care now?"

Her parents stared at her. Their silence made Charlotte angrier. She picked up the ribbon and carried to her bedroom. She shredded it until she fell asleep.

One of the rumors at school on Monday was that Charlotte had pushed Izzy off the tree. Both girls were in the same drama class, and both girls had auditioned for the same role in the spring play: Kim McAfee in *Bye Bye Birdie*, but Izzy had gotten it. Obviously, Charlotte was jealous. With moves like this—getting revenge on other actresses—she could definitely make it into show business. The other rumor was that Chad Riley had asked Izzy out, when Charlotte had

clearly been giving him googly eyes for weeks. Chad Riley denied this rumor, seeing as how he knew Izzy but couldn't pick Charlotte out of a lineup. His "Well, I talked to Izzy, but I didn't ask her out. Not yet. I was going to, soon, but..." was met with a soft cooing from the girls who followed him around that day to offer their condolences.

Small lavender ribbons littered the floors of the school. The linoleum floor surrounding Izzy's locker was littered with flowers and cards.

Later that night, her parents received a phone call from the guidance counselor at school. The administration was dismayed the scrutiny Charlotte had received from other students throughout the day. Charlotte's parents squeezed into her bedroom and stood at the foot of her bed. Her mother reached out and patted her foot. "We were wondering, Char, if you would like to go visit your aunt for a few days. To clear your head."

Charlotte asked if it was to Tampa to see her aunt Kathy. Kathy lived near the beach and let her nieces and nephews do whatever they wanted during the day so long as they were at the dinner table by seven.

"No," her father said. "Aunt Beth. In Chattanooga."

Charlotte sat up. "Why would I want to do that?" Aunt Beth sold Mary Kay products and had ventured into the candle party business a few years back. Every time Charlotte visited, she ended up attending at least two different candle parties and leaving town with lipstick samples in her bag and order forms in her hands.

Her mother sat next to her. "Your guidance counselor thinks—and we agree with her, honey—that some time away from all of this would be good for you." She pushed Charlotte's hair behind her ears. "It would be so much fun for you. The track team at the high school there is very good."

“I’d switch schools?”

“A transfer would be a good idea,” her father said. “A temporary transfer, of course.”

Her mother smoothed the dark hair that fell across her shoulder blades. Charlotte allowed the petting motion, but her hands gripped her jeans and her jaw clenched tight. “Don’t you just think this is a good idea?” her mother whispered. “Your father will fly up with you on Wednesday morning. We’ll pack your things tomorrow.”

Aunt Beth had cleared all of the extra things in the house out of the guest room. Her son Mark, who at seventeen was just less than two years older than Charlotte, lugged them to the basement. When Charlotte arrived, the room was clean and airy. When her boxes arrived six days after her, she left them in a pile in the corner and let the room turn into storage again. Her father stayed, under the pretense of visiting his sister, but he made it clear every once in a while that he wanted to make sure Charlotte wouldn’t turn into a sobbing ball of grief. The truth of it was that besides the few errant tears that fell on the first Sunday, she hadn’t cried since.

The night before Charlotte’s dad was to fly back home, Aunt Beth had Mark invite some of his friends over, in hopes that Charlotte might make a few friends before school started on Monday. Between her father’s embarrassing anecdotes and Beth’s extreme determination to not let anyone discuss why Charlotte was here, dinner was awkward. If Mark sensed Charlotte’s discomfort, he didn’t seem too inclined to help her.

“Jordan and Collin run track too, Charlotte,” Aunt Beth said. She smiled at the boys sitting across from Charlotte, who didn’t even raise her head.

“What do you run?” the brown-haired boy asked.

“Char was on a relay team back home,” her father replied. “First leg.” He put his fork down and chuckled. “One time she tripped just before handing it off to her partner. It was sad, but oh man, we can look at it now and laugh.”

Mark shrugged. “I’d be pissed if everyone talked about me tripping.”

Auth Beth chimed in. “Don’t you have scars on your hip from the fall?”

Charlotte escaped to the back porch as soon as she could. She had spent most of her evenings here, watching the neighbors across the back yard. They distracted her from what ran through her head. They ate outside every night, and sometimes, if he had enough to drink, the young husband would take out his BB gun or his rocket launcher while his young wife chirped with laughter. Tonight, he was shooting fireworks off their back porch.

The sliding glass door opened and one of Mark’s friends walked out. It was the blonde one. He sat at the table next to her. Charlotte nodded at him, but didn’t acknowledge him more than that. She heard his breath catch in his throat a few times, as though he didn’t know how to speak to her. She thought he had given up trying when he said, “So, your friend died?” She turned her head sharply. He shrugged. “I heard your dad talking about it with Beth. Is it true?”

Charlotte nodded.

He let out a low whistle. “That sucks.”

She frowned. The faint smell of smoke drifted onto the balcony. The air around them was hazy. Finally she said, “Yeah. It does.”

Across the yard the guy approached the firework that just wouldn’t go off. “What an idiot,” he whispered. He looked back at Charlotte. “So how did it happen? Was it gross?”

“She fell on her head and broke her neck,” she said. She squinted into the dusk. The man across the back yard was holding the firework upside down. “She fell out of a tree.”

“Was there blood?”

Charlotte paused. She hadn't taken the time to inspect Izzy after the fall. The images she had was of Izzy falling, and Izzy's body soaking in the mud beneath the tree. No bones, no blood—just a slack face and twisted limbs. That had been enough for her, and she had turned toward the neighbor's house and never looked back. “No,” she said. “Everything happened on the inside.”

“Whoa.” They both watched the man shake the firework a few times and Charlotte thought that all the instances of death they had known before were from gruesome photographs of car accidents and blackened lungs—pictures meant to scare you into wearing seatbelts and avoiding cigarettes. No one ever waved pictures of girls lying peacefully on their sides.

“Yeah.” The firework started to smoke. Charlotte's breath caught in her throat, and she leaned forward in her seat. The man dropped the firework and jumped back. It squealed at his feet and shot into the air, exploding just above the roof of his house. He whooped and his wife suddenly decided it wasn't funny anymore. She went inside.

“I'm Jordan,” he said. He waved at the smoke surrounding them. When Charlotte looked up, she could almost see the paths the fireworks had taken as they burst into the air. These days, she felt like she could see a lot of things that weren't really there anymore.

Charlotte nodded slowly. “Okay.”

The track team was not as good as promised by her mother, but Charlotte joined it anyway. Auth Beth was right—Mark and his friends were on the team. Either Jordan was good at keeping secrets, or none of their friends thought it was interesting that Charlotte had witnessed Izzy's death. She was just Mark's cousin. If anyone asked her why she had transferred in the

middle of a semester or why she lived with Mark, she muttered, “Intense custody battle,” and everyone left her alone. Almost everyone’s parents were divorced and no one found it interesting.

Running was harder in Chattanooga. There were hills to fight against. Charlotte found if she ran in the neighborhood, Aunt Beth settled on the porch and watched her like a hawk. Once, when she took a detour before heading back on the regular loop, Aunt Beth was crazed with worry. She swooped off the porch, crying, “You’re four minutes later than the last few times. What happened? Where did you go? Who did you see?”

It was easier for her to run in the state parks if she could get Mark to take her there. He liked to fish with his friends, and if she tagged along with the promise of not getting in the way, he let her come too. She would run for an hour or so, and then lie on the beach by their car while he and his friends fished in the rowboat.

After a month or so, Jordan stopped fishing and started running with Charlotte. She ignored him at first. After a few runs together, she tried to outrun him, but it became fairly obvious that he was faster. So they ran through the state parks. He would run ahead then double back to meet her, run with her for a while, and then go ahead again. It was not a friendship but a companionship. The last person she had spent time with who didn’t care if they spoke or not was Izzy. She and Izzy would hole themselves up in Charlotte’s room and listen to CDs, trying to memorize the lyrics and wonder if maybe the band was singing to them exclusively because it sure felt like it. Jordan was quiet, and Charlotte felt like maybe he would be nice to listen to music with.

Usually when they got back to the car, they waited silently for the guys to come back. Jordan would sometimes swim out to them or walk to a shore closer to them. This time, he stayed with Charlotte. They sat on the beach and he asked, “So when are you going home?”

It wasn't something she thought about often. She didn't like to remember how she had been shipped off so easily. In their hearts, her parents believed they had done the best thing, and she knew that. It was just frustrating to not be old enough to dictate her own life. Charlotte didn't want to know if her parents were relishing the time they had to themselves or if they missed her. She didn't talk to them often. The awkward phone calls had decreased from every night to a few times a week, with a letter or two in the mail from her mom, but nothing more than that. The most recent phone call involved her mother talking about her new job. Charlotte had listened without interrupting, and after a few minutes of babbling about filing systems and organizing a Rolodex, her mom had said, “Well, sweetie, it was a good talk. Next time, let's talk about getting you back here, huh? Love you.” They were always going to talk about her coming back the next time. It was a new way of being a daughter, and Charlotte didn't know how easy it would be to adjust back.

“When they send for me, I guess,” she said. Jordan laughed and she smiled in spite of herself. It was easy for her to pretend she was a piece of furniture being passed to different houses, to whomever had the space to keep her. It made the situation seem less about Izzy and more about Charlotte needing to discover how to live. “I'm apparently at their will.”

“Did you want to come here?” He fell back and stared up at the sky. It was cloudy. It would rain, probably before the guys came back in with fish they should've released.

Charlotte slowly leaned back. She dug the heels of her tennis shoes into the thick and grainy sand. “No,” she said. She picked at the hem of her T-shirt and briefly told him how that

one day at school had sent everyone into a tizzy and how quickly plans had been made. “I guess they didn’t want me to be a social outcast or something, so they sent me here.” She sighed and rolled her head over to look at him. “It makes sense, sometimes.”

Jordan shook his head, rubbing sand into his hair. “I don’t know. When does running away ever solve something?”

Charlotte looked back to the sky. The clouds rolled by. She stared hard for a moment, then closed her eyes and watched the imprints of the clouds roll past her eyelids. She liked the moments when she could close her eyes and see something other than Izzy. It happened when she ran; she closed her eyes on a straightaway and let the nothingness sink in. Sometimes running solved everything. Charlotte wondered what she would have done if she had stayed at home after Izzy’s death. Would everyone have forgotten that she had anything to do with it? Did they institute an Izzy Thatcher Remembrance Day? If the stares never stopped, would she just have had to run away later?

She heard Jordan shift next to her. She tilted her head closer to the sky, wanting to keep the images. Warm air covered her cheek and she tensed. Then, very softly, Jordan’s lips touched her own. She squeezed her eyes shut tight. He pushed just a little and then fell back onto the sand next to her. When she let herself relax again, the images of the clouds were gone and all she saw was the red of her eyelids.

It snowed five days before Charlotte’s parents came to visit for Christmas. She hoped the snow would fall like crazy and cancel their flight, but the airports didn’t skip a beat, and the snow melted within three days. Her parents came into Aunt Beth’s house with a sharp anxiousness. They wanted to see what their daughter had been up to in the three months since

they had sent her away. They wanted to know what she was doing with her life, what she thought about coming back, what she thought about fixing their mistake, because yes, it was a mistake, one that was very clear to them now. Neighbors, teachers, family, friends, and minor acquaintances in town stopped them to ask them how their daughter was, how she was coping, and they never had a solid answer because how could they know?

Charlotte's father asked if she would show him around Chattanooga. He drove the rental car downtown, and she navigated from the passenger seat. Most of the snow was gone from the valley. When she pointed out the snow-capped foothills, her father couldn't stop praising their beauty. "Just look at that, Char," he said. "It's like a picture. Or the box of a puzzle." He paused before adding, "I don't see how you're handling this cold so well. For a Florida kid like you, that's quite a feat."

Charlotte took him down by the Tennessee River. The river was wide and dark green. From a distance it was calm, but when Charlotte went to the edge and looked down, she saw that there was in fact a swift current. Even in the cold, boats with tourists drifted by. They moved their hats and scarves away from their faces and took pictures. People posed, resting precariously against the railings of the boat, and as Charlotte watched with her father, they could tell who was uncomfortable by being in a boat—that person usually hung onto the railing with one hand and gripped someone's shoulder with their other hand, while under the pretense of getting close for a picture.

They made their way to the walking bridge. When they found an empty bench, Charlotte sat down and her father sat awkwardly next to her. He rested his arm on the back of the bench. They were quiet, listening to other people chatter around them. He said, "So, Char, your mother and I would like for you to come home."

Charlotte stared ahead to where the mountains grazed the sky. She could feel him looking at her profile. She wanted to know why it was he got stuck convincing the teenage daughter to come back. It really seemed like something more suited for her mother.

“A few months have passed and the town has mostly forgotten what happened. We think this is an opportune time—”

“‘Forgotten what happened?’” Charlotte echoed. Her father stopped abruptly. Charlotte laughed and said, “It’s going to come right back when I show up. No one’s forgotten, Dad.” She scuffed the pavement with her shoe. “They just stopped talking about it.”

“Your mother and I think it’s best.”

Charlotte stood up and folded her arms over her chest. She looked down at her father. “You decided I would move here,” she said. “There’s no way *you* get to decide when I come back.” She shook her head. Her cold hair snapped at her cheeks and stung her eyes. She thought about Jordan and how he really seemed to understand. She didn’t want to leave him just yet. She remembered the brush of his fingers on the scar on her hip from her track accident. “I’ll come back when I’m ready.”

They were quiet, staring at each other. After a silent moment, her shoulders slumped. She didn’t know how to follow a declaration like that. She still had to direct him back to Aunt Beth’s, still had to spend Christmas with him. Would he try to call her bluff and insist that she move back to Florida? Would he back off and let her stay? If she stayed, did that seem as right as it felt at that moment? Lowering herself to the bench, she now felt dizzy thinking that she had finally made a decision about her own life.

“We had the tree removed,” he said. She turned to look at him. He was the one staring at the horizon this time. “Its branches were too... We should have had it done before the hurricane season. We were lucky no damage was done this year. It’s safer now.”

But the damage *was* done, and Charlotte now knew she could never go back to Winter Park. The tree was gone, but she knew what would be there in place of it: her memories, and they were far worse. Every time she thought of Izzy, she closed her eyes and saw it all over again. It had been such a long afternoon, stuck inside with nothing to do but watch the rain fall and read the script for the play. Izzy had a hard time memorizing the lines. Charlotte didn’t complain, but she didn’t even have a speaking role. She just loved knowing that her name would be in the program.

When the rain ended, they bounded outside. The tree had been their jungle gym since they were children. It was massive, with its first strong arms at about eight feet high. They dipped low, beckoning the girls to climb them, before rising to the sky. A maze of branches was hidden within the leaves. Some branches were used as chairs, others as monkey bars. Years ago they had perfected their method of climbing as high as possible.

It was on one of the monkey bar branches that Charlotte hooked her legs over. She fell backwards peacefully, relishing the way the slippery bark felt against the back of her thighs and calves. Her hands gripped the branch, just as a precaution. The neighborhood looked so different from this perspective. Across the street, Mr. Beasley was pulling his garbage cans out to the curb. But the driveway and the sky had switched places, and Mr. Beasley was walking upside down. Charlotte smiled. She looked to the left and peered up through the branches in the tree. Izzy was resting on one, and it looked like she was sitting upside down. Charlotte could only see

her ponytail and her arm. From the movement, it looked like she was throwing acorns into the street.

Charlotte released the branch and let her arms fall below her head. They almost grazed the branch beneath her. She arched her back so her head moved toward her feet, and the world almost turned right side up again. She felt like a seal at Sea World or a trapeze swinger trying to catch a rope. She laughed as the blood began to rush to her head. She yelled at Izzy.

“Hey, Izz! Check it out—I’m almost a full circle!”

Izzy’s head turned and her eyes widened. She wobbled on the branch and then, almost like Izzy was in slow motion, Charlotte saw her falling. But she was falling up. Her arms and legs floated away from her body. Charlotte frowned as Izzy moved up in the air, toward the grass. A small branch jerked to the side and Izzy’s arm snapped back toward her chest. The crown of her head touched the ground first and it slipped to the side as soon as it made contact with the puddle. Mud splashed. Izzy’s body flopped down—shoulder, arm, hip, knee, and foot—and almost immediately, the parts of her white shirt that touched the ground turned a dull brown. Some small twigs fell on top of her back.

Calmly, Charlotte pushed her arms through the air to grip the slick branch. Izzy liked climbing the tree after the rain; the slickness made it more of an adventure. Charlotte pulled herself up and felt the release of the blood flowing back through her body. Her fingers were numb, and even as she flexed them, she couldn’t feel anything yet. She heard shouting somewhere, and when she looked down, she saw Mr. Beasley running toward them. He was yelling now, yelling something, not at her, but back toward his house. His wife was there, and she disappeared, but she came back a few moments later with a phone pressed against the side of her head. Charlotte slowly began the descent. When her feet hung just above the ground, Mr.

Beasley grabbed her and shoved her toward his wife, who swept her under her arm, like a mother bird guarding her hatchling.

DIGGING UP THE GARDEN

In the swarm of people waiting to file into the sanctuary, I find Chloe easily. She is dressed in black like everyone else, but she isn't crying or whispering to someone. She stands near the door, with our sons lined up behind her, and stares at the floor. I push through the distant relatives I haven't seen since the last family get-together. Her brown eyes are molten molasses as she looks up at me and says my name.

I wrap my arm around her shoulders and hold her tight. With my free hand, I touch each of the boys' shoulders, hoping they understand what's going on. Chloe was close with her dad, and I always assumed that whenever he did pass, it would be rough on her. But I hadn't expected this sort of disconnection from her. Instead of being organized and efficient, she's regressed into a shell of a person who walks around without words and who doesn't have life in her eyes. It's been four days since he passed, and I struggle dealing with her and guiding our sons through this transition.

Chloe's head dips against the crook of my neck and presses into me. It knocks me back for a moment, because we haven't been affectionate like this in months. I kiss the top of her head, get a whiff of Dove shampoo and hairspray. My nose wrinkles and I hold back a sneeze. She says into my neck, "Thank you, Jim. For being here."

"Where else would I be, Chlo?" I feel a tugging at my leg and look down. Steve, our five-year-old, grips our legs. The church director pushes people into a line around us. I tousle Steve's hair before moving him away. I squeeze Chloe once more and guide her forward.

No, I've never been completely faithful to Chloe. I tried, I swear. We dated for almost three years, and somewhere in year two, at Chloe's sister's wedding, I met Sally. That wedding was the epitome of pressure. Chloe is the oldest daughter in the family, and as she sat with a

frozen smile on her face throughout the entire reception, masking her discontent with being the maid of honor instead of the matron of honor, I sat at the bar and let the woman next to me rub my leg. By the end of the night, I knew that her name was Sally and that she had an incision scar on her left ribcage. That scar felt like someone had slid a toothpick under her skin and left it.

After we were married, we moved into a house. It seemed like the next logical step in the plan everyone around us talked about. We had barely stepped into the newlywed phase before our parents practically handed us a to-do list: buy a house, get a dog, work hard for three years, take a few vacations, get Chloe pregnant, have up to four children, and don't ever think about not visiting. Chloe had always been a people person, one who aimed to please, and she did her best to follow the invisible list from the moment it was brought to her attention.

The one thing about our house that I don't like is that it's attached to this yard. The yard never really bothered me, in the beginning, but now it's something completely different. When the real estate agent showed us around the first time, the shrubbery had been mowed down in the backyard and a few marigolds had been planted up the front walkway. The grass was spotty, but grass is hard to grow in a yard that consists mainly of rocks and pebbles. The wedding was still four months away, and I didn't care. Chloe was too happy picking out paint colors to consider yard work. We were the quintessential blissfully unaware couple.

Five months passed between us seeing the house for the first time and us actually moving in. When we pulled into the drive with our moving van, the yard was a monster. Chloe knew that I had no skills that were useful beyond pushing a lawnmower across a patch of grass, so she called the one man who could help her. For two weeks, her father lived with us as he made our yard "acceptable." He took care of the main part. At night, when Chloe got home from work, the

two of them planned an herb garden that trailed the edge of the house. After they mapped it out, they spent a week buying seeds and gingerly planting them. We should have been having sex on every piece of furniture, in every room. Instead, we were acting like contained adults, and her father was trying hard not to laugh.

The funeral is simple and quick. The church is crowded, and since Chloe hasn't said more than two words since we walked into the sanctuary, I handle all the guests who approach us. As we drive from the cemetery to her sister's house, she sidles up to me in the back of the limousine. The boys sit on the other end, playing with the remotes that handle the television and DVD player. Chloe tucks herself against me and threads her arm over my stomach so her hand rests on my side, nestled against my jacket. She trembles a little. I keep my arm around her, tight, and when I look at the mirror on the ceiling of the limo, I see a couple.

The gathering afterwards is mostly painless. People I've never met come up to us and offer their condolences. I park Chloe on a loveseat with the boys and do my best to keep everyone away from her. She picks at the threading in the arm and stares at the carpet. After most of the guests have left, Chloe joins me in the kitchen. Her sister placed the dirty dishes on the counters and told me my job was to clean them. Chloe leans against the counter and folds her arms over her chest. She may be thirty-five, and she may have just been through an emotional ordeal, but she looks as good as she did when I met her at twenty-three. Her hair had been pulled into a ponytail sometime after we left the cemetery, but wisps of dark brown hair still framed her face. As I fill another casserole dish with soap and water, Chloe speaks from behind me.

“What would you say about maybe a separation?”

I joke because the thought of a divorce had never entered my mind. Even with all the cheating, all the sneaking around, not once had I considered leaving her. “As in church and state? Because that seems appropriate.”

“I meant us. Like, we separate.”

I turn to look at her, and she seems so comfortable, standing in the middle of the kitchen with her hands resting peacefully against her arms. The best way of getting out of the conversation without doing significant and lasting damage is to let her take the reins. There’s an empty cookie platter next to her, so I reach for it. She passes it to me and I speak softly. “I hadn’t thought of that. Is that what you want?”

“I’ve considered it.” She leans against the refrigerator. I study her for a moment. She doesn’t look like she’s having an affair, and she hasn’t confronted me about anything. I know the look of infidelity and I know how to hide it. She shows none of the signs. She isn’t maintaining a desperate level of eye contact, she isn’t carefree, she isn’t more detail-oriented. She’s just Chloe.

“Well, we can do that.”

“Do you want to?”

I choose my words carefully. “If that’s what will make you happy, sure. I would be just as happy staying together. You know that.”

“Really?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I turn away from her and submerge the lasagna plate in the soapy water. She comes up beside me and rests against the counter. She places her hand against my ribs, presses her forehead against my shoulder.

“Chlo, is this about your dad, or about something else?”

Her breath is hot against the fabric of my shirtsleeve. “I’ve been thinking about it, and this sort of made me take it seriously.” Her fingers trace patterns against my side, and I almost wince at the chills that run up my spine. “Life is short, you know? It’s a cliché, but it’s true, and if we’re not happy, then maybe...” Her voice trails off, and her fingers stop their dizzying ballet.

“Okay,” I say. “Makes sense.”

Her head tilts up and she smiles at me. “You still love me, right?”

That question phrased that way can only mean that she knows the answer, and she doesn’t want to leave room for me to say no. “Yeah.”

“I love you, too,” she says. She squeezes my side and walks out of the kitchen. Over her shoulder, she says, “But I still think it’s something we should consider.”

When Greg and Steve reached grade school, Chloe went back to work at an accounting firm. She had been an amazing up-and-coming financial consultant when we met. Her salary tended to put mine to shame; having one real stint as an op-ed writer for the local paper and being a free-lancer the rest of the time wasn’t the best way to yield monetary rewards. When we had kids, she was adamant that she stay at home. Our savings dwindled so quickly, she ended up working part-time at a real estate office. With her back at the accounting firm, and the boys at the private school in the next town every day, I was free again.

It’s not that I don’t love her. I swear. I love her more than anyone I have ever been with. I want to love her as much as she loves me.

But there had always been something or someone in the way. Sally’s been in the way, off and on, for five years. A few months after my second son was born, I ran into Sally at an event hosted by the newspaper. In an instant, that meeting at Chloe’s sister’s wedding came crashing

back and it put my then current romance with my wife to shame. I realized that I was married with two children, but I only wanted to get Sally naked and in a bed. Since then, I haven't been able to stop.

Even though I write in my home office, I never once let Sally come to the house. I meet her at her apartment, usually. Once in a while, we met at a motel. On those days, it feels like I was in college again, without a girlfriend, without responsibility. When I get home, I spend almost half an hour in the shower, hoping that all the hot water would wash away the smell of Motel 6, thinking how great it felt to be there, thinking how nice it would be to never go back.

Two weeks after the funeral, Chloe's boss asked her to take a leave of absence. He called me one afternoon, while I was writing my column, and asked me to come to the office and take her home.

"She's pretty bad, Jim," he said. "She just sits here. She hasn't seen any clients in four days."

Well, now she just sits on our back porch, watching the boys run around the backyard, digging these holes. One of the holes was so deep, the neighbor's Jack Russell terrier jumped in and couldn't get out without my help. Last Christmas, we got them these shovels so they could help Chloe with her garden. Her father was a pro at working in the yard and his house looked like it was straight out of the Garden of the Month Club. One of the things Chloe loved the most was working in the yard with her dad. The boys never liked to help though. They pierced the earth in random places and spent the rest of the time trying to whack each other in the legs with them. They don't understand death—I guess most children don't. Our oldest—Greg, who's eight—was mostly concerned about who was going to visit during holidays now. Sally thinks I

should have let them stay with their friends during this time of stress. I wish I hadn't told her about Chloe's dad, or Chloe's reaction for that matter.

I didn't know who else to talk to. The day after I got the call from Chloe's boss, I went over to Sally's. For the first time, we didn't have sex. We tried, but I couldn't stop thinking about Chloe's breakdown, and how I left for a couple of hours even though I probably should have stayed. So we ended up stretched out on her couch, naked, talking about Chloe and her dad.

"He really knew how to talk to her," I said. Sally's foot was pressed against my bicep, and I was running my fingers up and down her leg. "She responded to him. I think she told him more than she told her sister."

"Some dads are good," Sally responded. Her hands had stopped rubbing my thigh and were now lightly tapping a beat on my calf.

I laughed and said, "God, you should see the yard. The boys have dug about ten holes all over it. Most of them are small." I held up my hands to show her the depth. "Not more than a foot. A few are deep, like two or three feet. They said they're going to China."

"Are they looking for different entrances or something?"

"Steve said when they see a flash of light in a hole, they keep digging. He thinks there's a kid on the other side with a flashlight. I don't know what's wrong with them." Sally hummed and closed her eyes. I took a deep breath before I broached the subject that had been on my mind since Chloe brought it up. "She asked me what I thought about us separating."

Sally propped herself up on her elbows. "She really suggested you guys separate?"

"Yeah," I said. I picked my watch off the coffee table and tossed it around my index finger a few times like a horseshoe. "Said she's been thinking about it. Wanted to know what I thought."

“What brought that on? How come that didn’t come up after she answered the phone that one time?” I clicked my watch onto my wrist and tried to quell the somersault feeling in my stomach that arose whenever I remembered Chloe briefly speaking to a strange woman named Sally on the phone about a year ago.

“Well, a separation. That’s good, right?”

I shrugged. I didn’t know if it was good or not. I had never been through a divorce, let alone that messy purgatory stage where you technically have a wife, but you don’t live with her, so no one really knows the code of behavior. Would Chloe be upset if I dated someone else? Did Sally still have to be a secret? Did I say I had a wife, or was I officially single?

“Have you told the boys yet?”

“Nah,” I said. “They don’t need to know anything until something actually happens.”

Sally sat up. I watched her breasts sway to the side as she leaned over to pick up her bra. “You know, Jim, I have a friend who loves guys like you. I’ll give you her number. She’s real pretty. Looks a little like Chloe.”

I laughed. It always made me nervous when Sally mentioned that she had once met her, at the end of that wedding. Sally had stuck her hand out and been so proper and sweet to Chloe, even though we had just fucked in the bathroom not twenty minutes before. “I’m already having one affair. I don’t think I can juggle another.”

“For when you’re separated or divorced,” she said, as though the idea of having an affair with a married man was ridiculous. “She doesn’t go for married men.”

No matter what I say to them, what I threaten them with, it’s like they can’t hear me. Every time I come home, the holes have multiplied. Two days before her stint as the watcher of

all things in the yard, the boys had followed Chloe into the garage one morning. Those shovels were hanging on the wall, and they were on a mission. While a half-hearted effort at first, with only one hole a day or so, soon it became a full-fledged endeavor. It's China or bust. The yard looks like an obstacle course that is navigated by walking in jagged paths to get around them. And Chloe sits in her rocking chair, watching them destroy her father's hard work.

Chloe and I haven't separated yet, but after three weeks of her sitting on the porch and the boys tearing up the yard, I feel like we had been divorced and out of the loop for ages. I received a phone call from the boys' school the other day. The principal wanted to know why the boys hadn't been in for three days. I was so tired of Chloe being comatose on the porch, I started writing at the café downtown. I had no idea the boys hadn't been in school. I asked Chloe, and she didn't answer. I asked Greg, instead.

"Mom told us we didn't have to go anymore," he said.

Steve chimed in. "She said we can have a vacation, like her." I looked past them, through the French doors, and into the backyard. The grass was barely visible anymore. All I could see were mounds of dirt. With all the extra time they had on their hands since Chloe had kept them out of school, they had been busy. I looked at Chloe, still sitting on the porch. I understood her wanting to have her boys close to her. But this was insane.

A few days after the phone call from the principal, Sally convinces me to meet her at a bar. She's been pestering me about her friend Hannah who would love me. The more she talks about it, the less interested I am. Chloe only moves from the porch to go to the bathroom or to sleep in the guest room bed. She hasn't touched me—and I haven't come anywhere near her—since our discussion in her sister's kitchen. Within two minutes of ordering our drinks, Sally

rifles through her purse to find her phone so she can call her friend and have her meet us for drinks.

“Sally, what are you doing?”

“This is a great opportunity for you,” she says. “Hannah’s great, and she loves men like you.”

“I thought you liked men like me.”

She smiles, and I immediately want to drag her to my car and get her in the backseat.

“No, I like men who can handle commitment. You’re separating from your wife, Jim.”

I take a sip of my beer as I think about her logic. Sally pulls out her phone, and I rest my hand on hers. “Sally, I’m married. I’m not committed to you. And I don’t know if Chloe and I are separating. We only discussed it that once.”

Sally leans forward and frames my cheek with her hand. “You’re committed to me, Jim,” she says, with a slight tone of regret in her voice, as if she feels bad that she’s breaking the news to me. “Even though you’re married, you’ve been faithful to me as your girlfriend for five years. You’ve never cheated on me. You’ve been open with me. Trust me, you were committed.” She rests against the back of the booth and shrugs. “But now your marriage is up in the air and that causes men to do crazy things. Hannah knows men like you, and she likes the challenge. She’s perfect for where you’re about to be.”

“Don’t call her, Sally.”

“Why not?” She raises her martini glass and shakes it when she wants to emphasize a word. “You don’t love your wife anymore. You’re going through a rough patch. Hannah can help you get over your wife.”

It shocks me to hear someone tell me I don't love Chloe. I know I love her, and I think that if you list all the good and bad things I've done during our relationship, the good would come out on top. I never hurt her, I care about her well-being, and I really do only want to be with her.

"I think we need to stop seeing each other."

"Us?" Sally puts her phone back in her bag and signals the waiter for another round.

"Yeah," I say. "Chloe is going through a rough time and I think she might need me. It might be best if we just... stop this."

Sally nods. "That's sweet. Sure you don't want Hannah's number?" I nod and throw some money on the table for our drinks. Sally takes another sip of hers. "Well, call me if you change your mind or things start picking up again. You never know."

When I get home from the bar, a handful of our neighbors are standing on our sidewalk, peering down the side yard. I walk into the house to see if my family is okay, or at least okay in the current time's terms. I find them on the porch. The boys are filthy with mud, and Chloe is sitting in her chair. Most of the back yard has been excavated. Puddles of water stretch across the lawn. One of the holes is completely full of water and bubbles rise from it. Greg looks around, with his shovel at his side, before calling to his brother.

"Over here!"

They walk to the herb garden and pitch their shovels in between the rosemary and parsley. Steve takes the tomato plant out at its base. They throw the debris over their shoulders so callously, I have an image of them as adults: after this private school education that Chloe and

I have been so proud of, they will be construction workers, and the basis of their education will stem from the time when Mom let them fuck up the back yard.

A noise comes from behind me and I turn. Chloe cries in her chair. Her hand covers her mouth, and her eyes raise to meet mine. She stares at me with horror, like I allowed this to happen and she wasn't witness all along. I shake my head, annoyed that she woke from her comatose state now, angry that she looks at me like that, like I haven't been struggling to keep the family together for weeks. I glare at her. Her eyes meet mine, but she seems to look through me. My voice hisses as I speak. "What is wrong with you? They busted a water line, Chloe." I stopped seeing Sally, I turned down Hannah, and I was back, wasn't I? "You let them fuck everything up." I stare down at her and try to keep the secrets inside.

Before I can say anything else, she calls out from behind her hand, "Boys!" They lift their heads, and she lowers her hand. Her voice is shaky and raw, as though she's been screaming and screaming for the past few weeks. She pushes herself up and folds her arms across her chest. "Stop digging up the garden." She turns and makes her way inside. The boys drop their shovels and reluctantly follow her into the house, tracking mud and dirt behind them. I am left to the mess. I walk through the remains of the yard—my shoes sloshing in the puddles—and walk through the gate on the side yard.

My neighbors are still congregated on the sidewalk. I approach them and see what they were looking at: the mounds of dirt, hidden from the backyard by the privacy fence but visible when looked at from the front, make it look like we are either having a pool put in or we have a severe case of giant rodents. They look at me with their questions, and I don't know what to say except the truth.

"Chloe's dad passed away."

“Oh,” one neighbor says.

“Well, then,” another says, “that clears that up,” as though all of them have witnessed the upheaval of a yard by two boys under the age of ten, as though this happened after all of their fathers’ deaths. Why hadn’t one of them handed me that list, of what happens after your wife’s father dies? They walk away, and I sit in the front yard, facing the street. I pull my cell phone out and try to think of who I would call for a busted pipe. I don’t want to call anyone. The repairman will show up and know exactly what happened. The holes will speak to him. He’ll know that I let down my wife and I’m just waiting for her to say the word so we can go our separate ways.

TAG OUT

The waiting room at the funeral home was silent save for the clicking of the receptionist's nails on her keyboard. Jane sat by herself in a row of blue chairs covered with cracked maroon vinyl. When she shifted, her thighs lifted from the vinyl with a forceful suction. So she tried to sit as still as possible, which wasn't easy to do when the receptionist kept asking her questions.

"You sure you don't want a lollipop?"

Jane turned her head and looked at the young woman. She was probably in college and just trying to make ends meet by answering phones at a funeral home. Her bleached-blond hair had been extensively teased and now hovered above her head in a messy ponytail. She leaned over the ledge of her desk. A lollipop dangled from her skinny fingers. Jane shook her head. "I'm sure."

The receptionist looked confused. "All the kids want lollipops."

"I'm not a kid," Jane said. "I'm thirteen."

A faint smile washed over the receptionist's face. She dropped the lollipop back in the bowl. She pressed her hands onto the counter and said, "Fine. There are some *Highlights* magazines on the table next to you. Have fun." She pushed herself back in her chair. The only thing visible to Jane now was the crown of her head. The clacking resumed.

Jane faced straight ahead. She hated the receptionist. She hated her mother for leaving her alone in the waiting room while she went to Mr. Stanley's office to finalize the preparations for Mary's wake and funeral. And Jane really hated that no one else was walking through the doors with stale tears and fresh ideas for funerals they didn't want to plan.

Jane's mother, Susan, had been crying incessantly for the past fifty-seven hours. It unnerved her to see her mother in such a state, but it was to be expected when one's child dies.

At least, that's what the neighbors and church members kept telling Jane. They kept stopping by the house at random hours during the day, casseroles clutched in their hands, wisdom spewing from their mouths: "It'll get easier, sugar," "Don't worry, your momma will feel better with time," and "It's a tragedy, but hopefully you've learned something from your sister's carelessness."

The casseroles stayed on the counter, and the neighbors usually left the house after a few minutes. For the most part, Susan stayed on the back porch. The summer heat didn't bother her. She sat on the old couch and watched the birds and squirrels in the backyard. Jane's father, Randy, handled the visitors. He kept them away from Susan as best he could. The visiting strangers watched her through the patio door and fussed from afar. At their insistence, Randy played the role of understanding and doting husband. He ambled out every couple of hours and refilled her glass of sweet tea. No words were spoken between them.

The idea of a divorce had been floating through the house for almost four years, but neither he nor Susan had brought themselves to the reality of it, what with the children and all. But now that Mary was gone, there was fifty percent fewer children in the house, and maybe divorce wouldn't be the worst thing. Randy didn't want the neighbors talking, so he kept an eye on his wife. He ignored the hallway leading down to Jane and Mary's rooms. It was almost as though he couldn't bear to look at the corridor and know that Mary would never walk there again. Jane knew better. She had a feeling Randy appreciated having one less obligation around. However, Jane quickly found herself as an obligation to those women milling around the house. More than one old lady paid her a visit, and the easiest way to make them leave was to stay silent.

Of course things were different with Mary gone. Jane wasn't dumb; as soon as she heard the news, she knew that her life would change. She suspected the change was for the worse. The fighting between Randy and Susan was at a momentary armistice. It was peaceful, but deeply unsettling. The two full days that had passed since Mary passed were fine—Mary had always drifted around during the day, so that was not different—but the nights were already awful. The arguing and shouting had been replaced with muffled conversations and nicer tones.

Jane hated it.

“What an asshole, huh?” Mary shut the door and leaned against the bedroom wall. “It’s almost two o’clock in the morning. Doesn’t he understand that there are kids trying to sleep?” The fights had never been pleasant, but when they got bad, Mary had been there. More nights than not, Jane’s bedroom door opened and Mary slipped in.

“I’m not a kid,” Jane said. She sat up and pushed the covers off her legs. Jane was always awake when Randy yelled. She found that most nights she couldn’t even fall asleep for fear that the yelling would start soon. She didn’t like him most days, and she was worried about her mom. Mary wasn’t worried. She was usually pissed off.

“Sure you are. I am, too,” Mary said. Jane almost laughed. Her older sister was not a kid. She was older—how could she possibly be a child? Mary collapsed onto the foot of the bed. “You’re sure as hell not an adult.”

“We’re teenagers.”

Mary grinned. From upside down, her soft features looked haggard. Jane looked away. “Saying that makes you sound even younger, Janie.” Mary rolled onto her stomach. She

surveyed the bookcases lining Jane's wall. "I wish they would stop. I can't exactly sneak out if they're awake."

Jane perked up. Ever since school had gotten out for the summer, Mary snuck out almost every night. Susan was usually asleep in her and Randy's room, and Randy was usually locked in the den, drinking beer and watching ESPN. Only Jane knew about Mary's night routine. "Where are you going?"

"Steve's."

Jane deflated. Steve was Mary's sort-of boyfriend. Mary had been talking about him since the summer started a few weeks ago. Before that she had talked about Mark. From what Jane could tell, high school was full of sort-of boyfriends and rotating friends. Mary always hung out with a revolving-door of girls and giggled about different boys. Jane had just finished eighth grade at one of the local middle schools. She had classes with the same students every day, and she was ready to move on to high school. Four middle schools fed into that high school. She wanted new friends. She wanted a sort-of boyfriend. High school held those promises.

"Steve is weird."

Mary shrugged. "He's interesting."

"Boring."

"I can't help that you liked Mark. Mark was boring. Steve is different," Mary said. She pushed herself up on her elbows and looked at her little sister. "Steve works at the movie theater. He snuck us into a movie—"

Randy's shouts were loud, but the words unclear. Jane leaned back in her bed and pulled the covers up to her shoulders. Mary crawled up the bed and rested next to her sister. She took a

hold of her blanket-covered hand and waited. When the shouting quieted a bit, Mary whispered, “Steve isn’t like *him*. That’s for sure.”

Jane fell asleep. In the morning, Mary was gone and Jane had to tell their mother that she heard her leaving that morning and she remembered something about a friend’s pool. Susan was too tired from fighting the night before, and she brushed it off. Jane hoped it would always be that easy to sneak out, run off into the street, and embrace the adventures of night.

Jane heard Susan’s voice down the hall. Mr. Stanley’s low tones came next. Jane stood up—her skin successfully peeled off the vinyl—and walked into the foyer. She couldn’t see them yet. The receptionist got up from her desk. She walked toward Jane with a stack of programs. She eyed Jane apprehensively. “I’ll be right back,” she said. “Don’t touch anything.”

Jane nodded at the programs. “Are those my sister’s?”

“No,” the receptionist said. She stopped a few feet from Jane and looked down at the paper in her hands. For just a moment, her tone softened. “This is Mr. Montag. He died two days ago. A heart attack.”

Jane didn’t reply. She hadn’t wanted to know all that. The receptionist started walking again. “His wake is tonight, too. After your sister’s. We usually don’t double up but a lot of people died this—”

“Does my sister have programs?” Jane turned around and watched the receptionist walk away.

The receptionist didn’t flinch at Jane’s interruption. “Yep,” she called over her shoulder. “Down the hall. Where your mother is.”

Jane walked in the opposite direction. There were empty rooms up and down the hallway. It scared Jane to think that these were sometimes full of coffins, and dead people, and the people who had once loved them. One of the rooms had a small podium outside of it. On it were programs with a picture of her sister on the front. It was an old picture. Mary had dyed her hair brown just days before the accident, and the Mary in the picture had her normal blonde hair. The hazy blue eyes they shared stared up at her. The picture resembled Jane more than Mary. The words “Mary Rebecca Rolland” scrolled across the top. The bottom read: “October 14, 1987 to July 7, 2005.”

Jane didn’t pick up the program. She didn’t want to know what was inside. Instead, she peered into the room. The chairs were arranged in a V formation, all facing a large, empty space in the front of the room. Two voluminous displays of flowers stood on either side. More flowers were off to the side, sitting on the floor, waiting to be arranged. Jane heard her mother’s voice again, further down the hall. She backed away from the room and kept walking. The voices were coming from the room at the end.

Jane stepped into the doorway and quickly stopped. The room had a procession of coffins—mahogany and cherry and oak and painted and metal coffins—standing attention in the same V formation. At the very tip of the V was a white coffin, with the lid open and nothing inside. Her mother and Mr. Stanley stood just in front of the coffin, Mary’s coffin, beneath the dimmed track lighting. Their two middle-aged bodies were engaged in an embrace. Her mother’s lipstick-stained lips pressed against Mr. Stanley’s mouth at an odd angle. Jane saw the crevices on her mother’s sun-weathered face. Mr. Stanley’s hands gripped her back and exaggerated the tightness of her clothes with every movement his fingers made. Her mother gripped his shirt. Her

fingers dipped into his skin, as though she was trying to condense his pudgy body into a more pleasing form.

Jane slowly backed out of the room.

Randy would kill her mother if he ever found out that she had kissed the funeral director the day of Mary's wake. Jane doggedly walked down the hallway. She passed her sister's designated room. She made it back to the waiting room and foyer before the receptionist. She stood next to the desk and shifted her weight from foot to foot impatiently. The computer emitted a low hum. Her mother's voice resumed; she sounded closer. Jane pushed her hands into her pockets and then pulled them back out. She clenched her fingers. She took a step forward and reached for a lollipop. When she looked at the desk, she saw the computer screen. The receptionist had been browsing for lingerie. The voices got louder and Jane leaped back from the desk.

Mr. Stanley appeared first. He held his arm out. Susan came next and Mr. Stanley lightly pressed his hand on her back to guide her into the foyer. The receptionist came from the other direction. She saw the lollipop in Jane's hand and grinned. "I knew you wanted a lollipop. All the kids do."

Susan dabbed her eyes with a Kleenex. She looked over at Jane and her eyes widened, as if she had forgotten that she had brought her remaining daughter to the funeral home. Susan turned her attention to the receptionist. "I hope she wasn't much trouble."

The receptionist grinned. "Of course not. We became quick friends."

Jane's expression didn't change. She didn't even think to show her disgust with the false rapport the receptionist claimed to have with her. She took a few steps to the door and turned to

look at her mother. Mr. Stanley was watching Jane and smiled at her. His puffy lips stretched against his teeth. Jane glared at her mom.

“Well, Susan, I think Jane wants to leave. It’s probably a good idea to head home now,” he said. He continued to guide her across the foyer. “Don’t worry about a thing. Everything is taken care of. We’ll see you back here tonight.”

“Thank you so much, Gary,” Susan sighed. “It’s such a relief to know that she’s in good hands.”

“Of course,” he said. He reached for her hands and squeezed them. Jane watched his pale hands embrace her mother’s tanned ones. Those skinny fingers with the magenta nails—the ones that used to scratch Mary’s back and tickle her feet—slipped out of his.

“Thank you so much,” she repeated. “Come on, Jane. Let’s go home.”

Jane had spent a lot of time roaming the neighborhood during this past summer. Every summer before this one, she and Mary had done it together. But Mary no longer wanted to ride her bike up and down streets or go to the city pool and practice their dives and jumps. She liked to talk on the phone with her friends or sun by their pools. Jane expected a summer by herself, aimlessly riding her bike and wishing that she knew someone that she actually wanted to hang out with. Her friend was Mary, and last she heard, Mary was busy with Steve.

Jane knew where Steve lived, and she couldn’t help that she rode past his house a couple of times every day. She never really expected to see her sister. Steve’s beat-up truck was usually gone. One time, Jane had seen Steve’s truck approaching her on a road. She stopped on the sidewalk and watched as the truck drove by. Steve was driving and Mary sat in the middle of the seat, pressed against him, smiling.

This day, though, Jane heard music coming from the backyard. Steve's truck was in the driveway. Jane pedaled by five times before finally stopping. Since the kickstand was broken, she lowered her bike quietly onto the grass. She walked through the weed-riddled yard and navigated her way through the overgrown grass on the side of the house. The grass danced around her legs and she tried to resist the urge to scratch her skin red. Steve's house had a wooden fence around the backyard. Jane walked along the perimeter until she found a loose plank. She peered through the hole in the fence.

The backyard was overgrown, too. A kiddie pool with ducks and fish painted on the side rested in the middle of the yard. Behind the pool were two chaise lounges with Steve and Mary lying on them. Steve lay on his back. He had his arm thrown over his eyes. He wore cargo shorts, and a T-shirt was crumpled on the ground next to him. He held a beer in his hand. On the chaise lounge next to him Mary reclined on her stomach. From what Jane could see, her green, floral bathing suit top hung from the top of the chaise. She wore only the bottoms.

Jane's heart beat a little faster. She knew that Mary had made out with Steve—after all, she heard her giggling on the phone with her friends, but she did not know that Steve had seen Mary partially naked. She hoped that he had never seen her completely naked. She felt embarrassed for her sister. Steve muttered something and Mary laughed. She pushed herself up and walked to the patio. Steve had not moved a muscle when Mary got up. This made Jane feel worse. Was he so used to seeing her sister topless that he just didn't care anymore? The grass brushed against Mary's ankles. It made Jane itch just from watching, so she raised her left leg and scratched her short nails over her calf and ankle. A red cooler sat on the patio. Mary opened it and pulled out another beer. As she pulled out a can of beer, she turned her head and her eyes met Jane's.

Jane moved away from the fence and caught her breath. She hadn't expected to be seen. She peeked through the fence one more time. Mary stretched out next to Steve on the lounge chair. Her small breasts pressed against his bare chest. Jane looked away. He said something and Mary laughed. Her laughter stopped short and Jane raised her eyes. Steve was still talking, but Mary was staring right at her. Mary flashed a small smile at her younger sister before laughing again at what Steve said. Jane backed away and slowly made her way through the side yard jungle back to her bicycle.

Jane chose to sit in the backseat of the Oldsmobile. Susan had the oldies station on. Jane rolled her window down and let the thick wind move the heat around her. The heat was almost suffocating, but the open window made the proximity between her mother and her seem less nauseating. Susan called back to her, "Honey, you should have been polite to Mr. Stanley." Jane didn't answer. "He's been a friend of the family for years. He's really sad over what happened to Mary."

What happened to Mary was still a mystery to Jane. She didn't think it was right that everyone else knew what happened, but still referred to it as an "accident" to her. Of course it was an accident. It involved a car, and Mary wasn't suicidal. But the way they said "accident" made Jane think that it was more than a car accident. She just wasn't sure she really wanted to find out. She especially did not want to find out from someone like Mr. Stanley, who liked to kiss her mom at his funeral home.

Jane was tempted to ask her mother what she planned to do once Randy found out she was cheating on him. Surely her father's temper wouldn't let that one slip by. Mary would've known what to do. Over the years, Mary had formed many plans to get rid of Randy—all of them

ingenious but ultimately flawed and therefore unable to be carried out. Mary had always ended their covert meetings with optimism about future plans. But Randy was still there.

Susan stopped talking and the rest of the ride was silent. Jane got out of the car as soon as it stopped in the driveway. She walked up to the front door and stood silently as Susan made her way with the keys. Randy yelled out hello as they came inside. Jane walked to her room. She heard Randy ask, "What the hell took you so long?" Susan attempted to reply but Randy started on about how the damn neighbors keep coming by and how we don't even eat green bean casserole so what the hell are we supposed to do with three of them stacked in the fridge?

Jane decided to spend the rest of the afternoon in her room. She didn't need to do anything until the wake. So Jane lay on the floor of her bedroom, holding her Discman in her left hand, watching the ceiling fan rotate. Some of Mary's CDs were stacked next to her. Jane listened to two Red Hot Chili Peppers and one Pearl Jam. She stared at the fan and wondered if she could will it to spin backwards, somehow manage to turn the world back three days.

Susan picked out an outfit for Jane to wear to the wake. Sometime during her uninterrupted vigil on the patio for the past two days, she had slipped away to a department store. It was a sleeveless black jumper that fell just above Jane's knee. A light blue, long-sleeved shirt was on a hanger behind the jumper, but Jane ignored it. It was too hot for long sleeves. Susan saw Jane before they left the house, though, and made her put on the tights that she'd picked out. A wake with bare legs was inappropriate.

Randy drove the Celebrity. Susan sat up front. Jane stretched out in the backseat. Randy was a bad driver according to Susan (he was a "fucking bad driver," according to Mary), and Jane spent most of the ride with one hand braced against the passenger seat and the other

wrapped around one of the seatbelts. They arrived at the funeral home ten minutes before the wake started. Most of the guests were already there.

Susan led Randy inside. Jane followed. Mr. Stanley was at the front door. He kissed Susan on the cheek and firmly shook Randy's hand. No hint of the transgression that had passed earlier. Jane walked through the doors but made sure to avoid Mr. Stanley's grasping hands.

The funeral home was full. She recognized people from the few times a year they attended church, neighbors from the street, old teachers, friends, friends' parents. Most of the small town had shown up. It seemed that everyone knew Mary, but no one in the room seemed to understand that Jane was Mary's sister. Ahead of her, Susan and Randy were ushered away by people. Randy tensed as the mourners enveloped him.

Jane pushed her way back out the front door. She walked to the back of the parking lot. This wake was quite possibly the worst idea her mother had ever had. Susan was stupid. So was Randy. Mary, though, was the worst one.

Mary had been an ally. Now, some stupid mistake had dragged her away. How was she supposed to cope with Susan and Randy now? Who was supposed to hold her hand when the shouts grew louder at night? How was she supposed to survive high school? How could Mary have been so selfish to just leave and vanish in the night?

"I hate you, Mary," Jane said to the pavement.

"That's not nice."

The voice came from the back of a beat-up pick-up truck. Jane spun around and stared. Steve pushed himself into a sitting position. His legs hung off the back of the truck. He stared at Jane. "You don't hate her."

Jane glared at him. She didn't know what exactly had happened to her sister, but she had a feeling that he had something to do with it. He wasn't supposed to be out here. She wanted to be alone. "What are you doing out here?"

Steve shrugged and looked over his shoulder at the funeral home. "I don't know. Waiting, I guess." He looked back at Jane. "What are you doing out here?"

She stood akimbo and continued to glare at Steve. "I hate them. I don't want to be in there." With a rush of adrenaline, she added, "I hate you, too. Leave."

"Sounds like you hate a lot of people." Steve rubbed his forehead. Jane looked behind him. A couple of beer bottles rested on their sides in the bed of his truck. "You shouldn't hate Mary, though. She sure as hell didn't hate you."

Jane felt the anger coursing through her now. Forget dying—her sister had practically abandoned her a year ago. All the effort Mary put into keeping Jane safe at night didn't mean anything anymore compared to leaving her for a boy. Mary was gone. Jane suddenly realized she might have been completely alone for longer than the past sixty-five hours.

"What do you know?" she demanded. "She liked you. She wanted to be with you. She didn't care about me."

Steve rolled his eyes. He moved over on the bed of the truck. "Sit." He patted the truck. A ring he wore clanged against the metal. Jane stood her ground. He frowned at her. "Come here and sit. Want a drink?"

Jane watched as he pulled another beer out from behind him. She slowly made her way up to the truck. She pushed herself off the ground and found a spot on the tailgate as far from Steve as she could manage. The metal snagged her tights. He opened a bottle and held it out to

her. She took it and drank slowly. She didn't need to embarrass herself by grimacing or saying "yuck."

Steve and Jane remained quiet. They both drank, but Jane nursed hers for a longer time. The voices from the funeral home floated over the parking lot. Jane could just imagine her mother sitting solemnly in the viewing room, and Randy standing stoically, barely tolerating the attention of the mourners. She didn't want to think about them anymore.

"It was my idea," Steve said. Jane looked at him. He was staring straight ahead. He took a sip of beer and kept talking. "We were bored and it was my idea. A couple of us were doing it. Just running around the neighborhood. Playing tag, like how we did when we were kids. Or something stupid like that. We weren't causing any trouble." He tapped the bottle against the bed of the truck. The sound reverberated against the parked cars before disappearing. "This guy was drunk though. His headlights weren't on. And you know there aren't any streetlights on the streets around here. She probably didn't see him. He definitely didn't see her. There just wasn't any time."

Jane listened to him confess what had happened. He took a deep breath and pressed on. "Listen, she told me how rough it is with Randy. How he fights with your mom. She hated it, you know, mostly because of how you got upset. She tried so hard to get your mom to leave." Steve finally looked over at her. "She loved you. I'm sorry she's gone."

Jane didn't look back at him. She felt him searching her face. When he looked away, she replied, "She really liked you."

"I know. I liked her too."

"My mom kissed Mr. Stanley."

Steve barely faltered. “Mary mentioned a couple of times she thought your mom might be seeing someone else. She didn’t want to upset you.”

Jane nodded. “Okay.”

He took a deep breath and put his beer down. “You gonna go in?”

She shrugged. He reached over and took the beer she’d barely touched. He put it down. Jane jumped onto the ground and they walked over to the building. People in black swarmed around the entrance. The crowd seemed to part as Steve and Jane walked up. They knew who Steve was. A couple of the other teenagers reached out and patted his shoulders, rubbed his arms. He didn’t acknowledge them.

Immediately inside, her sister’s programs were scattered across a table. Steve took one for himself and handed one to Jane. Steve headed for the viewing room. He turned to look at Jane, but she remained in the foyer. He raised his eyebrows in question. She nodded at him, and he kept going. She turned and walked down the opposite hallway.

A podium stood outside a door halfway down the hall. Mr. Montag’s programs sat in a neat stack. His first name was Henry. He had been eighty-two when he died. His family and friends hadn’t arrived yet. The room was quiet and blissfully empty. Jane opened Mary’s program and walked inside.

EXECUTION DRIVE

We stopped at 7-Eleven on the way to the execution because Sheila said we needed snacks. It's not a road trip without snacks, she said. I hadn't been to a 7-Eleven since I was a kid. My mom was strict in our house, and we were never allowed sweets of any kind. Once, when I was seven and my sister was nine, our dad woke us up in the middle of the night to take us to the coast to see the space shuttle take off. We made a pit stop at a 7-Eleven on the way. I don't remember anything about the actual shuttle; all I remember is the scarlet bag of Skittles, and how sticky the colors felt in my hand.

I stood by the Slurpee machine, trying to decide what flavors to mix. This was a treat, and I didn't want to waste it on one flavor. Sheila called me to check out before I could decide. I got plain Coca-Cola. She had an armful of food—Slim Jims, Skittles, Doritos, Funyuns, M&Ms, and some bubble gum. She asked the clerk for a pack of Marlboro Lights and laid a five-dollar bill on the counter. Deftly, she reached into my back pocket, took out my wallet, and added a twenty. She slipped the wallet back in, and I smiled at the cashier, wondering if he could see what this familiarity meant, if he could see how close we were. He didn't even look at us as he tossed all the food into a flimsy white bag.

"It's a beautiful day, Derek," she said, as we stepped outside. It was early in the morning, and the humidity was rising fast. The sky had only a few clouds, but it looked like it was blue all the way to Starke, Florida. I looked at her then. The auburn hair at the bottom of her neck curled. She turned to me and smiled, with the gap between her front teeth looking a bit larger than it ever had before. "Good day for an execution, right?"

*

I didn't know much about Sheila. We met at the computer repair store where I worked. It was next to a small coffee store, and she was always there. She and her friends got a hookah almost every afternoon and sat at one of the tables, sometimes with textbooks and notes, but usually without them, and talked for hours. I saw them a lot when I was on my break, or if I came in for the night shift. She said hi to me sometimes and her friends giggled, but to be honest, I always thought her friend who drank too much Diet Coke was the cute one. But one day, Sheila came into the store and walked right up to me.

“You work here, right?”

I wasn't sure if I should point to my nametag or remind her of all the times she'd seen me outside, so I just said yes.

She introduced herself and read my nametag aloud. “‘Derek, Senior Sales Associate.’ It's a strong name.” She crossed her arms and said, “Tell me, Derek, what do you sell at a repair store?”

It wasn't a new question. We had sarcastic teenagers come in all the time and ask us that. To my boss, it was one step above the “is your refrigerator running” joke. “Well, we sell computer accessories and used computers that have been refurbished.”

“Do you think computers will be obsolete in twenty years?”

“What?” I asked. I shook my head. “No.”

“That's too bad,” she said. “I do.”

I didn't say anything and just stared at the place above her eyebrow where her bangs brushed against her forehead. They weren't even. It looked like she had taken a pair of kids' scissors to her own hair one night, but she didn't look like the kind of person who would have done it on a dare. She didn't say anything either, and it was almost nice, like that sort of familiar

quiet you have with someone you've known for years. It seemed like such a nice moment, I told her I felt like I'd known her forever.

She laughed a little and stood up straight. Her right hand tugged on her bangs for a second, as though straightening them out—that was her nervous gesture. She did it then, and again a few weeks later when a police car pulled us over. She had a small bag of weed under the passenger seat of my car. She only admitted this later, but I should've guessed when she didn't leave her bangs alone until the cop pulled away.

Sheila reached out and touched my nametag. She straightened it and said, "If you're not doing anything later, you should come to a party my friend is having."

I told her maybe, but then she and her friends waited until we closed for the night. They sat outside while I straightened the displays and counted the till. When I walked out the door, she offered to drive with me to show me how to get there. She kissed me less than a mile from her friend's house. Three hours later, despite all the things I tried to ask her, all I knew was that she was a part-time student with no discernible job who—if she had enough beer—danced with one arm waving free, just how that Bob Dylan song describes it. I haven't learned much else over the months.

She talked about the upcoming execution for a few weeks. I thought she wanted to protest. I don't like people who protest. I generally don't like when people stand out too much, which makes it difficult to be around Sheila for too long. I'm always on edge when we're together. She has a loud voice, and it only gets worse when something she's "passionate" about comes up in a discussion with other people. She's passionate about things like public transportation, Darfur, Great Britain standing strong on not using the euro, the abolishment of

puppy mills, peace in the Middle East, universal health care, and capital punishment, although she never actually yelled about that last one.

My mom used to call me every Sunday to see if I had met any girls over the weekend—like girls magically appeared at my door on Friday and Saturday nights. She stopped asking that question after I didn't have any satisfactory answers three straight months in a row. I could tell her about the girls my roommates met at house parties, but those weren't the kind of girls I wanted my mom to think I was with. She had high hopes for me—someone smart and pretty with a keen sense of humor and upstanding parents. Sheila probably wouldn't fall into that category, but when I met Sheila, I wanted my mom to know. It was exciting and new and I thought—maybe—it would last awhile.

“You met someone? Where?”

“At work.” I stood in the doorway of my bedroom, looking in on Sheila. She was still asleep. She liked to sleep until noon and then stay up until four in the morning doing nothing. I woke up by nine—I couldn't help it. I usually ended up lying next to her, waiting for her to wake up. I didn't want her to know that we didn't have the same sleep schedule. If she knew she might start sleeping at her own place.

“What's her name? What's she like?”

“She's short, with this dark red hair, and she has a crooked smile. It's kind of cute.” The descriptions I had provided were vague but true, and I didn't see any point in pinning down exact details. In her sleep her crooked smile looked more tilted and off-balance than anything. I turned away.

“Her name, Derek?”

“Sheila Lisbon.”

“Do I know her? The name sounds familiar. Oh, have you talked to your father lately?”

As she jumped into a story, I took the digital camera off my desk. I covered the speaker on the camera and took two pictures of Sheila. I zoomed in on the second one, and a slight trace of drool was visible on her chin. “Your grandmother went to the bank and took all of the money out of her savings and put it in her checking account. He’s going crazy dealing with her.” If I ever showed anyone the pictures, I would Photoshop the drool out, maybe adjust the mouth a little.

The Slim Jims, Doritos, and M&Ms were gone before we hit the hour mark. Sheila said that we could switch drivers when she left the Turnpike for I-75, but she changed her mind. She liked to sit and watch other people drive. It usually made me nervous. She had a trivia book on American history, and she kept a running total of which one of us knew the least about our country. In my head, she was losing by six points, but every time she read the scores out, she said that she was smarter according to the book. I never could decide if I was going to call her out on it.

When she woke up in the afternoons, she turned to me and stretched against me, like she was a cat. I touched her hair. She showered at night, and in the morning, her hair was soft without any of the hair product she put in it after we rolled out of bed. It was long when I met her. After she cut it, it was just a little longer than mine. She thought we looked like twins. I didn’t find it as funny as she did.

She threw her arm over my waist and brought me closer with her leg. We had been together for four months. At least, I thought we were together. We didn’t talk about it. It was

more like she had been sleeping over most nights for four months. We had only had sex seven times, and that happened in Month Two. It was great, or it seemed great to me, and I thought she felt the same way. She initiated it all seven times, and then when I tried to once, she fell onto the bed and said she was tired.

She had been tired ever since, and I didn't think I could tell her she needed to be tired at her own apartment. I still liked having her around, for the most part.

To get in the prison we drove under an archway with "Florida State Prison" in block, iron letters. I got nervous immediately. I knew right then that I never wanted to go to prison. Sheila grew quiet after we passed the archway, but she didn't seem nervous. Just serious. She didn't offer me directions, and there were no signs, but a group of people stood a little bit farther ahead. I drove toward them. When we were still about fifty yards away, Sheila said, "Pull over here."

I pulled onto the side of the road, convinced that this would result in a parking ticket, and turned the car off. She turned toward me, smiled and kissed me quickly, like we were brother and sister. If my eyes hadn't been open, I would've sworn I imagined the whole thing. I almost called her out on it the other day—I had gotten so tired of being treated like a friend, like a brother, and I don't see the point anymore. But I didn't know how to bring it up, so I asked my mom in general terms, so she wouldn't get suspicious of anything. She told me it was important that Sheila felt safe with me, and she's probably so genial with me because she trusts me. I always expected to be trusted by my girlfriends, but I thought that would entail something more than pecks on the cheek and pats on the hand every so often.

We walked up a small grassy hill until Sheila stopped. We were between two groups of people, with about thirty yards of nothing buffering us from them. With a satisfied grin and a

cheerful tone, Sheila said, "It's time for a picnic." She set our things up on the grass. She'd packed two beach towels to use as a blanket. She arranged them parallel to each other but not touching. She grabbed the remainder of our snacks and junk food and settled on the blue towel with the bleach spots. I sat next to her on the red and white striped towel and watched the protestors farther down the field.

They held hand-painted signs that screamed "MURDERER" and "GRANGER IS GOING TO HELL." Some of them marched in a circle and pierced the sky with their signs. I tried to stereotype them in my mind, but they were women and men and a few children, none of whom looked similar. If I said they were radicals, I'd have to acknowledge that three of them were wearing suits. On our other side, the smaller group of protestors advocated peace. They held candles and signs that read "LIVE AND LET LIVE" and "WHO ARE WE TO JUDGE?" Again, they could've been anyone out there, standing against the fence, marching back and forth. When they failed to fit into a single category, I turned to Sheila. She watched the building, not the people. Her eyes seemed to peer through the walls, and she was so concentrated I wondered if she really could see what was going on back there. She popped a few Skittles in her mouth, and I had to look away when I saw her jaw working so hard.

My roommates have tried about once a week for the past month to convince me to get rid of Sheila. They think she's weird, and Tyler has asserted more than once that she's not pretty. "She's nice looking," I said. "I think she's just fine." They laughed. "I don't see what the big deal is," I said. "It's nice having someone around. And besides, I don't think I have it in me."

"That's lame," Tyler said. "Grow a pair and get rid of her."

When I woke up one morning, a pro/con list was taped to my door. I removed it before Sheila could see it. I didn't think she would care what Tyler thought, but I still felt as though I should protect her. She seemed like someone who needed some protection, underneath it all.

“That woman's letting her daughter walk around with a ‘murderer’ sign,” I said. I looked back at Sheila, but she was still staring straight ahead. I had tried five times to start a conversation, but she didn't say anything. I looked past her to the other side of the small field at our hippies. Sheila hadn't acknowledged that they were there. She just kept staring at the building. “Look at that guy,” I said. “He's wearing tie-dye and blasting the Grateful Dead. Talk about weird, right?” I waited for her to jump on me, to tell me he was expressing himself, but she didn't take the bait.

I leaned back onto the towel and closed my eyes. If I focused hard enough, I could hear her breathing next to me. I was stuck at Starke Prison with a girlfriend who acted like a stranger most of the time. She had convinced me to drive to the place where Ted Bundy and Aileen Wuornos had been executed to what—protest? Sit in peace as another soul left our earth? We were just sitting, and she wasn't even talking. I had nothing to do. I started counting the passing seconds, to see how high I could get before Sheila finally acted on something. When we couldn't fall asleep at night, I counted and she breathed. She had tried many times to get me to use some breathing techniques she used in the yoga classes she took, but I didn't like them. When I thought about my breathing and focused only on myself, it just freaked me out. But I liked listening to her practice them. It was usually comforting.

When I got to four hundred and thirty-eight, I stopped counting. I kept my eyes closed, but I knew she was still sitting next to me, breathing slowly and evenly. “Sheila,” I said, “we

should break up. This isn't going anywhere. Let's just go home. I'll drop you off at your apartment, and that'll be it."

She didn't respond, and her breathing remained even. I turned to look at her again. She was still staring at the building. "Give me a break," I muttered. I sat up and began packing our stuff up.

"What time is it?" she asked.

"Are you kidding me?" I asked. I looked around to see if anyone else was near us to hear her talking. "I just broke up with you." She kept up her breathing, and it provided a soothing white noise underneath the yelling from the protestors.

"What time is it?"

I looked down at my watch. "Three-forty." I shoved my towel into the bag we'd brought.

"Twenty more minutes," she said. She finally moved her eyes and looked at me. "Then we can leave. Okay?"

I could have argued, but it would have felt out of place for us. I never argued. That was who we were together. I stood for a moment, looking around at how isolated we were from everyone else, before I fell back against the grass. It itched my neck and my arms. I heard the noise grow louder after a few minutes. I looked up and saw a female reporter and her camera crew walking across the grass. The hippies had sent them away, and they were headed toward us. They stopped right in front of us. She held her microphone to her mouth and said, "Hi, I'm Hannah Prentiss, from Channel Nine. What are your names, and why are you here today?"

Sheila didn't respond. I shook my head and said, "I'm Derek Allen. This is Sheila Lisbon. I'm not sure why we're here." The cameraman smiled, probably at my sarcasm, but the reporter wasn't listening to me.

“I’m sorry, ‘Sheila Lisbon?’” I nodded. Her demeanor completely changed at that moment. She dug through a file folder in her hands and pulled out a piece of paper. She looked at it, then at Sheila, and back at her paper again. “Oh my God. Yes,” she whispered. She turned to face the camera. “Ready? Okay. Hannah Prentiss, reporting from Florida State Prison near Starke, Florida. We’ve been interviewing some of the citizens who have come to the prison today, and we found Sheila Lisbon, the convicted’s last victim and the only one who was alive to testify in court against him.” Hannah turned on her heel and knelt before us. “Sheila, how do you feel about today’s execution?”

“What? No,” I said. “She’s not that girl.”

Hannah pushed the piece of paper at me but kept looking at Sheila. I took the paper and looked at the black and white picture on it. The girl looked a little like Sheila, just several years younger, with long hair, no bangs, bruised and cut around her eyes, cheeks, and mouth. Her eyes gleamed. That was obvious even past her swollen eye. I crumpled the paper in my hand and turned to the camera guy. “Turn it off. You’re not taping her. Off.” The camera guy lowered his camera and the reporter glared at me. “Too bad. You’re not interviewing her. She can’t talk right now.”

“Why don’t you let her talk for herself,” Hannah said. She turned to Sheila and smiled. “Sheila? Hi, sweetie. Could we ask you a few questions?” But Sheila stared right through her. For a moment, I was proud of her. She didn’t argue with the woman, she didn’t antagonize her, she didn’t even speak—she just sat there and completely annoyed the reporter. And I ignored my own instincts too.

I pushed myself off the ground and squeezed between Sheila and Hannah Prentiss. “Get out of here,” I said. I folded my arm across my chest, like I was a bouncer at a popular club, and

stared into the camera, which was now pointed at me. Hannah eventually stood. She grabbed the paper from my hand and stalked off without saying anything. Her cameraman followed, and I called after him, “You don’t have our permission to use that footage.”

When I saw that they were interviewing the pro-capital punishment crowd, I sat next to Sheila’s towel. I pulled a few blades of grass out and shredded them in my hands. I released them on Sheila’s towel and said, “Why didn’t you tell me? I would’ve understood.”

We sat in silence, not because I wanted to, but because I had nothing else to say. Maybe I would’ve understood if she had told me months earlier, when she rolled away as I touched her hip in bed, or when she stopped holding my hand, stopped kissing me. It felt like *déjà vu* how it came back to me, this thing I had forgotten because it didn’t feel important. I remembered hearing about it on the news—how she had been raped and held prisoner in his garage for days before somehow getting out while he was distracted by a refrigerator repairman who had come to the house. I had been a freshman in high school, so she had been about thirteen or fourteen. But it felt like it was too late now. She would accuse me of pitying her if I took back what I had said just before the reporter showed up. And I didn’t love her. I hardly knew her. So I watched the building, looking at the windows to see if I could get a glimpse of the man inside who had hurt her.

I didn’t realize the crowd had fallen silent as well until the enthusiasts to our right burst into cheers. Sheila’s head turned to the side, and I looked too. A group of people walked out of the building to a podium and makeshift press area. I squinted and saw Hannah Prentiss near the front of the crowd. I checked my watch. It was 4:26.

“Well, let’s go home,” Sheila said. I was surprised to hear her voice after such a long period of silence. She stood and began putting everything back into the bag. I sat in the grass for a few more moments.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

She smiled and folded the bag of Skittles. “Well, it didn’t turn out to be the best day, did it.”

“I’m sorry, Sheila.”

“Don’t be,” she said. She put the Skittles in the bag and frowned. “You didn’t eat the Funyuns?” She sighed and bunched her towel into the bag. “We weren’t going to be together forever, Derek.”

I shook my head. “That’s not what I’m talking about.” I reached for my towel, to fold it, but she took it from my hands. “I meant the execution, what he did—”

“I don’t think there’s much to divvy up between us,” Sheila said. She cocked her head and said, “But you can keep those pictures of me. I saw them on your computer.” She winked and backed away. “Let’s get going, huh?” I watched her walk for a few moments. She seemed strong and sure of herself, like that reporter hadn’t invaded her privacy, like she hadn’t been here for an execution. And maybe I had been wrong the whole time. Maybe she didn’t need anyone protecting her.

THE ROOT OF OUR SOCIAL PROBLEMS

It was late in March when we heard the story about the missing girls. Their names were Alexis and Brittany and they were six- and four-years old, respectively. Brown-haired, green-eyed sisters. According to the reporter on Channel 6, one minute they were playing in their front yard, and then the next minute they weren't. It was that simple. We saw clips of their mother crying, their father cradling his head in his hands, their older brother silent by the garage door. No one could remember who was supposed to be watching the little girls outside. No one could remember if they had seen anything suspicious.

Clay said, "Stupid fucking parents."

The story of the missing girls dominated the news that night. Our beagle-mix, Samson, sat in front of the television and whined as he watched the bloodhounds and German shepherds sniff the ground outside of the girls' home. It grew more and more depressing as we watched the reporters on three different channels repeat the same tedious details. I flipped to a different channel and played along with *The Wheel of Fortune*. I got up to get a drink and when I came back to the room, Clay had put the news back on. Stories like those happened all the time, and they were all the same. I fell asleep on the floor. When I woke up the eleven o'clock news was playing. Clay sat on the edge of his seat, staring at footage of the girls' home. I swear, if his ears could perk up, he would have been panting right alongside Samson.

Not a lot happens in Pine Hill Sound, North Carolina. When the girls went missing, it was all people could talk about. Posters were plastered on lampposts and telephone poles, the doors and cash registers of businesses. People drew on their cars' back windows with shoe polish, begging others to keep an eye out. People asking if I had seen anything approached me at

least two times every day. Clay came home from the Home Depot for the next few days and told me the only thing they spoke about was the girls. I was a waitress at Ray's down by the water, and I had heard most of the same thing. It didn't matter that it was spring break for the local schools and the seniors were having illegal bonfires and drinking on the beach every night, or that there were high bacteria levels in the water at the southern end of the island. The girls were the only news.

We learned a lot about Alexis and Brittany in those early days. They loved Disney princesses, and they knew the lyrics to some of the songs from *High School Musical*. Brittany was learning how to swim, and Alexis had the neatest handwriting in her first grade class. At first, it was heart wrenching. The family—including aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents—crowded around the news channels' microphones and cried for their safe return. The family was united. The love they had for the girls was almost tangible. I hadn't seen that sort of love in years.

On the fifth day, Clay came home from work early, just about the time I was leaving to pick up a dinner shift. Without a word, he dropped his orange apron on the couch and went to the patio. I picked up my cup of coffee and followed him. He opened the patio door and the warm, salty breeze came into the apartment. I heard some of the fishermen shouting down at the causeway. He opened the door to the storage closet and knelt on the concrete.

“What are you doing?”

“Have you seen my Torch flashlight? Or that map your brother gave us when we moved here?”

“No,” I said. I watched him tear open some of the boxes we hadn’t unpacked since we moved here over eighteen months ago. From that angle, I could tell that he hadn’t gotten a haircut in a couple of months. His hair, which was usually no longer than half an inch, was nearing the inch mark. He looked like one of the typical scruffy actors you see on soap operas. “Why do you need the flashlight? Or the map?”

“They’re asking for volunteers to help search the marshes.” He tore into a box of things from my childhood—horse figurines, chapter books like *The Boxcar Children*, some Mariah Carey CDs—and rifled through it.

“Hey!”

My objection surprised me as much as him. He looked back at me with wide brown eyes. His brow was furrowed, but I couldn’t tell if he was concerned about the map or about me.

“What, Stella?”

I gripped my coffee mug and glared down at him and my so-easily-discarded belongings. “*Who’s* asking for volunteers?”

“The cops.” He pushed my box to the side and grabbed another one. He spoke into it. “I heard today that the FBI’s gonna be involved soon.” There was a trill in his voice I had never heard before.

I watched him for a few more minutes before I went inside to finish getting ready for work. When I left the apartment, he was standing on a step stool and searching the top shelf of the closet.

While serving customers that night, I kept a close eye on the television. The restaurant was the quietest it had ever been. Besides the fervent whisper when a reporter would phrase the now common knowledge about what little of a case the police had, the patrons ate with their eyes

on the televisions. When the news was over I listened to the diners' theories but didn't speculate any of my own. Stories like these were depressing and pointless to get involved in. I just hoped they'd find the girls so this could be over already.

Friends and neighbors of the girls' family arranged the candlelight vigil on the seventh day. Their home was only three miles from our apartment. Usually Clay and I ride our bikes everywhere. We rented a car to move us here from Austin, and we hadn't saved up the money to buy a car. Clay didn't feel like riding his bike, though. He felt that it would be disrespectful, and we argued about it for almost ten minutes.

"I just don't see how it's disrespectful," I said, slumped against the stairs outside our apartment building. Samson, who was coming along as per Clay's desire, sat next to me. Clay stood in front of me, with one hand on his hip and the other holding my bike captive. At this rate, we were going to be late. That was more disrespectful, in my opinion.

"Speeding onto their street without a care in the world while this family grieves is very disrespectful. Why don't you just spit on them, Stella?"

"They're not grieving," I sighed. "They don't even know..." I looked past Clay to the small fountain at the entrance of our complex.

"Come on, Stella." Clay reached down and I took his hand. He pulled me up and gently pushed me in the direction of the street. He locked my bike to the staircase and jogged to catch up to me. He gently squeezed my side as he and Samson fell into step beside me. As we walked, he kept his arm around my shoulders.

We arrived late. Candlelight bounced in the new dusk, and the low murmur of hymns pulsed throughout the neighborhood. There was a box of candles at the front of the street. We

took two and approached the glowing mass of people. I saw two waitresses I worked with, and I waved. Clay drifted away from me toward the house. Someone in an orange Home Depot shirt approached him, and the two walked across the front yard. Clay knelt down next to Samson and whispered to the dog. Samson wagged his tail against Clay's coworker's leg. I stood in the background with my unlit candle. Clay was busy with his friends, and I didn't like the two waitresses enough to actually stand with them. Usually when Clay and I moved, I made friends fast. Pine Hill Sound had been different for me in that sense and different for Clay too—he tended to get involved with a nonprofit organization or some cause as soon as we moved to a new town. Those were usually why we came to certain cities. But he'd been happily working at the Home Depot for eighteen months and didn't seem too concerned with moving on.

A small stage had been erected on the driveway of the family's home. The parents and son stood on it with their family and some of their friends. I found myself staring at the mother and father, Janice and Tim. Janice seemed to have aged years in the matter of a week. She wasn't wearing makeup, and she had on the same outfit she had worn to one of their press conferences the day before. Tim's clothes weren't ironed and his hair stood out on the sides. Their daughters had been gone for a full week, but they looked like it had happened just this morning. I wondered if that expression of shock, of ultimate betrayal and loss, ever vanished, or even lessened in its harshness.

Sometimes Clay worked the night shift, unloading new deliveries. He would come home at seven in the morning with bagels and a sore back. On those nights, Samson and I spent hours watching the "girly" shows that Clay despised. It was the eleventh day and near midnight when Clay walked into the apartment.

“Did they send you home?” I sat up, and Samson bounded off the couch toward Clay.

“Sort of,” he said. “Something came up.” His arms were full of papers and folders and rolled-up posters. He spread everything on the kitchen table. He pushed the placemats over the edge and took my pot of African violets in his hands.

“What does that mean?”

Clay uttered a noise of exasperation, a noise that I was becoming very familiar with. Before this week, I hadn’t heard that noise since I lived with my parents. It was my father’s favorite expression. When I turned eighteen, convinced I was underappreciated in my family, I hitched my way from Boise to Miami as fast as I could.

Clay looked up at me, and for a moment, I recognized him as the boy I had met at a park in Miami—the boy with the sugary shine in his eyes who wanted to get the hell out of Florida. Back then he worked at a nursery and came home smelling like mulch and pine. His hair had been buzzed, his muscles taut, and when he suggested we move together, I fell for him. I fell for him over and over. Only recently had he started looking like someone else, someone I wouldn’t be able to pick out in the street.

“I quit.”

“What?”

“Okay, I was fired.” He extended the flowerpot to me with one hand. He returned his focus to the things on the table.

I climbed off the couch and walked towards him. “How were you fired? How do they fire you?” I took the flowers and put them on the counter. In a matter of seconds, my kitchen had turned into a messy office. “You work there full-time and you’re always so helpful. I mean, you get that employee of the month thing sometimes.” I felt my hands moving to prove my point, but

when I tried to settle myself, I felt oddly restrained. “For Christ’s sake, Clay, you get customers going up to your manager all the time to tell him how goddamn wonderful you are.” I gripped his forearm with one hand. “What happened?”

He shook me off and continued with the papers. I watched him separate stacks and shuffle things into orderly piles. “I’ve been working on the girls,” he said. “If we don’t find Alexis and Brittany soon, it may be too late.”

For a moment, I thought I might vomit. “Who’s ‘we’?”

“Me and some of the guys at work.”

“Did you all get fired?”

“No, but only because they’re not as concerned about this family,” Clay said. He shook his head. “Makes me sick, really. They say they want to help, but only if they have time. Make some fucking time, you know?” Samson started whining at our feet. He scratched at Clay’s leg. Clay reached down and briefly petted Samson’s head. “I know, buddy, but you can’t help anymore.”

“What does that mean?”

“I figured since he’s a beagle, he might be able to pick up a scent. No such luck.”

I thought Clay losing his job had sent me into an anxiety attack. That was nothing compared to him trying to turn our dog into a bloodhound. I stared at him. “How did you get a scent?”

“When we were at the vigil,” he said, “I had Samson sniff around. But he didn’t follow anything.” He shrugged and looked up at me again. “Not a purebred, you know?”

“No, I don’t.” I looked down at the table. Police reports, photographs of footprints and soil and marshland, handwritten notes by Clay, the map my brother Sam gave us. I touched the

dirty map and smoothed one of the creases. The map had new red pen marks scribbled on it; next to each red X was a note scrawled in handwriting I couldn't decipher upside down.

Clay stepped back and observed his new workspace. "Yes," he said. "We're going to find the bastard that did this."

The day shifts at the restaurant weren't so bad. Spring break was over, so the kids were gone. We got a handful of tourists every day and lots of retirees. Mostly it was just locals who loved Ray's hamburgers or his wife Laura's seafood bisque. I hoped Clay would go back to Home Depot when he realized what he had done, so I hadn't told Ray or Laura that Clay had gotten fired and that I needed some extra shifts. Lately I heard some of the waitresses talking about Clay and the other guys who were helping him. I was embarrassed to be connected to him, so I had stopped socializing at work. I didn't want to add any fuel to the embarrassing fire. Ray just loved how I was getting more work done than normal.

I was wrapping silverware for the dinner shift when I heard my name being called. I looked up and saw a haggard Clay coming towards me. He hadn't shaved since the vigil, and a week's growth wasn't his best look. He was a long and lean guy anyway, but the beard made him look gaunt. Between the circles under his eyes and hollow of his cheeks, his accentuated bone structure practically gave him a heroin chic look. The clothes he wore appeared to belong to a man twenty pounds heavier than him. Like something inside him was changing, he looked to be shedding himself more and more every day.

"I need your bankcard."

His outstretched hand took me by surprise. I leaned back in my seat and pushed the pile of silverware more toward the edge of the table, effectively creating a small wall of napkins and

utensils. I looked over his shoulder and saw Ray watching us from the bar. The waitresses stood in the kitchen doorway. One of them looked Clay up and down and laughed. When I looked back at him, I couldn't help myself. "You look awful. When was the last time you took a shower?"

Clay smiled at me, like I was absurd for asking that question. He moved his hand a little closer to me and repeated the question.

"Why?"

"We need more supplies." His hand hung in the air.

I stood up and eased behind my chair. "Like groceries?"

He laughed again, that mocking noise that echoed in our apartment now. Even when he wasn't there, I heard it. The evidence of his newfound passion was all over our home. I had to push maps and documents out of the way to find my keys every morning. I gripped the back of the chair. Ray started towards us. Clay's eyes darted over to Ray and he lowered his hand. "No, supplies for the search. We need more flashlights, a GPS, gloves, some walkie-talkies. You know, stuff we can use in the woods."

"Walkie-talkies?" I could hear the disbelief in my voice. Giggles erupted from the kitchen. My face burned. I refused to cause a scene at work—because the girls would never stop talking about that—but I was going to lose it at home. "That's stupid, Clay."

Clay opened his mouth to speak just as Ray's hand covered his shoulder. He turned and smiled. "Hey, Ray, how's it going?"

"Fine, just fine," Ray said. He was a short man, only five foot six, with tattooed arms and a shaved, gleaming head. But in this circumstance, he looked about a foot taller than Clay. His fingers tightened on Clay's shoulder. "Stella is working now, Clay. I think you need to take this home. You can see her later."

The grip on his shoulder must have worked. Clay nodded. "Sure, sure." He looked at me and said, "See you at home. We'll talk then." His hand lifted again in a last-ditch effort for my card before Ray directed him to the door.

After he walked out, Ray looked at me from across the room. I felt his eyes on me, but I had already resumed wrapping silverware, and I didn't want to fall behind. I heard whispering from the kitchen, and I turned to glare at them. The girls walked into the kitchen and their laughter sounded from behind the swinging door. I grabbed another fork, spoon, and knife and placed them in a napkin. I tried to steady my breath.

Clay never asked me for the money again. I wasn't good at handling confrontation, especially when the man I was living with, the man I had been criss-crossing the country with for four years, demanded something like a few weeks' tips. I hadn't even seen him since the restaurant four days earlier. I heard him come into the apartment when I had been in bed for hours and was too tired to say anything, and he was gone in the mornings before I awoke. The other side of the bed looked unused. I was tired of the situation. I wanted the girls to be found.

I wanted us to move again and be rid of Pine Hill Sound.

I came home from work to see a pile of shoes outside our apartment. I opened the door. Samson didn't run up to me. Instead, I heard loud voices. I walked inside and held my breath, not sure what to expect. I rounded the corner and saw seven strange men sitting in our living room. They were muscular and thick. Three of them squeezed together on the love seat, and the other four occupied the couch. A man with a bony frame gestured at the chart in front of the couches.

No one looked at me. No one said anything or moved. I slipped behind the gangly man to go into the bedroom. I turned on the light. Samson raised his head and his tail wagged, but even

he didn't get off the bed to greet me. I looked through the doorway at the eight men in my apartment. They were discussing the girls. No one had seen them in almost three weeks. Here I was in my own apartment, visible and tangible, and no one was seeing me either.

I lay on the bed next to Samson and rubbed behind his ears. I was quiet, but I wasn't listening to them. I let the voices wash over me and I focused on erasing the words. Was it so bad that I didn't have it in me to go out of my way for those girls? I did my part—I looked at every little girl I saw on the streets or at the restaurant to see if any of them resembled Alexis or Brittany. I watched for suspicious activity. If I saw children by themselves in their yards, I didn't leave until I saw a parent present. That probably made me suspicious to most passersby. I was just as concerned as most everyone else.

“Hey.”

I rolled over and looked in the doorway. He stood there, but I would not have called him Clay if I saw him on the street.

“We need to set some stuff up in here. We're running out of room.”

I pushed myself off the bed and walked past him. The kitchen area was littered with the evidence of their search, but there was plenty of room in the living room. Besides the chart on the easel, the room was empty. I waved my arms and said, “Look at all of this space. This is fine.”

Clay walked out and said, “No, we need more room.”

I shook my head. “No.”

One of the men on the couch asked, “What's the problem?”

“You’ve taken over my apartment,” I said. I tried to identify which one of them had spoken, but I couldn’t. I saw a sea of closed and angry mouths before me. I turned to Clay.

“Without asking. Without even thinking about me.”

“It’s our apartment,” Clay said. “And this is important.”

“This is another one of your adventures,” I responded. “You’re just trying to be important. Guess what? You’re not.” His eyes weren’t the same shade of brown anymore. Even as I spoke, I knew this wasn’t one of his adventures, because that shiny gleam was missing. This was not something he was doing out of the goodness of his heart. This was an obsession. But I kept on with the fight, because it needed to be done.

“You haven’t even talked about the girls in weeks. You just keep talking about the guy who did it.” I felt myself reaching a conclusion that I knew wasn’t true, but that I thought might push him out of his own mind. I crossed my arms over my chest and put one foot out in front of me to steady myself against the fight I knew was coming. “You just want the glory of turning someone in.”

Another man stood from the couch and walked towards us, but Clay acted as though I hadn’t crossed a line. I shied away from the bulky man as Clay spoke. “Is there somewhere you could go so we can continue working?” He looked down at the clipboard in his hands and scribbled a note. It was the formality of his request, his obvious disregard for me, that pushed me.

“Your little search isn’t going to come up with anything.” I felt something come loose inside me, and my mouth opened to release it. “I bet you’re infringing upon the actual search. You’re probably screwing with evidence by tramping all over the woods.”

“Hey now,” another man said. “That’s enough.”

“No,” I said, “it’s true. You’re not helping. You’re hurting everyone, Clay.” He looked at me again, and nothing registered in his eyes. Like I wasn’t even speaking to him. Like Clay was someone he had never heard of. “You won’t do this anymore.”

A steady hum rose out of nowhere and I saw their mouths moving, but none of their words came to me. I struggled against the rushing sound in front of me. I had erased their voices, ignored what they were saying about the girls. But they had erased me too. Clay’s mouth moved, and I raised my hands to my ears to quiet the buzzing. I stood just outside of their group. After a few moments the noise lessened and all I heard was the rush of nothingness and the smack of desperation from my fading words.

Clay moved towards me, and I stumbled into the bedroom. I had never been frightened of him. I had trusted him across state lines, time and time again. Without a word, Clay reached forward and shut the door, sealing me off.

The next morning, I heard the slamming of car doors outside my window. I struggled to get up, but Samson was stretched across my legs. I pulled open the blinds to see a mass of cars outside the apartment. People were rushing back and forth between them. It looked like the beginning of a camping trip. Everyone was holding a cooler, a walking stick, a map, or a cell phone.

I recognized some of them. Three women who always walked around Main Street on the weekdays to get people to visit the Baptist church were loading up the back of a pickup truck. One guy—an ex-cop who had gotten fired after three separate cases of assaulting suspects—was holding back two German shepherds. The men who had been in my living room were getting into the drivers’ seats of a few of the cars.

One man was standing in the bed of a truck with a bullhorn, shouting into it. He was gaunt, but determined. The shaggy brown hair that reached his shoulders seemed to cascade down his face to form his beard. One hand gripped the bullhorn, but the other one cut through the air with purpose and zeal. He was taking these people places they had never imagined they would go, where they would probably help those who couldn't help themselves. The man was attractive in an activist sort of way—like a sexy Jesus. He looked like the guy who would get you to care about more than just yourself.

He pounded the top of the truck and held on as it rolled away. The crowd filed out of the parking lot in cars and on foot. I got on my knees and leaned to the far side of the window in the hope that I could see them from there, but they were gone. Knowing that soon they would realize they had left me and would come back, I stared out the window for the better part of the morning. I remembered what my parents told me when I was a kid—that if I ever got lost to stay in one place until someone found me. And so I waited.

TWILIGHT TIME

The power went out four minutes into the storm. Peyton had been watching the local meteorologist blast away about cells and lightning strikes and how when warm air hits warm air, sometimes these things just happen, when a boom resonated outside. It wasn't thunder but the transformer. Without even a flicker, the lights went off. The television hissed, the cable box clicked a few times, and the air conditioning hummed itself into silence. She wasn't sure where to look for candles and matches. Everything was still in boxes.

The rain was coming in sideways—that much was evident, even in the early minutes of dusk and the looming rain clouds. Peyton pulled the blinds away from the sliding glass door and peered into the night. Everything was a shade of gray until lightning struck, and then she saw her new neighborhood in bits and pieces. Small branches whipped in the air. A few houses down, closer to the lake, a screen door tossed back and forth in the wind. A few birds careened in the air, in dangerous new spaces every time the sky illuminated above them.

Just as quickly, the storm was over. If rain hadn't been trickling off the roof, she would've thought she had imagined it. She flicked a light switch a few times, just to see if it would work even though she knew better. Peyton walked around the bungalow, turning off switches because she remembered hearing once that if the power goes out, it was best to have everything in the off position. She briefly wondered how she would know when the power was back, if everything was off.

She stood in the dark hallway for a few minutes. This was the one part of the house that didn't have boxes in her way. She kept one hand against the wall, scared that if she moved away from it she would get confused and not know where she was or how to get back to somewhere familiar. She was stupid to have not unpacked. Stupid. She had moved to Savannah two weeks

ago and was still living out of boxes in a rented house that she didn't think was as nice as it had looked online.

A sound outside grew louder, and Peyton recognized it as a car alarm blaring. She breathed in time to its shriek. When it silenced itself, she looked toward the window. Thunder grumbled in the distance, and she counted for the lightning, but lost track. Maybe she had imagined it. Thunder always had lightning. She walked to the front door, her fingers guiding her along the wall. To keep her life simple, and coincidentally a mess, she kept all her shoes by the front door. She stuck her hands in the pile and came out with the galoshes she had been looking for. Her hands crawled along the wall until they reached the door. She moved her left hand two feet to the left and up to level with her head. She fumbled, her nails scratching the wall, until her keys jingled.

The muggy air hit hard when she walked outside. She quickly shut the door, hoping to keep as much of the cool air in as possible. The sky was a dull charcoal, but it was so much easier to see out there than it had been inside. She walked through her rented front lawn, her overshoes squishing in the mud and water. She had worn the boots to her first day at work in downtown Savannah. It had rained that morning too, and these boots that she usually wore on snowy days in Illinois had come in handy. As she took them off in the lobby and wiped the water from her shins and ankles, three women giggled as they clicked past in their heels. She put her own heels on and clicked her way to the elevator to join them.

Peyton's family laughed when she said she was leaving Joliet for Savannah, Georgia. She was tired of snow and going to work with the same people she had gone to high school with. She didn't choose Savannah; she applied for a dozen jobs in the southeast and Savannah was the only

town that took the bait. And now her family would be laughing more if they saw her trudging through her front yard in those galoshes she hated, in mud instead of snow.

She had moved into a bungalow on Moore Street and still wasn't able to pick her own house out of the lot just yet. It was identical, in shape and color, to at least eight of the other houses. Nothing about it stood out to her, so she had shoved a neon pink pinwheel by the mailbox to be her reminder. It spun in the wind, and rainwater and flecks of leaves and dirt spat off it onto the ground. It made a small squeaking sound that her neighbor's dog hated and barked at every time they passed.

Another car alarm started. She looked up and down the street. Some siding from someone's house littered the road where it intersected with Elizabeth Street. A stop sign was bent at a thirty-degree angle, and it shimmied from side to side in the wind. It thundered in the distance, and heat lightning lit up the clouds. It smelled like rot. A burst of wind blew broken leaves and dirt against her legs.

Footsteps and splashing water sounded behind her. She turned and saw a woman in a raincoat and pink sweatpants walking towards her. She, too, had boots on, and a closed umbrella clutched in her fist. She raised her free hand and called out, "You survived, then?"

Peyton looked behind her, curious if this woman was calling to someone else, someone she knew. It was such a familiar question, one with a tinge of humor and the hint of past conversations and secrets. But no one was there. The woman was closer now, and Peyton saw she was older. Her brown hair, gray at the roots, was tucked into the hood of the raincoat, which fell to her knees. Her blue boots were scuffed. Peyton lifted her hand and replied, "Yes. It felt close, though."

“Hasn’t been a storm that bad in at least three years,” the woman said. “Went by fast, too. If you’re not careful, you’d think you dreamt it.” She smiled to reveal perfectly straight teeth. She pushed her hand out and said, “Ruth.”

Peyton introduced herself. It was quiet for a moment, and on the verge of awkwardness, so she said, “I’m going back inside now. Nice to meet you, Ruth.”

“You’re not dressed for a natural disaster.”

Peyton looked down. She had a big red shirt on that read MIKE’S ALL-STAR BOWLERS/JOLIET CHAMPS 2002 across the back, with a small picture of a bowling ball knocking down all ten pins on the front. Her legs looked gangly, sticking out between denim cutoffs and galoshes. She smiled at Ruth and shrugged. “Wasn’t expecting it.”

“Didn’t your mother ever tell you to look nice in a blackout in case you meet people?”

She wasn’t sure she liked Ruth. Who was this woman, and why did she care so much?

“No,” Peyton said, “she only warned me about looters.”

“Smart woman.” Ruth dug in her pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes and a matchbook. Peyton hadn’t seen someone use a matchbook instead of a lighter since her grandfather, and he had died when she was twelve. “The food in my fridge is going bad,” Ruth said. She looked up at Peyton and tilted her head. Her mouth twisted in a half smile. “I’m gathering the neighbors to help me get rid of it. Come on.” It was a strange request, and Peyton wasn’t sure how to respond. She had been raised to never go to a stranger’s house, never accept bizarre offers, and so on. But Ruth had a plan, and Peyton didn’t even get to think about how her own food was going bad at that very moment. Ruth turned and touched Peyton’s arm, pulling her along the road. “We’ll need to get a few more people. I have some in mind.”

They walked along the street. About seven houses down from Peyton's, Ruth walked up to a front door and invited the man inside the house to come with them. His name was Sam, and he brought his wife Heather. They walked in parade fashion: Ruth led the way, with Peyton behind her, and Sam and Heather bringing up the rear. People had begun to wander throughout the neighborhood like them. The houses were growing warmer and warmer, and the oppressive heat outside didn't seem so bad when you could push it away from you and it wasn't confined within four walls. Ruth picked two of the wanderers to join them. She introduced them as Burke and Sandy.

A man approached them. He was young, around Peyton's age. He was one of those guys you could place anywhere, and he would seem to fit. Inconspicuous to a fault. Ruth seemed to know him; she hugged him briefly and invited him to their dinner. He walked next to her, and Peyton felt a jealous jolt run through her. She had been pushed back in the line. She looked back to Sam and Heather, but they were discussing something amongst themselves and hadn't seen what had happened. Peyton felt embarrassed that she even cared.

Ruth's house was identical in shape to her own house. A rusted Buick stood under the carport, surrounded by six storage bins with years on them. Peyton stopped when she saw a box labeled 1952-1958. She wondered what could be in there from fifty years ago. Who would store antiques, or photographs even, outside in a plastic bin? The car was blocked in by one wheelbarrow, three bags of soil, and various gardening tools. Peyton scanned the yard. Every few feet, different flowers and shrubs grew. The azaleas stood proud with rain dripping from them, but the impatiens' petals were all over the sidewalk. Too delicate to survive in the storm. They walked up the front walk. Three wind chimes hung from the awning, and when a gust of wind came by, their songs screamed instead of chimed.

The living room walls were hard to see past the towering piles of books, magazines, and newspapers. Knick-knacks littered every table space, and framed photographs hung in no discernible pattern. Ruth said, “Come on,” and led the others to the kitchen. Peyton slowed down to look at a display of clocks on one of the bookshelves. The entire shelf held only clocks—thirteen of them—and they were all at the same exact time, down to the second. At a coffee table to her left were thirteen porcelain panda bear figurines. Next to them, but not mixed together, were thirteen small music boxes. It seemed that Ruth did not believe in superstition.

“Crazy, huh?” Peyton looked up. The young man stood in the doorway. He pointed at the music boxes. “They each play a different song.”

“Like what?”

“Some are nursery rhymes. Some classical, like ‘Für Elise.’” He walked over and picked one up. It was made of mahogany, with a painting of constellations on the lid. “This one plays ‘Twilight Time.’” He said it like Peyton should know what he was talking about, but she had never heard of it. “You know, the old song? By The Platters?” He cleared his throat and stepped a little closer. She resisted the urge to step back. He sang out softly, ““Heavenly shades of night are falling. It’s twilight time. Out of the mist your voice is calling. It’s twilight time.”” His eyes widened, searching her face for any sign of recognition.

Peyton looked away and shrugged. “I’ve never heard it. Sounds nice, though.”

“I’m Nathaniel,” he said. “Ruth said you’re new to the neighborhood.”

She didn’t give him her name. “Yeah. Pretty new.”

“How’d you like the storm?”

“It was fine. A little boring.” She looked around. She wanted to go back to her house, raid her own fridge, throw the yogurt out and eat a bowl of Cheerios before the milk went bad.

She didn't know these people, and she wasn't sure she wanted to. Nathaniel was handsome, but the way he was looking at her made her nervous. The way he looked at her made her feel intimidated.

"You tracked mud in," he said. He pointed to the floor behind her. Sure enough, her trail was documented with dirt. Before she could plan an escape to her own house, Ruth called her name. Peyton leaned over and took off her boots. She felt smaller, like a child, in the room with the music boxes and the figurines, holding her galoshes in one hand, while Nathaniel stood before her in his white T-shirt, carpenter jeans, and black boots. He had left his shoes on. She hadn't noticed if there was a mat outside she could have dragged her shoes along. Ruth called her name again, so Peyton walked out of the room and dropped her shoes by the front door.

Peyton walked into the kitchen, where Ruth stood in front of the open freezer and refrigerator. She had piled things on the counter and was calling out assignments to people. "Sam, you're in charge of deli meats. Heather, do something with these frozen vegetables." Burke was carving the remainder of a cooked ham that Ruth swore was only two days old. Sandy arranged a plate of tortilla chips, salsa, and avocado slices. Ruth's voice disappeared into the freezer as she reached to the back. Peyton heard her own name, and then the words "ice cream" and "mix it together," which was followed by Ruth putting two cartons of ice cream on the counter behind her. Ruth called out something else about watermelon, and Nathaniel came up next to Peyton. He took the sliced watermelon, pineapple, and cantaloupe from Ruth. He reached into the freezer and pulled out a half-full bottle of vodka. He winked at Peyton and whispered, "It'll go bad, right?"

Peyton smiled back and moved over to an empty spot in the kitchen. She looked at the vanilla and coffee ice creams in front of her. Ruth was still busy pulling food out of the fridge.

Heather was pouring the frozen vegetables into a bowl, and Sam was preparing sandwiches. Peyton made herself at home in the kitchen as well. She found two large bowls and a manual hand mixer. The ice cream was already a little melted and fell into the bowls easily enough. The carton of milk was on the counter, and Peyton poured some into each bowl.

As she blended the ice cream as neatly as she could, she watched Nathaniel walk around the den, which was decorated the same way the living room was. The vodka was in one of his hands. He had put the fruit down. He seemed to know his way around Ruth's place. He walked right to the bookcase and pulled out a book, then flipped to the middle of it, like he had left off there the last time he visited. He tucked the bottle under his arm and read for a few minutes. Peyton started mixing too fast and some ice cream splattered across the counter into the salsa.

Soon they had a feast on the table: vanilla and coffee milkshakes; a bowl of green and northern beans mixed with pesto sauce; another bowl of partially frozen peas and corn; ham and turkey sandwiches with Swiss cheese and mayonnaise, Dijon mustard, or pimento; a plate of sliced tomato and mozzarella; a side dish of sliced cantaloupe; a bowl of pineapple and watermelon chunks; and the platter of chips and salsa. Containers of sour cream and yogurt were on the table for anyone who had the urge. Nathaniel took the block of cream cheese and cocktail sauce that had been placed in front of him and poured the sauce over the cheese. He got up and found a sleeve of Ritz crackers in the pantry.

Sam spooned some of the cheese and cocktail sauce onto his plate and said, "Would be better with shrimp."

"Whose fault is that, huh?" Nathaniel said. Sam smiled and passed the mixture to his wife.

Peyton tasted the vodka on the fruit and looked up at Nathaniel, across the table from her. He grinned and poured the rest of the vodka in juice glasses for everyone.

Ruth had set three candles on the table. With the sun almost beneath the horizon, the windows shed little light upon their dinner party. Ruth heaped some of the beans onto her plate. “Peyton just moved here,” she said. “From up North.”

“Illinois,” Peyton said. She wasn’t sure why almost everyone she met referred to the Midwest as the North.

“Yeah, you’ve got that accent.” Sam mimicked her voice and grinned. Peyton smiled back, a little unsure of how to take him since all she had said in front of him was the name of her home state. She put a sandwich on her plate.

“How’s business, Sam?” Ruth asked. As Sam launched into the latest details of work on a shrimping boat, Peyton carefully watched her fellow diners. Heather didn’t say much but nodded at everything Sam said. Ruth didn’t seem to be listening to Sam. She looked at everyone’s plates and pushed bowls toward them if she wasn’t satisfied with the amount of food on their plates. But when Sam said he was having a hard time selling shrimp to some of the local stores, Ruth launched into a speech about the effect of the commercial shrimpers in their town. Her speech left Sam nodding in agreement and Peyton surprised that Ruth was that knowledgeable about the local commerce. Burke had his plate piled high with the most perishable items. Sandy was only eating the avocados she had sliced. Nathaniel poured his small glass of vodka into his milkshake and mixed it with a spoon. Peyton watched as he took a sip. He grimaced and looked at the glass. It looked watered-down from the vodka. He paused before taking a longer sip, followed by the same grimace. He lifted the glass to his mouth again and drained half the glass.

“What do you do?” Peyton jumped in as Sam lifted a forkful of corn and peas to his mouth. Everyone looked at her, but she looked at Nathaniel. He wiped his mouth.

“I’m a painter,” he said. “And a carpenter. A handyman. A scholar. A substitute teacher.”

“Don’t forget lawyer,” Ruth said. She leaned towards Peyton and said, “He did such a good job when he got himself off on those larceny charges.”

“Larceny?” Peyton asked.

Nathaniel grinned. “It’s easy to get yourself off if you didn’t do anything,” he said. He smiled at Peyton. “I didn’t do it.”

“No matter what those security cameras showed, right, Nathan?” Sam laughed.

“A lot of people look like me,” he said. “Ralph, the guy who owns the hardware store on 16th Street, is a jackass. He knew I was patching up the Goldsteins’ front porch, and when some of his merchandise went missing, he accused me.” He reached for the tomatoes and mozzarella. Peyton stared at him. He looked up and winked at her.

Peyton cleared her throat. “You said scholar?”

“Yes,” he said. “I’ve been a non-degree seeking student for years now.”

“What sort of classes do you take?”

“Art history. Astronomy. Biology. Sociology. Whatever interests me.” He put the tomato and cheese on his sandwich. “What did you study?”

“Accounting,” she said.

“Can’t say I’ve taken any of those classes.”

“It’s an acquired taste,” she said.

“Sort of like vodka milkshakes, huh?” Nathaniel grinned and Peyton looked at her plate.

“Heather, did you get a chance to check your vegetables before you came over here? I hope the storm didn’t ruin your cucumbers or tomatoes. You always have the best at the farmers’ market.” Ruth waved her fork in the air as she spoke to Heather. They launched into a discussion of who grew the best produce in their backyards. Sandy pushed her milkshake over to Nathaniel, who poured some vodka into it. Peyton found she was disappointed that Sandy didn’t want the milkshake the way she had made it. She sighed and pushed food around her plate, finding none of it appetizing anymore. Across the table, Nathaniel picked up one of the green beans and dipped it in the milkshake, leaving pesto sauce behind.

“Excuse me, Ruth, where’s your restroom?”

“Take a left. At the end of the hallway.”

The hallway was dark, but she saw a small square of faded light from the window in the bathroom. Peyton shut the door and sat on the edge of the tub. She wasn’t sure how she got sucked into this impromptu dinner party, but she knew she wanted it to be over. Maybe it was the mixture of the food, or the changing barometric pressure in the air, but she was light-headed. She stared at the mint-green tile on the floor and counted to one hundred and twenty, figuring that was an appropriate time to be away from the party. She flushed the toilet and then ran the sink for a few moments.

Peyton dawdled in the hallway. She reached out and felt that the walls were covered with frames, much like the other rooms in the house. Ruth had planted herself in this house, and made it her home with all of her belongings. Peyton could barely make herself unpack her boxes. Her decision to move across the country and start her own life was being stunted by her own inability to root herself comfortably. She leaned closer to the wall, her nose only two inches away, and squinted at the framed pictures.

“Ruth sent me for some more candles. She wants atmosphere.”

“Oh God.” Peyton pushed herself away from the wall, tilting one of the frames, and held her hand over her chest. “You scared me.”

Nathaniel smiled. “Looks like you’re trying to push yourself into the wall.”

Peyton couldn’t help herself. She chuckled and played along. “Not the wall. Just the pictures.”

“You can see them?”

“A little.” She waved him over. “Look at this. It’s black and white, and it looks faded and creased, even in the frame.” Nathaniel came to stand next to her, and she did not back up. She peered at the wall and pointed to the picture she was talking about. It was of two little girls, wrapped in pea coats, gloves, scarves, and hats. They weren’t smiling—they didn’t seem to have any expression. That just looked up at the camera. “Maybe it’s Ruth.”

“Maybe.” Nathaniel was as close to the wall as Peyton had been. She kept her eyes on his profile, barely able to make it out in the darkening hallway. The soft square of light from the bathroom was fading faster as evening fell outside. “She’s had an interesting life.”

Out of everything they had talked about at the dinner table—Sam’s shrimping business, Heather’s vegetables, Nathaniel’s questionable background—no one had mentioned anything about Ruth. All Peyton knew was that she wasn’t scared of the number thirteen, she liked getting people together, and her house was a living monument to the things she had collected over her lifetime. That was nothing, in the realm of getting to know a person.

Nathaniel stepped away from the wall. “The candles are in a box in the guest room closet.” He started to move past her, but Peyton reached out and stopped him. She leaned forward and didn’t even have to raise herself on her tiptoes too much. She hadn’t noticed he was

almost the same height as her. She kissed him a little more harshly than she meant to. He didn't seem to care. His hands came to her hips. His jeans scratched against her legs. She felt a little off balance, and when she corrected herself, her bare foot landed on his steel-toed boots. The contrast threw her off even more and she pulled away.

She couldn't make him out in the darkness. She wished she could see his face because then she would know who he was, what he was supposed to be. He was a thief, a student, a repairman. He could be a liar, too. Maybe Ruth didn't know anything about him. And what did she know about Ruth anyway?

"That was a surprise," he said.

"Your shoes are on," she replied.

"What?"

"Maybe you tracked mud in."

Nathaniel laughed softly, causing her hair to tickle her forehead. "Did you have too much of the pineapple? I wasn't stingy with the vodka."

Peyton shook her head. She was thinking clearly. It was like she was peering through a microscope—everything in this experience was magnified, and she felt like she was getting pushed to the side a little too fast. If only she could see his face, she would know if he was making fun of her or putting her on. "Ruth wants candles," she said. She moved past his silhouette and into the living room. She heard Sam, Heather, and Ruth talking in the kitchen. Nathaniel hadn't followed her. She looked around wildly, searching for something, anything to ground her in the moment.

Ruth called her name. Peyton plucked the music box with the constellations from the table. She gripped it in her hands as she shoved on her boots. She yanked the front door open,

and thought better as she slowly and delicately closed it. Without streetlamps, the street looked like a perfect place to play hide and seek. She darted across Ruth's lawn and into the street. The wind pushed against her but she kept on. Leaves and twigs nipped at her legs as she pressed on. She cranked the key on the music box and held it to her ear as she walked. She tried to remember the words as the song flooded the empty street, but she couldn't. She wondered when Ruth would realize that one of the music boxes was gone. If Nathaniel would say it was the one he had shown her. If Ruth would blame him and not her.

But she didn't really care, she decided as she neared her own house. She had boxes to unpack, food to rescue from the refrigerator. How selfish of Ruth to think that only her life mattered in the aftermath of this storm.

WRITING LIFE ESSAY

When I was growing up, my dad took me on errands with him. For every ride he gave me a time frame—ten minutes, twenty minutes—and I would tell him a story that wrapped up as we pulled into a parking spot. For years he gave up listening to the Eagles, Dire Straits, or sports radio to listen to me. I did it until my inner editor grabbed a hold of me and made me too nervous to share my spur-of-the-moment stories. The confidence my parents gave me in my writing carried over to the freedom they gave me with my reading selections.

I was allowed to read whatever I wanted from the library. So I read everything John Grisham had written and relished in the triumph of good over bad. I scared myself with some of Stephen King and Dean Koontz's thrillers. I was lucky enough to have a high school English teacher named Roy Starling who kept an expansive library in his classroom, and that was where I fell in love with literary fiction. I allowed Jeffrey Eugenides to throw me into the minds of the boys who loved suicidal sisters with *The Virgin Suicides*, and I followed Tim O'Brien through Vietnam in *The Things They Carried*. I got lost in the Pacific Northwest with David Guterson's *Snow Falling on Cedars*. But it was not until I read Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* that I understood I could apply everything I had read to what I was doing in my Introduction to Creative Writing class. That was the day I chose to follow the fable in my hands rather than the Financial Accounting book in my backpack.

The wide variety of books I've read influenced my writing whether or not I intended it to. Now I gravitate toward short story collections and novels written by women in their twenties and thirties. I feel like there may be something I can learn from their stories and imagination. My initial goal was to write coming of age stories because I found books like Julie Orringer's *How to Breathe Underwater*, Karen Russell's *St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves*, and Thisbe

Nissen's *Out of the Girls' Room and Into the Night* to be mesmerizing. I quickly realized that all of my characters were coming of age in their own time, whether it was reentering the dating scene after a marriage or entering retirement or coming back to reality after the death of a loved one. I took a step back and tried to identify who the main characters were reacting against in hopes that I could categorize my fiction in that sense. In most cases, the characters were having issues with their families.

Complicated family relationships are in part the groundwork of Nissen and Orringer's work. Nissen's novel *The Good People of New York* documents Miranda Anderson from when her parents begin dating to her time in college, focusing on the growing pains endured between her and her mother. I found these books interesting because it was nothing like my own life. I have a loving relationship with my mom that make other people roll their eyes. I had Thissen's novel in mind as I wrote about the troubles between two sets of mothers and daughters in "Resounding Gong, Clanging Cymbal" and "What Isabel Said." After every revision of both of those stories—which I stopped numbering after six each because watching the number climb didn't help me feel encouraged about the characters' stories—I felt exhausted from using my imagination so much. I have an easier time imagining issues that arise with siblings, and Orringer's story "The Isabel Fish" documents just that. I have a very strong relationship with my sister, and I found myself contemplating the opposite of who we are in order to write these stories. My story "Tag" explores what happens when a teenage girl dies before telling her younger sister how to navigate adolescence. The familial relationships in Kim Edwards's *The Memory Keeper's Daughter*, Cate Kennedy's *Dark Roots*, and Nissen's *Osprey Island* paved the foundation for the relationships I explored in my own stories.

Some of my stories explore the nuances of romantic relationships. I was particularly inspired by a passage from Ian McEwan's novel *On Chesil Beach*, a novel that explores a marriage that fails before the honeymoon is over. After the two characters go their separate ways, the narrator states:

This is how the entire course of a life can be changed—by doing nothing. On Chesil Beach [Edward] could have called out to Florence, he could have gone after her. He did not know, or would not have cared to know, that as she ran away from him, certain in her distress that she was about to lose him, she had never loved him more, or more hopelessly, and that the sound of his voice would have been a deliverance, and she would have turned back (203).

That passage was the force behind “The Root of Our Social Problems.” I wanted to see how I could portray a crumbling relationship that involved people who didn't know how to speak to one another, who only knew how to yell and ignore.

In crafting my thesis, one of my main objectives was to explore different voices and different points of view. I wanted to use first, second, and third person narrators, and have a mix of male and female protagonists. My story “Peas” was heavily influenced by Richard Russo's *Straight Man*, as it originated in a mimic story with the objective to be an imitation of voice. After I learned how to craft sarcasm and humor, I changed the structure by keeping it linear—besides the marker that the narrator Jack keeps going back to (how his daughter met her boyfriend at a dry cleaner's). I also added concrete detail and more memories and anecdotes to allow Jack to seem more empathetic.

I wanted to keep most of my stories as linear as possible. I feel that—besides with a balance of male and female narrators—my stories probably have evolved the most in this aspect

since my undergraduate workshops. Before, I had no idea how to keep tension going without alluding to some event in the future, and then going back to show how the characters come to it. I looked to Edwards's *The Memory Keeper's Daughter* and Susan Minot's *Monkeys* to analyze the structure of a chronological story. I feel that "The Root of Our Social Problems" and "Twilight Time" are two of my stories that keep the tension going without alluding to an upcoming event.

As for some of the other stories with male narrators, such as "Digging up the Garden," I turned to Steve Almond's collection *My Life in Heavy Metal*. In particular I turned to the title story to illustrate a man who has no qualms with cheating on his significant other. While in Almond's story, David sees him and his mistress as "friends... companions... markers of time," in my story Jim acknowledges that he uses Sally to escape from the dullness of his married life (4). I also structured "Digging up the Garden" so that Jim is pleading his case to the reader, trying to convince his audience that he really does want to be with his wife and that he never really meant to cheat on her—however, it's up to the reader to decide if he's being honest.

Many of my stories use time markers to establish how a character connects with what they are currently dealing with. Toni Morrison uses techniques like this, especially in *Tar Baby*. While telling his story, Son keeps going back to how he did not follow the women. It is the memory that connects all his other ones. In "Climbing Trees" Charlotte is constantly reminded of watching her friend fall out of a tree and break her neck. This memory arises when she watches fireworks, when a boy kisses her, and when she looks out over the Tennessee River. In "Crashing Against the Wood" the narrator accompanies her fellow classmates to the lake where their friend drowned. As she prepares to jump into the lake, she is reminded of a special moment in a roller skating rink. While I feel that my linear stories tend to be stronger, I think the

characters that go back in history to acknowledge something that happened in their past may be the ones that have more on the line.

In terms of setting and imagery, I prefer to keep my descriptions brief and strictly necessary. While I find books such as McEwan's *Atonement* and Alan Lightman's *Einstein's Dreams* astonishing because of the attention to detail, I prefer work with more succinct imagery. In "Climbing Trees" and "Crashing Against the Wood" there are many descriptions about the woods and lakes the characters are near because nature plays such a large part in those stories. I don't describe many of the physical aspects of my characters because—as a reader—I prefer to fill in most of the details myself. I think characters start to take on a life of their own once their stories are told, and I like to keep their descriptions to a minimum.

As far as diction is concerned, I have to attribute my progress in selecting the best word to the books of poetry on my reading list. I felt like I gained a lot from reading Kim Addonizio's *What Is This Thing Called Love* and Adrienne Rich's *Diving into the Wreck*. Another poet I'm learning a lot from is Rita Dove. I hope that my interest in poetry grows as I continue to write fiction.

I cannot separate the books I've read from the stories I've written. Nor can I separate the freedom I had as a child in the library from the freedom I have when I'm looking at a blank document on my computer screen. At the heart of it I want to leave readers feeling like they connected with one of my characters or themes in my stories. I would like for someone—even if it is just one person, someday—to have one of these stories playing in their mind years after they read it, like I have the stories of the girls at St. Lucy's Home, Cecilia Tallis and Robbie Turner, and Santiago the shepherd boy running through mine.

APPENDIX: BOOK LIST

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