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Evolution of a Smart Girl

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Dedication

To my parents: I love you.
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Abstract

*Evolution of a Smart Girl* is a collection of short stories that chronicles the evolution of the modern American female. The stories are arranged in three parts: “Dirty Barbie & Breakable Boys” focuses on adolescent relationships between boys and girls; “Some Things Can’t Be Unbroken” centers on Maggie and Charlie Copper’s marriage after Maggie is diagnosed with ovarian cancer at the age of twenty-five; and “Of Apples and Broken Scabs” presents four stories about four very different women who experience heartbreak in love, friendship, and lust. This work explores the ways in which a girl’s interactions with others shape her into the young woman she becomes. Through same-sex friendships, romantic relationships, and sibling rivalries, the women in these stories experience intellectual and sexual awakenings.

Keywords: Barbie, Brothers, Creative Writing, Evolution, Fiction, Games, MFA, New Orleans, Ovarian Cancer, Sexuality, Sisters
Some Girls Rot Boys’ Teeth: 
An Introduction

Girls fascinate me. I often find myself in awe of how my kind interacts with the opposite sex. I have been known to sit at a bar while my friends shimmy on the dance floor, simply so I can observe the interactions between males and females. When people ask me why I’m staring into the crowd, I tell them that I’m a writer. This usually elicits some sort of visual response that tells me that they think I’m a voyeur, which I suppose isn’t a complete fallacy. All writers are, to an extent.

As I sit, writer/voyeur that I am, this is what I see: I see girls who’ve never been kissed and girls who are addicted to kissing; I see girls who love boys and girls who love men; I see girls who’ve had good sex and bad sex and no sex at all; I see girls who want other girls, and women, and maybe a boy, too, just for a night; I see awkwardness, vulnerability, and packs of secrets waiting to be unwrapped.

_Evolution of a Smart Girl_ explores these secrets. It strives to reveal the interior lives of girls with pasts that shape their presents and with presents that create uncertain and unpredictable futures. As I compiled stories for this project, I found myself with a set of narratives that reveal the evolution of the modern American female: a girl who is exposed to sex at a very young age, and who develops into a woman that society expects to be both strong and independent, and maternal and nurturing. Some women consistently enter unhealthy relationships; others grow strong as a result of past pain and abuse; and some, still, use a tough demeanor as a shield to protect a vulnerable, emotional underbelly. These women – those who wield strength as a weapon against hurt – are the hearts and voices of these stories.
When crafting this collection, I discovered three prevalent themes: adolescence, friendship, and sexuality. These three themes are irrevocably connected, for it is in adolescence that we forge our strongest early friendships and first discover our sexuality. Each story in *Evolution of a Smart Girl* shows the evolution (or, in some cases, devolution) of a female protagonist. The collection begins with stories about adolescence and progresses to more mature narrators. The first section, “Dirty Barbie and Breakable Boys,” focuses on adolescent relationships between boys and girls. The third section, “Of Apples and Broken Scabs,” explores heartbreak in four different relationships: a romantic partnership, an unrequited love, a deep friendship, and an affair. These two sections are broken up by “Some Things Can’t Be Unbroken,” which focuses on a young couple’s marriage that is threatened when the wife, Maggie, is diagnosed with ovarian cancer. The three stories in this section interrupt the collection’s timeline as an illustration of how unexpected circumstances may interrupt life’s natural progression.

The collection begins and ends with stories about sexual awakenings. In “Plastic Parts,” Nicole and Rebecca’s friendship eventually advances to the point where Barbies are rendered unnecessary, and they begin to explore each other’s bodies rather than the dolls’ plastic parts. The story concludes with Nicole’s first period, and, with it, the revelation that this is where games end and a new life begins. The final story, “Evolution of a Smart Girl,” also reveals a young woman’s sexual awakening, but with different results. Whereas “Plastic Parts” employs a humorous tone, the title piece shows the darker side of new sexuality, and where it can take a girl who doesn’t know when to stop playing games. Framing the collection with these stories creates a cyclical narrative, one that evolves from a light, young point of view to a darker, more mature perspective.
Each of the narrators in this collection is a female with a distinct voice. These characters have become their own entities, and I know that if I put them in a room together, there would be some interesting interactions. Nicole and Mac would probably make wry commentary the entire time, and I’m pretty sure Yoshi and Jaye would band together to kick some ass. Even though these characters make different choices in their lives, they all have one thing in common: they aren’t sweet. And yet, they share a strong desire to be accepted. This is what I’ve discovered: we never really grow out of the adolescent wish to fit in. No matter how old we are, we still possess the need to be liked, loved, and wanted. Perhaps, in this sense, none of us truly evolve from our former selves.
Dirty Barbie & Breakable Boys
Plastic Parts

My hands grip the rusty monkey bars above me as I watch three boys chase Rebecca Stewart around a tree. Rebecca’s one of the prettiest girls at St. Paul the Apostle School and the reason why the boys play tag. They like to grab her wrists and tug her sweater. I can’t blame them. She’s the type of person who manages to escape massive popularity while simultaneously capturing most girls’ respect and every boy’s heart. She’s an assortment of contradictions: smart but not nerdy; athletic but not jockish; pretty but not beautiful. She’s just enough of everything; she’s almost perfect.

I stuff my hands into the pockets of my red uniform sweater and bounce on the tips of my toes. I’m a good runner, but if someone chased me, and if that someone was Cody Cameron, then I’d run turtle-slow. Most sixth grade girls sit in clusters and create drama during recess. The three L’s – Lisa, Lizzie, and Lauren – are notorious for this. They fight over the same boy one day and ask each other to be future bridesmaids the next. I can keep up with those conversations, but I can’t always pretend to be vapid. So my thirty minutes of recess is spent playing tag with the boys or reading books that keep me isolated and teach me words. Like vapid.

I watch Rebecca pin herself against a tree. Cody Cameron and his two-man posse surround her. She grins. Cody puts his hand on the tree and leans toward her, and I’m sure I’ll see something scandalous. A kiss, perhaps, or something worse. Then some snotty fifth grader runs into me and falls, and I have to help him up instead of watch what happens next. All I see when I look back at the tree is a tree.

“Hey, Nicole.” I turn around, and there’s Rebecca right behind me.
“That was stealthy,” I tell her.

“What?”

“I didn’t know you were there.”

“Oh, okay.” She squints in the sunlight. “Well, I was wondering, are you doing anything this weekend? My mom said I could have someone sleep over on Friday night.”

Rebecca and I are sort of friends, but we’re certainly not the type of friends who sleep over.

Hands in pockets, I shrug. “Might be cool.”

Air puffs out of Rebecca’s mouth with each breath. Pink nose. Pink cheeks. Shiny wisps of black hair, spiraling from two loose braids. I wish in an instant that my own hair didn’t look so much like dry wheat.

Cody jogs up to us. “Maybe we can practice our tag moves,” Rebecca jokes, “and then we can beat these boys to a pulp.” Cody pinches Rebecca’s elbow, and she ignores him so effortlessly that I want to applaud. “So you want to?” she asks.

I’ve studied my older sister’s tactic for appearing disinterested in a person. Anna’s in high school; she’s experienced in the art of playing hard to get. She does this thing where she kind of looks away, shrugs her shoulders, and gives a sideways glance. I perform this for Rebecca, who simply stares back at me. Stupid, I tell myself. That move might have worked on the Three L’s, but Rebecca’s too smart, which is probably why she doesn’t hang out with those vapid morons, anyway.

“I’ll have to ask my mom,” I say.
“I’ll have to ask my mom,” Cody repeats, mocking me. I notice a pus-crusted pimple near the corner of his right nostril. Maybe I don’t want to marry him after all. But then he pinches Rebecca again, and I’m instantly jealous.

“Cut it out, dork,” Rebecca says. Cody shrugs one shoulder – *I’m a tough guy, no sweat* – and runs back to the Rebecca fan club. The object of their affections looks at me and smiles. I feel the sudden urge to bite her like a gold coin. I want to tap her teeth, poke her stomach, pull her hair. Just to see if she’s real. Just to make sure she isn’t a figment of everyone’s imagination and maybe to allow a piece of her to rub off on me. I glance down and watch the hem of her plaid skirt flip up with the wind. It barely touches the tops of her bright white knee socks. A sliver of golden brown skin peeks out between skirt and sock. That seals it; I know that I have to see where this type of girl lives. I should probably take notes.

I spent two hours the night before the sleepover trying to decide which pajamas to pack: a matching pair my mother bought me for my birthday or just shorts and a T-shirt. I didn’t know what Rebecca would think of my matching pajamas. They were pink with puppies, and I knew they toed the line between cool and dorky, but I wasn’t sure where they fell. So I ended up packing both options, making sure the pink pair was at the bottom of my duffel just incase.

Standing in Rebecca’s bedroom doorway, I clutch my sleeping bag and pillow. As soon as I see the bedroom, I know I won’t be wearing pink puppies. Rebecca’s room looks grownup; mine looks just like it did when I was five. Stenciled yellow elephants dance across the tops of my windows, and the curtains are yellow with bright pink balloons printed on the sides. Rebecca’s room, by contrast, has personality. Smack in the
middle is a giant waterbed—a waterbed!—covered in a deep red feather comforter. Piles of black and white pillows line the tall black headboard. A thick black and white striped border stretches around the entire room, splitting the red walls in half. Magazine clippings of movie stars and pop singers cover the wall behind the bed, the pictures attached with strips of clear tape. The only thing on my walls is that troop of stupid elephants.

“I like your room,” I say.

“Really?” Rebecca takes my pillow and sleeping bag and tosses them on the floor. “You don’t really need these,” she says. “We’ll just sleep on the bed.”

A swarm of butterflies flutter in my stomach. I try not to look excited, but I think my face betrays me. I slip the bag off my shoulder and place it carefully in a corner.

“So what do you want to do first?” Rebecca asks. She sits on the bed, and I hear water slosh. The pillows bob up and down. “I have Nintendo. Or we could play Barbies.”

Barbies? I kind of smile, thinking that she’s kidding, but then I realize that she isn’t. She’s offering Barbies as a real option. I suddenly don’t feel so stupid for bringing puppy pajamas.

“Whatever you want,” I tell her. I don’t mention that I gave my own Barbies to my younger cousins a year ago.

“Cool.” Rebecca opens her closet door and walks in. I keep my place by the door but lean forward to see what her closet looks like. From where I’m standing, it’s huge. I see clothes hung neatly according to hue: yellow, blue, green. Rebecca’s a color coder. I think of my own closet, piled high with mounds of sweaters and old toys. Clearly, my closet is inferior, and I decide right then that Rebecca will never, ever see it.
Rebecca emerges from her ridiculously neat closet with a large plastic container. Kicking the door closed, she sets the box on the floor and pries it open. Crammed among crumpled miniature outfits and tiny shoes are Barbies in every imaginable condition: shirtless Barbies, headless Barbies, legless Barbies, and even a few amputated Kens. It’s a Mattel massacre. I kneel next to Rebecca and grab a knot of cloth. A severed head follows, the blonde hair attached to some Velcro.

“Oh, that happens,” Rebecca says.

I yank the head off and toss it back into the box. I watch it roll across naked bodies and disappear behind a mountain of legs. Carefully, I untangle a sparkly pink dress from a mini bomber jacket and a pair of torn fishnet stockings.

“That’s my favorite,” Rebecca says, nodding toward the dress. “It’s really easy to take on and off. It goes with this one.” She plucks a fully intact, naked Barbie from the pile. “You can be her.”

“Thanks.” I pull at the doll’s yellow hair, struggling to break some of the knots and tangles. For someone who color codes her clothing, this Barbie situation is a little appalling.

“I’ll be Ken.” Rebecca grabs a Ken doll and slips a pair of pants over his legs. “Knock knock,” she says.

“Let me put her dress on first,” I say. I don’t want Barbie answering the door butt naked. Or is it buck naked? Anna says it one way, and Dad says it the other. Mom thinks it’s a terrible expression and thinks we should all say “birthday suits.”

“Knock, knock,” Rebecca repeats. She sounds irritated. The pink dress is only halfway on the Barbie. “Just a minute,” I say, my voice falsetto.
“Just answer the door, baby.” Rebecca’s sweet voice morphs into something deep and throaty. Her eyes are on Barbie, not me. I quickly pull the dress over Barbie’s boobs without fastening it in the back and pretend to open a door.

“Hi, Ken,” I say. “Ready for our night out on the town?”

Ken walks into Barbie’s house, moving in a stilted, two-footed hop. “That’s a hot dress,” Ken says.

“Thanks,” Barbie says. “Where do you want to go eat?” I think to myself that this is lame and that maybe Rebecca needs to get out more.

“Take it off,” Ken says.

Barbie’s speechless.

“Take it off,” Ken repeats. His hand touches the top of Barbie’s pink dress and pushes the cloth down. Happy Birthday, Barbie.

“I want you,” Ken says. His rubber hand touches Barbie’s plastic breast. “Let’s do it.”

“I thought we were going to dinner?” Barbie’s insistent on having dinner before the show, thankyouverymuch, and I am too. My Barbies never solicited one another for S-E-X. Usually the plot lines revolved around first dates at roller rinks and ice cream parlors, although there was sometimes a dramatic twist involving a lost puppy. After a Barbie and a Ken got married, they’d spend ten seconds under some sheets and then a baby was born. That was it.

“No, Nicole.” Rebecca’s voice returns. “You say, ‘Do it to me baby’.”

I’m not sure I want to do it, baby. In fact, what I want to do is something entirely different. Maybe play Nintendo, jump on koopas and squash goombas and slide down
two-dimensional green sewer pipes. But I also want to sleep on a waterbed in a red and black and white room. And I want to be Rebecca’s friend; she’s a sure ticket out of lonely lunches and empty weekends. And besides, she’s Rebecca. It’s hard to come up with a better explanation than that. Who wouldn’t want to be Rebecca Stewart’s best friend?

“Well,” I say. Rebecca grins and those perfect teeth and two little dimples that I’ve never noticed before completely convince me. “All right. Do it to me. Baby,” I add.

I take Barbie’s dress off the rest of the way. Rebecca wasn’t lying; it slips right off. I place Barbie’s hands on either side of Ken’s hips and pull. Down go the pants.

Rebecca gasps. “Nice,” she says. She sounds sincerely impressed with my improvisation. I’m impressed with myself, to be honest. Those pants came off so easily.

We inch the dolls closer to each other, slowly, hesitantly on my part. I’m uncertain, uncomfortable, but it’s all slowly becoming more exciting. I think we should stop, but I want to keep going. The butterflies in my stomach have migrated lower, and I imagine them tap dancing, wings spread like jazz hands. The inside of my skin tingles.

The dolls are face-to-face, nose-to-plastic-nose. The top of my bent head touches Rebecca’s. I think of my blonde hair mixing with her dark curls. Ken’s head touches Barbie’s. I put Barbie’s arms around Ken’s. We’re silent; I can hear Rebecca’s breath. Uneven. Husky. Ken slowly leans forward until he’s on top of Barbie. Rebecca rubs Ken up and down Barbie, their plastic parts clicking and clacking against one another. Rebecca moans.

“What?” I don’t know what I’m asking about, really, but the moan snapped me out of something.
“They’re having sex,” Rebecca says. She says it matter-of-factly, as though it’s something I should know. *Duh, Nicole,* her eyes say. *Maybe you and your stupid puppy pajamas should grow up a little bit.*

“Oh,” is all I say.

“You know how people have sex, right?”

“Of course I do,” I say, trying to sound knowledgeable. “It’s, like, so obvious. Of course I know.”

“Just checking,” Rebecca says. “I mean, you’re asking all these questions…”

“I know how people have sex,” I interrupt, and even after the word’s left my mouth, I can still taste it there, heavy. My eyes travel to Ken’s bottom half. The lines printed on his waist create the illusion that he’s wearing flesh-colored boxers. It occurs to me that I’ve never really considered what the bottom half of a boy looks like. I once saw my little cousin naked in the bathroom, but he was only six years old. I remember thinking that it looked like he had a deformed raisin between his legs. Anna’s told me about their parts and our parts, and how the parts fit together like puzzle pieces, but I’ve never actually thought about it. Now that I do, it all seems terribly uncomfortable.

Rebecca stands up. Her socks are pushed down to her ankles, and her knees are bright red from kneeling on the carpet. “Want to order pizza?”

“Sure,” I say. I’m both relieved and disappointed that it’s already dinnertime.

“What kind?”

“I like pepperoni,” I say.

“How about sausage and pineapple?”
It’s my first night at her house, and I don’t want to cause trouble so I just shrug. I figure I can pick the sausage off. And the pineapples.

“I’ll go ask my mom.” Rebecca’s skirt brushes against my cheek as she walks past me. She smells like school. I pick up the Barbie and slip the dress back on her. I pull her legs apart, one in front and one in back, so that she’s performing a split. Running my finger along the space between her legs, I think about how much easier things are for Barbie. No peeing. No, well, other stuff. I stroke the sleek, pink plastic. Flat. Closed. Simple.

Five weeks later, Rebecca and I have claimed an official Rebecca-and-Nicole cafeteria table. I’m staring at an orange lunch tray topped with questionable contents: a rubbery block of lasagna, a pile of too-yellow corn, a greasy butter roll, and a plastic bag of chocolate milk. I take the milk bag and stab at it with my straw.

“Penny Pollack’s carrying a purse today,” Rebecca says, nodding past me. I turn around and see Penny sitting by herself at a corner table, chewing on a sandwich, a paper bag to her left and a giant purse to her right. For a girl whose initials are P.P., she doesn’t do much to escape her fate. Her hair’s pulled back in a tight ponytail and topped with a really dorky barrette, the kind with big loopy ribbons glued to it. Her round glasses are almost off of her nose as she bends her head, reading a book. I squint, trying to see what she’s reading. Just a few weeks ago, I sat at the table next to her, reading Lord of the Flies; now, my books spend the lunch period stacked in my locker rather than tucked under my nose.
“Isn’t that where you used to sit?” Rebecca asks.

“Not really,” I say, tossing my dry straw on the tray. “Where’d you used to sit?”

“I kind of floated,” Rebecca says, pulling apart her butter roll. “I didn’t really have any table. Well, until now.” And then she smiles that thousand-watt smile, and I feel myself beam from head to toe. “I think she’s the first one,” Rebecca continues. “In our grade, I mean. I heard that a seventh grader got it last week in gym class, did you hear?”

It takes a minute, but I finally get what we’re talking about. “Poor P.P.,” I say, and Rebecca giggles. “My sister got it in eighth grade,” I continue. “She told me you can’t wear white pants when you’re on it.”

Rebecca takes a long drag of milk, bubbly noises coming from the almost empty bag. “I hope we get ours at the same time,” she says. “Then we’ll both be women. But if I have mine first, I’ll wait to tell anyone until you have yours. I wait for you, you wait for me. Deal?”

I look down at my lasagna block, at the red sauce crusted across the edges of my tray. I think to myself that girl is a prettier word than woman. It’s simpler, lighter. “Okay,” I say. “Deal.”

Later that afternoon, in Rebecca’s kitchen, we bake cookies and move on to more important topics, such as the one and only Cody Cameron.

“Cody’s such a dork,” Rebecca says, pouring chocolate chips into the bowl. “And he has a big nose.”

“Cody Cameron? I like his nose!” I reach across the counter and slide the bowl toward me. “It’s got character.”
“Character?” Rebecca laughs. “I don’t know anyone else who talks like you, Nicks.”

Rebecca started calling me Nicks last week. Our sleepovers have become frequent, and they’re always at her house. The agenda is consistent but never dull: go to Rebecca’s room, play Dirty Barbie, order pizza, bake something, watch a movie, play Dirty Barbie, go to sleep. It’s an art.

We spoon the dough onto cookie sheets and slide the pans into the oven. Rebecca sets a timer. “I’m getting married and having three kids,” she says. She wraps her lips around the wooden spoon and sucks the raw cookie dough.

“I want two,” I tell her. “One of each. Hey, maybe we’ll both get married and live on the same street.”

“That would be amazing!” Rebecca says. She throws the spoon into the sink.

Mrs. Cody Cameron, I think to myself. Mrs. Nicole Cameron.

“Mrs. Rebecca Cameron,” Rebecca says. “Actually, that doesn’t sound so bad.”

I stare at her. “Dr. and Mrs. Cameron,” she continues. “No, wait: Dr. and Dr. Cameron! And then you can marry Javier Hernandez and we can live next door to each other and get pregnant at the exact same time so that our kids grow up together and be best friends. Just like us!”

“Just like us.” Javier Hernandez smells like old feet. I want to claw Dr. Rebecca Cameron’s eyes right out of their sockets.

“Wanna go to my room?” I’m not surprised when she leaves the kitchen without waiting for my response. I slide off the stool and follow. Rebecca closes the door after me and sits on the bed. “Let’s play something different,” she says. “I’m tired of Barbies.”
“Whatever.” I suddenly feel cranky.

“Let’s play husband and wife,” she suggests.

Sometimes Rebecca sounds so childish. “Whatever,” I say.

“You can be the wife.” Rebecca leans back on her elbows. “Come here, honey,” she says. The Ken voice is something I’ve gotten used to, but it seems different when there’s no doll in her hands. I walk to the bed and wait at the edge, silent. I count the freckles on Rebecca’s nose. One, two.

“What’s wrong?” Rebecca asks. “Do you feel okay?”

“Do I feel okay?” Four, five.

“Why are you asking me?”

I roll my eyes.


I plop onto the bed, hoping I puncture it. Then water will spill out and flood the room, and Rebecca and I can just float away from each other. And yet, just as I’m thinking this, the familiar *slosh, slosh* comforts me. I decide the Cody Cameron thing isn’t such a big deal. “I brought the book I told you about,” I say. “The one with the pirates.”

“You’re sleeping,” she says, ignoring me. “And I just got home from work.”

“Okay, boss.” I lie down and close my eyes. Waves ripple beneath me as Rebecca crawls across the bed. I stick the side of my nose into the sheets. They smell sweet, like vanilla pudding. Rebecca kisses me on the cheek. “I’m home, Honey,” she mumbles in my ear.

“It’s about time,” I say.
“I missed you today.” She lies by my side and puts a hand on my shoulder. “Why won’t you look at me?”

“I think you’re cheating on me,” I spit out.

“Never.” Rebecca presses against me, and I feel her barely-developed breasts against my shoulder blades. Her whispers tickle my ear and send vibrations through my neck. I feel very, very warm.

“Turn around,” she whispers.

I turn, and I’m looking straight into Rebecca’s eyes. They’re green, so green, and I can see every single freckle on her nose. I want to hate her. She stole my future husband, and she’s bossy, and her cookies aren’t even half as good as she thinks they are. And I’m sick of eating strange pizzas. I want to jump off that bed and find a new best friend, one who respects marriage and eats pepperoni.

But I’ve never been this close to Rebecca before. I’ve never been this close to anyone. Her hand caresses my arm and makes its way to my left breast. It squeezes. Geez, I’m warm.

“I love you,” she says. Her breath smells like cookie dough.

“I love you too,” I say, only it’s more of a whisper, and I know, right then, that I can’t kick the habit. We press against each other. I rub; she tickles. I feel her teeth touch my skin, and I pull away.

“Cookies are probably almost done,” she says.

“Those are some fast cookies,” I say. Grinning, she puts a hand on either side of my head and presses her body into mine. While the cookies burn, Rebecca explores me. At that moment, I want nothing more than to be discovered.
Once we’ve crossed that line, there’s no going back. We both know this. We don’t need the Barbies anymore. We’ve learned that we can bend, move, and direct each other just as well, if not better. Like the Barbies, we keep it on a surface level, as though there are no messy openings, no flesh. Just girls.

Since that first night, we’ve spent a significant amount of time in the waterbed, playing different games that neither of us will ever tell anyone about. That’s what we promised. We pricked our pinkies with the backs of our matching silver hoop earrings and swore to be best friends forever. We’ve also vowed that we’ll never tell anyone about our secret play dates. We didn’t need to mix blood for that one; it was, is, unspoken.

It’s become an addiction. The waterbed. The pudding sheets. The red, red walls. When we’re at school or at the mall she’s just Rebecca Stewart, my best friend. We gossip about boys, play freeze tag at recess, and sample bright shades of lip-gloss until our mouths are stained like berries. We listen to pop CDs and argue over what movie to see, a horror flick or a romantic comedy. Rebecca likes thrills; I want happy endings.

My stomach feels jumbled, confused, as I sit next to Rebecca in the cold, shaky Art trailer at school. My head feels like it’s about to explode into a thousand messy pieces right there on the table. I rub my stomach. Maybe I’ll throw up instead.

I’m about to pass Rebecca a note about the third L’s horrible new haircut when I feel something between my legs. I crumple the note and stuff it in my sweater pocket. I
raise my hand; when Mrs. Jackson looks my way, I motion toward the back of the trailer. She looks annoyed but she nods, and I slowly stand up.

“Where are you going?” Rebecca whispers.

“Bathroom,” I hiss. I walk quickly to the back, keeping my thighs as close together as possible. As soon as I reach the bathroom, I back in and shut the door.

Pull down. Look down. A bloody rose field. I wish I were ignorant enough to think I had simply injured myself or had some rare Chinese virus. I think of Penny Pollack and her giant purse.

I bend down, my braids dangling near my chin. The pink ribbons I tied at the ends tickle my cheeks. For the first time, I notice tiny little hairs sprouting like coarse weeds. I try to pluck one off and it hurts. With two fingers and toilet paper, I press the slit between my legs. I press until it hurts and then I press some more. Close. Close. Stop. Wait.

I leave the bathroom, closing the door quietly behind me. Faintly, I hear an old voice praise the Sistine Chapel. I creep back to my place by Rebecca. She gives me a look, and I shrug. She hands me a note. I unfold it. *Nicks - A wet cat died on L3’s head! LOL!* Suddenly, I don’t find Lauren’s new haircut so funny, or even terribly interesting. I want Rebecca to know this. I want to grab her hair, yank her head down, and make her see what’s happening to me, but I know what that would mean.

“Meow,” I whisper instead, and I giggle with my best friend until Mrs. Jackson hushes us. And this, this is the plan. I’ll ignore the roses and pretend. Pretend we’re both girls until we’re both women. Pretend so we can play Barbies and swim in a waterbed. Pretend that I can wait. Pretend we all have plastic parts.
Alex wondered:

1. If the party would end with cake.
2. If the spinning bottle would stop on her.
3. If yesterday’s bruises were purple yet.

It was Amy Jo Henson’s fourteenth birthday, and she’d decided to have a party while her parents were out of town. This blew Alex’s mind. She couldn’t imagine her mother and Leo, her mother’s boyfriend, leaving her alone with only a grandparent while they went on a trip. But Amy Jo came from a different type of family, the kind with two parents, nightly family dinners, and a grandmother who trusted her granddaughter so much that she let her have a boy/girl party downstairs while she, granny, watched movies upstairs. So here they were, nine girls and eight boys, gathered in a circle in Amy Jo’s basement, spinning a bottle.

Most of Alex’s class had already played Spin-the-Bottle. Alex hadn’t, but she’d heard what the game was all about. If anyone asked her, she’d say that she’d played before, sure, loads of times. This game, though, was different. Regular Spin-the-Bottle, from what she’d heard, was kids’ stuff. This was Super-Spin-the-Bottle, a game that meant more than kissing. If you spun the bottle, you had to go into the closet with whoever it pointed at, and you had ten minutes to do whatever you wanted.
The bottle spun, spun, spun, and it landed on Kevin, a boy with dark curls. The redhead girl who spun the bottle – Lauren – stood up and giggled. The other girls giggled with her. The boys nudged each other and laughed. Lauren and Kevin walked into the closet, and everyone crowded around the door to listen. Not Alex. She already had an idea of what sorts of things went on in the darkness of closed doors. She tucked her knees and watched the girls giggle, and she wondered if she’d giggle, too, if she were that sort of girl.

Ten minutes later, Lauren and Kevin walked out of the closet. Alex looked at Lauren and wondered why she didn’t look any different. The circle reappeared as though it had never disbanded, as though Alex’s classmates had been trained to return to their spots. Like sheep, or soldiers.

Alex could think of a few other games she’d rather play:

1. Yahtzee
2. Trivial Pursuit
3. Monopoly

Paul Williams, with his floppy hair and freckles, crawled to the center of the circle and laid his hand on the bottle. His shoulders, like a coat hanger, reminded her of Leo’s. She shifted. With one quick movement, the bottle spun. She watched and counted the times it passed her up – 1, 2, 3 – liking the sound of glass against the hardwood floor. The mouth
of the bottle slowed until it stopped, right before it skipped her for the fourth time. It stared her down. Giggles and laughs.

“All right,” Paul said, standing up. He motioned like a quarterback trying to quiet the home crowd. He walked to Alex and held out his hand. “Let’s go,” he said, and she took his hand and walked with him to the closet, her heart punching her chest like a boxer. The others followed, though they were quieter. Paul had the ability to make people do what he told them to do.

Alex hoped her hands weren’t too sweaty. Paul’s hands were dry, and big, and she let her thumb touch the hairy part of his wrist. She wondered, quietly, what he would say if he felt underneath her sweater, if he’d detect the bruises simply by touching her skin.

“We’re supposed to make out,” Paul said. His hair flopped over his eyes, so it was hard for Alex to see exactly where he was looking. If he was looking into her eyes or if he was staring at her teacup breasts. He inched closer to her and pressed his hands on her shoulders. He pressed and pressed until she found herself kneeling on the floor. He reached over and flipped the light switch. Black cloaked over them. She heard him kneel in front of her, felt his breath near her face. She thought of being on the beach, like last summer when Leo treated her and her mother to a weekend vacation. He could do nice things, sometimes. In the closet, Alex thinks of standing in the sand, face tilted, feeling the wind on her face without exactly knowing where it came from: water, or air, or both.

“Okay,” Paul said. “I think we should kiss.”

He said it practically, as though they were painting a homecoming banner and someone had asked what paint to use for the lettering. “I think we should use red,” he might say, and then red paint would be used, and everyone would love it because Paul
was the sort of boy whose decisions always received praise, whose choices were never questioned.

Alex’s mother sometimes let her watch movies like *Dirty Dancing* and *Ghost*. Alex thought Patrick Swayze might make a good boyfriend; any man who enjoyed dancing and pottery was okay by her. And yet, those movies were the extent of her kissing experience. Even when Leo visited her bedroom at night – when he whispered, hotly, “Let’s play a game” – there wasn’t any kissing. So Alex did what she’d learned to do in uncomfortable situations: play pretend. She reached her hand out in the dark, found Paul’s knee, and squeezed. It worked. She felt his hand fumble across her lap, slide up her thigh, and, finally, cup around her hip.

“Are you a good kisser?” he asked, and she thought she could feel his lips near her nose. She wondered how he could find her in the dark. How it was possible for him to know exactly where he was going when she was completely lost.

“Kevin says you don’t like boys,” Paul continued. His voice sounded different to Alex, different from the voice she knew of the Paul who borrowed pencils from her in science class. The Paul who had asked if she liked baseball, who stood next to her desk and talked to her about the American League for six whole minutes. She knew; she counted.

“He said you don’t like anything,” Paul continued. “Is that true?”

She felt his hands move up her body, to her shoulders, to her chin, to the back of her head. Then, out of the darkness, she felt his lips on hers, and for a moment she thought, *I don’t know what to do, I don’t know what to do.* But then she remembered that
the game was pretend – it was easy to pretend – and suddenly she was the greatest kisser in the world. She kissed him back.

She focused on the wetness. It was very wet, this kiss, and Alex wondered if kisses were always this wet or if it was just this boy who kissed in such a wet, wet way. She realized, with some horror, that his tongue was in her mouth, and she tried not to think of the guacamole dip he’d eaten with such abandon just twenty minutes before. Instead, she mirrored all of his actions. When he put his hand on her hip, she put her hand on his hip. When he placed another hand on her back, she placed a hand on the back of his neck. His fingers danced.

Then, Paul pulled away, and the kissing stopped. She felt his breath on her face; the hand on her back; the walls of the closet all around her. 1, 2, 3, 4. She felt the rows of coats to her left and the rows of sweaters to the right. She smelled moth balls, detergent, and shoe polish. She sensed the door behind her and the light crack beneath it. She knew her own hand against his body, felt him breathing, up and down and up and down.

“You’re a good kisser,” Paul said.

Alex smiled, even though she knew he wouldn’t see. Or maybe because he wouldn’t see. She thought of saying something, but then he asked, “Can I feel you?”

She wasn’t used to being asked. She knew, even before his hands found her inner thighs, what was coming. And she thought of saying no, she thought of standing up, but she wanted to know if it would be different. If having been asked and having given permission would make it better. She was sure Patrick Swayze would be the sort to ask.

She remained perfectly still as he lifted her skirt. Dark. She felt fumbling, then pushing, and then it was nothing but the familiar pressure, his face still in hers, his breath
still hitting her face. She focused on that, on the noises he made. On his thumb against the
bruises on her inner thigh. Usually, she focused on the neat row of shoes lined under her
bedroom window: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. Sneakers, loafers, flip flops, dress shoes, rain boots. And
when Leo would laugh later, at a joke on television, she somehow always thought back to
the shoes, heels touching heels and toes touching toes.

This time was, as she’d suspected, different.

“How was it?” Paul asked, when he’d finished. He asked the question as though
what he really wanted to know wasn’t whether she’d enjoyed it, but whether he’d been
any good at it. The insecurity in his voice touched her; she wanted to hug him.

Alex could think of a few things she’d never tell Paul:

1. It was almost nice.
2. I’ve never been asked that before.
3. I like you.

There was a loud knock on the door, so loud that it shook the small closet. “Three
minutes,” a voice yelled. Alex heard Paul shift, probably so that he could sit back.

“Man,” he said, “this is a dark closet.”

Alex nodded.

“You don’t talk much, do you?” Paul asked.

Alex cleared her throat.
“Are you a mute?”

She narrowed her eyes and looked in his direction.

“Well, obviously you aren’t,” Paul said. “I mean, I’ve heard you speak in class before. And we’ve talked before, haven’t we?”

He sounded genuinely curious, as though he really didn’t understand why a person might be so quiet. He was, after all, the sort of boy who never stopped talking.

“Yeah,” Alex said. Her voice sounded strange in the dark, and even though she knew she was speaking, it still sounded as though the words were coming from somewhere else. “Yeah, we’ve talked.”

“About baseball,” Paul said.

“About the Yankees,” Alex said.

“You’ve got Tino written all over your notebook.”

“I like Tino.”

“You think he’s cute?”

“I think he’s a good ballplayer.”

There was another knock on the door, before Alex had time to keep the conversation going. She heard Paul stand up. When he turned on the light, Alex noticed hair sprouting on his chin.

Paul opened the door, to the boys and girls waiting to find out what had happened. Kevin poked his head in and looked at the ground, surveying, Alex supposed, the damage. She stared back at him.

Paul stepped over Alex, his straight shoulders pointing up and away from her. He put an arm around Kevin, and Alex heard him mumble something in Kevin’s ear,
something that made both boys laugh. She knelt on the floor until Amy Jo came in and pulled her up.

“Was it fun?” Amy Jo whispered into Alex’s ear.

What Alex could have done: Alex could have giggled. Alex could have lowered her chin and smiled, answering without any words. Or Alex could have spoken. She could have whispered, Yes. She could have whispered, No. She could have pulled Amy Jo close and said, in a voice just loud enough for the rest of the group to hear, “He was really pretty awful.” She could have done these things and said these words, if she were that sort of girl.
I’ve read that when a person drowns, he experiences a brief moment of euphoria right before death. The reason for this reaction is unclear. Forensic pathologists focus on the amount of water in the lungs; psychologists focus on the body’s supposed return to the womb; I focus on the death, because that’s what is. He is no longer here to hunt bees with me, or to catch tadpoles in water-filled paper cups. He isn’t here to race me down Monkey Hill, or to tackle me when I’ve almost beaten him down to the grassy bottom. Not that we did those things anymore; we’d grown too old for that. But, still, if CJ showed up at my door – dry, alive, and three months older – I might grab his arm and drag him to the playground, just so we could collect those little yellow weeds that we always called flowers, or so that we could play Justice League and eventually fight over the virtues of Aquaman. We’d fight and then forgive, dangling our feet in the lake’s waters while tilting our heads up and picking out animal-shaped clouds.

It’s the first day of tenth grade, just a few months after CJ left me. After what happened with CJ, my father pulled me out of the public school and placed me in a co-ed private school, complete with uniforms. My father had to deal with memories of my mother after she died, when I was three. He had to eat in the kitchen where she used to pack him lunches for work; he had to read on the couch where she used to sit next to him, her head nestled on his shoulder; he had to sleep in that bed. He doesn’t want that for me, but what
he doesn’t understand is that I want the memories. At least in the memories, I know my place.

Here, though, I don’t have a place. So I sit under a tree, drinking lemonade out of a bottle, a peanut butter sandwich balanced on my knee. I’m not hungry.

I open the book at my side. *A Separate Peace*. Only the first day, and I already have homework. I start reading; I’m almost ready to turn the page when a shadow falls over the words. I look up.

“Hi,” I say to the face I can’t quite see. The sun shines behind the person’s head, so that all I see is darkness.

“Mackenzie, right?” The figure squats down so that I can now see it’s Chris Hart, a boy that I’ve only heard called by his last name. He wears a basketball letter jacket even though it’s hot. He nods toward the book on the grass.

“Whatcha reading?” he asks.

“Homework,” I say. His eyes are green, sort of like CJ’s. Only CJ’s had more blue in them. Maybe CJ’s eyes were blue. It scares me that I’m already forgetting these things.

Hart’s eyes – the ones that may or may not match CJ’s – curve into crescent moons when he smiles. “It’s the first day,” he says, and I look down at my book.

“Yeah,” I say.

He sits next to me, and out the corner of my eye I can see him resting back on his elbows. “Not hungry?” he asks.

My peanut butter sandwich feels heavy on my knee. “Have my sandwich,” I say.

“What?”
“My sandwich,” I say. “You can have it.”

“Okay.” Hart’s fingertips graze my knee as he takes the sandwich.

I stand up, brushing my skirt with the backs of my hands. I pick up my book and my lemonade and leave Hart under the tree.

Of the night CJ died, these are the things I know: I know it was warm. I know there was a breeze. I know that it was eighty-five degrees on the South Shore, seventy-nine degrees on the North Shore. I know that I was wearing a Blur T-shirt and new blue jeans whose hems covered the tops of my black Chuck Taylors. I know that my stomach twisted into pretzels when my date, Sean O’Connor, picked me up at my house, and I know that my father wanted to pull him into the living room and interrogate him. I know the questions my father wanted to ask: what are your life plans, what does your father do for a living, what do you plan on doing with my daughter? I know what Sean’s answers would have been: I want to play music, my father owns three McDonald’s, I plan on taking your daughter for burgers and a movie. I know that all but one of these answers would have been honest. I know that when Sean and I went to the party – the one CJ wasn’t invited to, the one I didn’t tell him about – I drank the first beer that Sean handed me, and my head swam fuzzy after I drank the second one. I know that I followed Sean outside, and I know that I followed him onto the grass, and I know that he was my first kiss, my very first, and I know that even as I let him fish beneath Blur, I thought, Shouldn’t this be CJ?

These are the things I don’t know: I don’t know what time CJ went down to the lake. I don’t know if he thought we were meeting down there, or if he was hoping I’d
meet him down there, or if he wanted to be by himself. I don’t know if he’d found out about the party. I don’t know why he slipped into the water. I don’t even know if he stepped in, or dove, or was pushed. I don’t know if he felt warm, or cold, or flashes of both. I don’t know if he thought of me. I don’t.

After school, I walk across the parking lot to stand on the corner and wait for my father to pick me up. Upperclassmen peel out of the lot in sports cars and SUVs, birthday gifts from rich parents. Hart stands next to a blue Chevy Cavalier, waiting for his friends. His backpack is slung over both shoulders like a kindergartner. This makes me want to smile. He sees me and waves. I walk, fast, and I don’t stop until I get to the corner. A stray dog, a black and white mutt, walks up to me and sits at my feet.

“Sorry,” I tell it. “No food.”

It stares at me, its dark eyes wide. “Sorry,” I repeat, and I know that people will think I’m crazy, standing here and talking to this dog, but I don’t care. His eyes won’t leave me. “Next time,” I tell him. “Next time. Tomorrow. I promise.”

The dog lies at my feet and stays there until my father pulls up in his truck. I throw my bags in the back and hop into the cab.

“How was your first day?” my dad asks.

“Fine,” I say, and from the way he looks at me, I know he knows it wasn’t fine. And I know he wants to say something, but we aren’t really that sort of father and daughter. So we drive in silence until we get home.

***
CJ and I used to have marathon sleepovers. He’d sleep at my house, and I’d sleep at his, and then we’d go back to my house. We’d repeat the cycle until our parents had enough of ordering pizzas and rolling out sleeping bags. Up until sixth grade, we spent our summers connected at the hip. At the end of the day, we’d lie next to each other and talk about our classmates, our parents, our plans. CJ wanted to be a veterinarian; I wanted to be a chemist. One night, I said that I would create a formula to make animals live forever.

“Awesome,” he said. We were nine years old. I was wrapped in my Supergirl sleeping bag, with only my head sticking out. I could see CJ’s head, too, but that was it. Everything else was hidden by puffy cloth.

“Yeah,” I whispered, trying to make out his features in the dark. “And then no more animals will get sick, and we won’t lose pets.”

CJ answered this with silence, and I thought it was because his hamster, Jeff Gordon, had died a few weeks ago. True, he’d gotten a new hamster a week later, but I knew it was hard to replace something he loved that much. Jeff Gordon II was cool, but he wasn’t Jeff Gordon.

Just as I was about to apologize for my insensitivity, CJ said, “But, Mac, if you cure all the animals, then I’ll be out of a job.”

He had a point. So then we talked about animals and sports and video games until the conversation became one-sided, and until both of us simply stopped talking and fell into a happy silence.

We were adventurous, too. There was a tree between our bedroom windows, and we’d hop from our rooms, to the tree, and back, like monkeys. We never thought of falling. Once, we went to a house down the street where an old woman lived. Everyone in
school thought she was a witch, but CJ was pretty sure she was just old. So we snuck into her backyard, through a loose fence board, and watched as she ate her dinner in front of a television where Vanna White spun letters.

“Witches don’t eat soup and watch Wheel of Fortune,” I said.

“No,” he said, “but lonely people do.”

Most often – especially in the summer – we’d go down to the lake and race one another. Nine times out of ten, he won. CJ was a good swimmer, small and lean, and fast. Our parents warned us not to go down there, but we didn’t listen. We believed we were born with the ability to run, to jump, to swim; we believed we were born with the unnatural ability to do these things fast, easy, and without effort or consequence. We were Mac and CJ; we were Batman and Supergirl; we were, for all we knew, superheroes.

Sometimes, I wonder if it was like this:

CJ called my house.

My father answered.

“Hey,” CJ said. “Is Mac home?”

“Sorry,” my father said. “She just left.”


CJ hung up the phone, wondered for a moment where I might be, then decided that he’d talk to me the next day. He didn’t want to talk to me about anything important; he was just going to ask if he could borrow a CD. He sat on his bed and thought about

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doing some homework. Then he remembered that he didn’t have any homework, because it was the end of the school year. It seemed weird, not having homework. He felt like he should be doing something. What should he be doing?

*The lake,* he thought. *I’ll go down to the lake.* He hadn’t been there without me in a while. Had he ever been there without me? He racked his brain and realized that he hadn’t. Now seemed as good a time as any. He grabbed a flashlight, yelled to his parents that he was meeting me at the movies, and walked down to the lake.

He didn’t see the man until it was too late. It was dark by the lake, no lights, so by the time the man was at CJ, there was nowhere to go.

“Hey,” the man said. “You got any money?”

“No,” CJ said. “Sorry.”

“Any money,” the man said. “I’m trying to get a U-Haul truck for my wife and my kids. We don’t have anywhere to go.”

CJ didn’t understand how a U-Haul truck was going to help. “I’m sorry,” he said.

“You have no money?” The man eyed CJ in a way that now made CJ nervous.

“I gotta go,” CJ said. “I’m sorry.”

“Bullshit.” The man pulled a knife out of his pocket, or his shirt, or even his pants. CJ couldn’t tell; it was so dark. But there it was, a knife, and it was pointing at CJ’s stomach. “Give me what you got,” the man said.

CJ didn’t think about how quick it would be for the knife to slice straight through his skin. He didn’t wonder, in his usual analytical way, whether he’d hear his bones cracking. He said, “I don’t have any money.”

When I think of it happening this way, I don’t get past that part.
When my father drops me off at school the next day, the dog is standing on the corner, looking at me. “Well,” I say, “hello.”

The dog, I swear, winks.

I let my bag drop to the ground, and the dog starts nosing it. “Hold on,” I say. I open the bag and pull out my lunch, a turkey sandwich. “Here,” I say, tossing him half. He jumps up and grabs it with a large chomp.


Scraps winks in approval.

I walk across the parking lot, my eyes on my feet. The laces of my saddle oxfords are undone; with each step, they slap against the pavement. When I reach the courtyard, I sit next to the fountain and pull out A Separate Peace. For today, we’re supposed to have read up to chapter five; I spent most of last night reading, so I’m almost done with the book. I wonder why Gene and Finny don’t just forgive one another, and I wonder why teachers assign fifteen-year-olds such depressing books.

Groups of students pass me as I read, and some are in my classes, so they wave, and I nod my head back. One, a mousy girl in my geometry class, stops and tries to start a conversation. “Hey, Mackenzie,” she says.

“Hi,” I say. Is her name Judy? Jodie?

“Wow,” she says. “You read a lot.”

“Yeah,” I say. “I guess so.” Julia?
“Are you going to the Back-to-School dance?” Judy/Jodie/Julia cocks her head in a way that makes her look like a spaniel. “We’re going to eat at Applebee’s beforehand. You want to come?”

The last thing I want to do is go to a dance. CJ and I boycotted most school functions at the public school. It was one of the things that kept us friends: a general contempt for forced social fun. I liked dance nights, because then CJ would come over to my house, and we’d pop popcorn and watch old movies together. As this girl babbles about dresses and Applebee’s onion rings, I think of CJ and how he tried to recreate one of the dances from Swing Time. CJ liked Fred Astaire; I preferred Gene Kelly. And then I remember how I forced him to learn the “Moses Supposes” dance from Singin’ in the Rain, and how he really could dance, and well. As I think of these things, I suddenly feel my throat closing up and my eyes welling, so I focus on Judy/Jodie/Julia’s nose, the tip of which moves slightly when she speaks.

“If you don’t have a date,” she says, “you can take my brother, Douglas.”

The bell saves me from having to answer.

Three months ago, it was May, and it was hot. CJ propped himself up on one elbow and raised the other arm above his head. A patch of skin peeked between shirt and shorts, and I fizzed like soda. We were on my bed, flipping channels on the television. When a pretty blonde with red lips flashed across the screen, I told him to stop.

“Wait. Wait.” He sat up, offended. “When did you start watching soap operas? Where is Mac, and what have you done with her?”
“I just need to know if Evan found out that Winston’s her baby daddy,” I said.

“Did you just say ‘baby daddy’?” He tossed the remote toward me and lay back down. “Who’s that guy talking to Evan?”

“New Winston,” I said.

“What happened to Old Winston?”

“Old Winston,” I informed CJ, “disappeared sometime last week.”

“Is Old Winston coming back?”

For someone who hated soap operas, CJ certainly seemed invested in Old Winston’s fate. “I don’t know,” I said. “It doesn’t matter, though, because it’s the same character. So just shut up and get used to him.”

CJ hopped off the bed. “I’m going outside.”

“Well, wait,” I said. “I’ll come too.”

He left the room without responding. I stood up and smoothed my hair back into its ponytail. Before leaving the room, I turned off the television and snuck a look in the mirror.

At the lake, CJ and I sat with our feet in the water for a while, not really talking. I lifted my foot out of the lake. I watched, patient, as the thin sheen of water atop my foot disappeared, leaving wet patches like clouds. I tapped my heel against the water’s surface, and for a moment I imagined it was solid, that I could stand up and walk right across the lake, straight to the horizon.

“It’s smooth,” I said.

CJ nodded.

“The water,” I continued. “It’s like you could walk on it.”
“I don’t think I’d want to walk on water,” CJ said.

I dropped my right foot into the water and lifted the left. “Why not?”

“I just wouldn’t.”

“It’s like flying.” I wiggled my toes. “Who wouldn’t want to fly if given the chance?”

“It’s different.” CJ rubbed his nose. “If we could walk on water, then that would change the definition of water. The whole point is that you can’t touch it without somehow breaking, or entering, or whatever. You know?”

I didn’t. For a moment, I thought it might be worthwhile to point a flashlight in his ear, just so I could see how his brain worked. I always imagined brains ticking like clocks, but maybe CJ’s was silent. I wanted to ask him if this was true; I wanted to ask him what he meant by the definition of water; I wanted to ask him so many things, because he always seemed so much smarter than me. But if I asked, then I’d look stupid. We were supposed to be equals.

At lunch, I resume my spot by the tree, but I don’t read. Instead, I eat the other half of my turkey sandwich – the one I didn’t give to Scraps – and I observe lunch groups filled with people who have found their places. Near the cafeteria, there’s a group of girls sitting, cross-legged, in a circle. Five out of six are blonde. Instead of eating, they braid each other’s hair and lie with their backs propped up on their book bags, rolling up their shirtsleeves and pushing their skirts up past their thighs so that they can tan. A few feet from them is a mixed group of boys and girls, most of whom are wearing black nail
polish and thick eyeliner. And across from them, near the fountain, are the jocks. Hart sits with them, but I notice that he isn’t talking to the other guys. He’s reading a book, and I can’t tell what it is, but it looks about the same size as the one at my side.

Maybe Hart feels me watching him because he looks up, spots me, and smiles. Crescent moons. He lifts up the book, and I see that it’s *A Separate Peace*. I pick up my book and hold it up to him. He starts to nod his head, but one of his buddies nudges him and grabs his attention. I open my book and start to read.

CJ and I sat by the lake a few weeks before ninth grade winter formal. It was chilly. No. Cold. I wore a red scarf that I knew CJ liked. I wanted him to offer me his black jacket, but I knew he wouldn’t. He didn’t think of those things; maybe he would have if I were a different girl, a girl he hadn’t known since first grade.

“Are you going to the dance?” he asked.

I shrugged. “I’d have to wear a dress.”

“You could wear a suit,” CJ said. When I didn’t laugh with him, he nudged my arm. “What,” he said, “you don’t think that’s funny?”

I said nothing.

“What?” he asked again.

“Nothing,” I said. Then, “I wouldn’t wear a suit.”

“I’ll wear a dress if you wear a suit.”

“Yeah,” I said, “okay.” We sat in silence, and then I decided I would go to the dance and I would wear a nice dress. I wanted a dress that would show CJ that I was
actually a girl. Not Supergirl, or Batgirl, but a girl who could wear a dress and heels and a French twist. It would be like in a movie, when the leading man discovers that his best friend is beautiful.

“If I go,” I said, “I’ll wear a green dress.”

“That’s festive,” CJ said. “You’ll look like a Christmas tree.”

I stood up.

“Where are you going?” CJ asked.

As I walked away I said, “Home,” and I think he yelled something after me, but I can’t remember what it was. I just remember the heat on my cheeks as I walked away, how I suddenly didn’t feel cold anymore.

We went to the dance and stayed for one hour, then we went home to watch movies. I wore a green dress and a French twist, and he said nothing.

Tonight, as I’m puzzling over geometry in my bedroom, my father knocks on the door and pokes his head in.

“There’s a boy on the phone for you,” he says. “Some Heart kid. Why does he call himself that? What does that mean?”

“It’s his last name,” I say. “That’s what it means.”

“Well,” my dad says, holding up the phone, “take this.”

“I’m doing homework,” I tell him.

“He says he needs help with homework,” my father says. “Geometry.”
Hart isn’t even taking Geometry. I hold my hand out. My father holds the phone out. We stare at each other for a moment. I roll off of my bed and walk to the door.

“Thanks,” I say, taking the phone.

My dad looks around with the expression of a person who hasn’t been in a teenage girl’s room recently. It occurs to me that my father hasn’t been in here since CJ left. He steps in, looks at a framed photo collage. I put the phone to my ear, and I hear Hart breathing on the other end. My dad steps closer to the collage, studies a photo of me and CJ wearing party hats.

“Dad,” I say.

He walks back into the hallway. “Not too long,” he says.

I kick the bottom of the door to make sure it’s shut. “Hey,” I say into the phone.

“Hey, Mackenzie.” I like the way Hart’s voice sounds in my ear.

“My dad said you have a geometry question,” I say.

“Yeah,” Hart says. “Yeah, I didn’t know if you could have guys call your house, so I figured I’d tell him I needed homework help.”

“Why geometry?”

“He asked me what subject.”

“Wow.”

“And then he wanted to know what specific part of geometry.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah.” Hart clears his throat. “I said something about theorems.”

“That was smart.” I sit on my bed, and I wonder if Hart is sitting on his bed. I wonder what his bedroom looks like. I wonder if it looks anything like CJ’s room,
covered with sports posters. I wonder if Hart, like CJ, has a Playboy stash hidden in his underwear drawer. I got to those before his mom cleaned out his room so that she wouldn’t know he had them. Now they’re in my closet, stacked under a pile of sweaters.

“The real reason I called,” Hart says, “is that I wanted to ask you something.”

“Something unrelated to geometry,” I say.

“Uh, yeah.”

“Okay.” I twirl my hair with one finger then realize that I’m twirling my hair, and also that I’m lying on my stomach, knees bent and feet up. And I get a mental picture of myself as a ‘50s teenager, so I sit up.

“There’s a dance,” Hart says. Heat flushes my face. “And I was thinking,” he continues, “that, if you wanted to – I mean I don’t know if you like dances, if it’s your thing – but I was wondering, if you did want to go to this one, if maybe you’d like to go.” I listen to him breathe. “With me,” he adds. “I mean with me. Going with me.”

The silence is awful. I don’t know how to break it. I don’t know if I want him to break it. All I can think about is myself in a green dress and CJ dancing in my bedroom, using an umbrella as a cane. I don’t know what to say; I don’t know what I want to say; I want to cry.

“I have to tell you,” Hart says, “that I didn’t expect this much silence.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, and I hang up. I tell myself that I don’t want him to call back, so that when he doesn’t, I won’t be disappointed.

I go downstairs to return the phone to its cradle. My father sits in his chair, his back to me. He’s facing the television; a loud reality show is on. Women are screaming at each other, and one starts pulling the other’s hair out. I walk up behind him. I look over
his shoulder and see that he isn’t watching TV at all; he’s looking at a photo album with pictures of me as a little girl. Me in pigtails, wearing a pink dress; me in pigtails, wearing denim overalls; me in pigtails, wearing Sloppy Joe all over my face. He’s so intent on the photos that he doesn’t notice me behind him. I stay for a few pages, watching the slow way that he flips them, noticing which photos he lingers on, which photos he touches. When he gets to a page where CJ appears, I leave the room.

Sometimes, I imagine that it went something like this:

CJ called my house.

My father answered the phone.

“Hey,” CJ said. “Is Mac home?”

“No,” my father said. “I’m sorry. She just went out.”

“Oh.” CJ thought about this for a moment. Then, “Out?”

“On a date,” my father said. “Some boy. Sean.”

“Sean?”

“A friend from school. Don’t you know him?”

“Well,” CJ said, “thanks.”

CJ hung up the phone and looked around his bedroom. He stared at his Mario Andretti poster for a solid two minutes. Then he grabbed a flashlight, yelled to his parents that he was going to meet me at the movies, and left for the lake.
He was angry; he was jealous; that’s why, when he walked to the steps, he didn’t realize they were wet. And so he slipped and fell, and hit his head, and then there was water, just water, and he didn’t even feel it. He didn’t even know it was happening.

The next morning, I bring Scraps a whole bag full of turkey. I sit on the corner with him as he eats the meat off the sidewalk. For the first time, I reach my hand out and pet him. His fur feels softer than I expected.

“Are you running a racket here?” I ask him. “Do other girls feed you, too?”

Scraps answers by licking the sidewalk.

“I think you’re playing me,” I say, patting him on the head.

Cars pull up to the curb, and students spill out. Some of them kiss their parents when they leave; others completely ignore them, as though they’ve just taken a cab to school. I try to remember whether I usually kiss my father. I think that maybe I should start.

Judy/Jodie/Julia walks up and sets her bag down next to me. I notice that her bag is embroidered with white thread: Jenny. “Hi, Jenny,” I say.

“Hey, Mackenzie!” She sits next to me, eyeing Scraps. “Ew,” she says. “What’s that dog eating?”

“Turkey,” I say, thinking that she really looks more like a Jodie.

“You really shouldn’t sit so close to a stray,” she tells me. “He could have rabies.”

I pet Scraps. Jenny yelps.

“He’s fine,” I say.
“You shouldn’t sit so close to a stray,” Jenny repeats, and she stands up and hoists her bag on her shoulder. “See you in class.”

“Sure,” I say, then decide that I don’t want to go to class. I want to sit on the corner with Scraps. I could read; he could lick the sidewalk. I begin to wonder if my teachers would notice I was gone. I wonder if anyone would see me on the corner and ask what I was doing. The thought of being outside while the school day goes on without me suddenly becomes very appealing.

The idea becomes much less appealing an hour later when I see my father’s truck tearing down the street. At first, he passes me, and I think I might have time to race to class and pretend I was there all along. But the reverse lights flick on, and the truck backs up. I stay seated on the sidewalk, as though my legs are filled with stones. Scraps is asleep.

My father rolls down his window. He doesn’t even get out of the car. He stares at me; I stare back. His face is very, very red.

“Mackenzie Elizabeth.” His voice shakes, either with anger or relief, or both.

“Hi, Dad.” It’s the stupidest thing I could say.

“Get in.”

I look behind me at the quiet school building. “But I have class.”

“Get in.”

I stand and grab my bag. I throw it in the back, like I always do, then climb into the cab. Just as if he’s picking me up from school on any normal afternoon, only this isn’t a normal afternoon. This isn’t even afternoon. It’s nine o’clock in the morning.

“Where are we going?” I ask.
“I think,” my father says, “that you ought to stop talking.”

The drive home is silent.

I didn’t tell CJ about the party because I wanted to hurt him. That’s the stark, naked truth. I wanted him to find out after the party had ended. I wanted to casually say one day, “I went to a party with Sean O’Connor, didn’t I tell you?” And then, if I had played my cards right, I’d also be able to tell CJ that I’d kissed Sean. That’s all I wanted.

It rained on the day of the funeral. CJ’s was the first funeral I attended where it wasn’t sunny. I don’t know if this is supposed to mean something.

In the casket, he looked like he was sleeping. I wanted very badly to wake him. Stroke his forehead, poke his arm, twist a lock of hair around my pale finger and yank, hard. I touched his cheek lightly with the back of my hand, and it surprised me that his skin was so soft. I brushed my fingertips along the fringe of his lashes and forced myself to memorize the feeling. And then my father took my arm and gently pulled it away.

“You can’t touch him,” he whispered.

He didn’t look broken. He was all in one piece, and I imagined that, if I picked him up and shook him, I wouldn’t hear anything. No bone shards to rattle in the funeral home’s silence. I closed my right eye so that I could only see CJ’s torso and head. I imagined that he was in his NASCAR sleeping bag, that he’d wake up in a minute and suggest we eat bowls of Cocoa Puffs. And then I closed both eyes, because his face looked like something from a wax museum, and it scared me.

* * *

* * *
When we get home, I put my book bag near the door. I’m hungry, but I don’t dare go into the kitchen for a snack. My father walks past me.

“Come into the living room,” he says.

I am reminded of the time I came home from school with one of my long braids cut off. When that happened, my father spoke in a very quiet voice, a voice I hadn’t heard before. It was, I would come to discover, his angry voice. Some fathers yell when they get angry; others become violent. My father becomes frighteningly quiet.

I sit on the couch. He sits in his chair, across from me.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

“Do you know,” my father says, skipping past my apology, “what I thought when your school called me?”

“School called you?”

“It isn’t necessary for you to answer these questions.”

“Oh.”

“I thought something had happened to you,” he says. “I thought you’d been kidnapped on your way to class. I thought you got hurt. I thought you’d decided to skip class, to go to the mall or the movies, and that something might have happened to you there.” I hear him take a big, quaking breath. “I thought maybe you went to the lake.”

I can’t look at him. I really can’t.

“I don’t need to know why you skipped class,” he says. “I don’t need to know why you decided to sit on the corner. I don’t even need to know why you were sitting next to a dog. What I want to know is how you could be so inconsiderate. Did you even
consider what I would think?” I hear him tap his foot. “That’s a question you can
answer.”

“No,” I say.

“No, what?”

“No,” I repeat. “No, I didn’t consider you. I didn’t think about what you would
think. I’m sorry.” Hot tears drop down my cheeks, down on my skirt. “I’m sorry, Daddy.
I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

“Okay,” and now he is in front of me, and he is pulling me up, and now he is
hugging me, and I am burying my head into his chest and hugging him, hard.

“I’m just glad you didn’t go to that lake,” he says, and I hug him so hard that I
think he might break.

This, finally, is what I’ve decided on:

CJ called my house.

My father, being in the shower, didn’t answer.

CJ couldn’t remember whether or not we’d decided to meet at the lake that night.
Our plans had been pretty ambiguous lately. So he took a flashlight and walked down to
the lake. He sat on the steps that we always sat on, and he waited. After thirty minutes of
staring at the stars, he decided to cool off for a minute. He took off his shoes and shirt,
and slipped into the water.

At first, it was relaxing. He floated in the water, his head propped on the step. He
watched the stars and looked for clouds. Clouds didn’t just disappear at night, did they?
Of course not. CJ knew this. CJ was smart. He knew he was smart, too. He had plans for high school, plans for college. He didn’t want to be a vet anymore, even though he loved animals. He had his eye on other things now. Maybe engineering. He liked the idea of building roller coasters; he began to think about height, width, and gravity. He started composing the demographic of his theme park, planning a layout of kiosks, bathrooms, and hot dog stands.

As he thought of these things, he drifted into sleep. Each time he jolted awake, he thought, *Maybe I should get out.* But then, as though it were a school day and he were simply tucking a blanket closer to his chin, he allowed himself five more minutes.

When my father drops me off at school the next morning, he sits in the truck and watches me walk toward the parking lot. I know, because I can hear the truck’s rumble. I turn around.

“*It’s okay,*” I say. “*I promise I’m going.*”

He gives me a look that says, in no uncertain terms, *You’d better.* Then he smiles and gives me a peace sign, which he knows makes me want to roll my eyes, which I do. The truck drives off, slower than usual, and I’m sure he’s watching me from the rearview mirror.

I’m about to enter the parking lot when I feel Scraps’ head butt against my knee. I look down and pet his head.

“You got me in trouble yesterday.” I scratch behind his ears. “*Okay,*” I say, “*so it isn’t your fault.*”
“Hey.” The word hits me from behind, and I snap my head back. There’s Hart, on the other side of the parking lot’s chain-link fence. He anchors his feet in two of the holes and hoists himself up. He’s even taller now, a giant. He grabs onto the top of the fence and leans back. I think that if he let go and completely curved his spine, his head could probably touch the pavement.

“I think we got cut off the other day,” he says. “On the phone.”

“Yeah,” I say, keeping one hand on Scraps’ head. “Not sure what happened there.”

“Me either,” Hart says, and instantly I know that he’s accepting my lie. The sun hits his eyes, and he squints. “Is that your dog?”

I crouch and hug Scraps. “Sort of.”

“He’s cool,” Hart says.

“His name is Scraps.”

“Nice.” In two quick movements, almost before I realize what’s happening, Hart’s up and over and on the other side of the fence. Next to me and next to Scraps, who eyes him suspiciously.

“Is he friendly?” Hart asks.

“Here.” I take off my book bag and unzips it. From the very top, I pull out a bag of shredded turkey. I hand it to Hart. Hart opens that bag and places some turkey in the palm of his hand. He offers it, slowly, to Scraps. Scraps sniffs the meat, then Hart’s hand. Scraps looks at me, as if for approval.

“It’s okay,” I tell him. “It’s a friend.”
Brother in Arms

The thing about my younger brother that’s always awed me, even when we were little, is that he can get himself out of almost any situation. Our father once spent half an hour in the back yard, looking for a porcupine that Toby swore dug a hole in the middle of our mother’s rosebush. I knew for a fact that the hole was a result of Toby’s latest expedition to China. But he came up with this story, and even though it was completely ridiculous, no one asked why there was a porcupine in the middle of a northern Alabama suburb. Instead, a hunt commenced, until Toby finally decided that this game wasn’t fun anymore, and he pointed to the fence and said that the creature must have hopped across to the neighbor’s yard, probably to dig more holes. He had a talent for avoiding blame and unpleasant situations.

“Porcupines,” our father said, wiping dirt from his hands onto the back of his jeans. “Dirty creatures.”

This is why, when I call Toby and tell him about the bird, I’m worried he’ll see through the lie. You can’t fool the master, he used to say whenever I tried to trick him. And yet I am desperate to see my brother. I’ve always believed that Toby keeps his answers handy, in a neat little file cabinet, so he can just open the drawer and pull the right one out, all post-its and tabs and Times New Roman, double-spaced. So I call, and I tell him that I saw a giant red and orange bird with wings like fire. I tell him he should come over and look for it with me. I tell him he can use my camera to take a picture of it for his girlfriend, Kara, who happens to be a member of the Alabama Ornithological
Society. I don’t tell him that I think the Alabama Ornithological Society is stupid, and I don’t tell him about the thing growing inside of me.

“All right, Leya,” he says, when I propose the mission. “When’s the last time you saw this bird?”

“Yesterday.” Then, “Or a few days ago, or last week. I don’t remember.” I am a terrible liar. “Just come. You can help me look for it. It’ll be fun, or, I don’t know, at least tolerable. Come on. Kara will love it.”

There’s a pause. “I didn’t know you cared so much about Kara.”

I don’t. First of all, she’s my age, twenty-two, and four years older than Toby. The first time I met her was six months ago, over drinks and cheese fries at a bar in downtown Birmingham. I didn’t like her for Toby. I didn’t like what she did to him, the way she made him sit with his back straight as a rod, the way she magically compelled him to wear hipster clothes. He’d recently replaced his normal pair of glasses with a trendy, thick-rimmed pair that matched her own. Improved posture and fashion sense wouldn’t normally bother me, but I didn’t like that it was a girl who made him change. Besides, I liked Toby the way he was: tall, gawky, slightly stooped. Always in one of three faded T-shirts. So while Toby was preoccupied with the Auburn game on the television, I shot Kara a look: You’re only temporary. And you’re all wrong for my baby brother.

She, knowing Toby’s attraction to girls with healthy appetites and an eye for creative food combinations, squeezed three drops of hot sauce into a puddle of ranch dressing on her plate. She took the lime from the side of her margarita glass and squeezed a few drops of that into the dip. She mixed it with a knife as Toby and I watched. Then,
she pulled two fries from the platter, dipped them in the dressing, and ate them in one bite. Not a drop of ranch on her lips.

“That’s what I’m talking about,” Toby said.

Kara draped an arm around my brother and offered me a silent, smiled rebuttal: *I’ve just proven you wrong. And I have done so with cheese fries.*

The day after I talk to Toby on the phone, I stand on my apartment’s balcony and watch Toby walk across the parking lot. I look across to the highway, barely visible behind the line of orange and red trees. When I look back down, I see that he’s standing just below my balcony.

“Hey,” he yells.

“Hey,” I yell back, and I walk down the steps to meet him. When I get down, I realize that he’s wearing a denim jacket, and I realize that I have no idea when he started wearing things like denim jackets.

“Nice jacket,” I say.

Toby stuffs his hands in his jeans pocket. “Nice sweats,” he says, nodding toward my oversized Auburn sweatshirt. “Are you going for the thug look?”

I cross my arms. “It’s comfortable.” I hold my camera up by its strap. “Here, make yourself useful.”

“Kara’s going to like this.” Toby takes the camera and slips it into his back pocket. “You’re the best,” he says, and I remember when that actually meant something. Like when Toby was eight, and I let him sleep in my room because he’d just seen *Indiana Jones and The Temple of Doom,* and he was scared of heart thieves. The next day, he asked our mom to help him make me a certificate on the computer: Best Sister Award.
It’s somewhere in my closet, packed in a box with other memories that I think about at odd times.

When we were young, Toby and I were partners in crime. We would hold mock business meetings with our stuffed animals as employees. When our family purchased a computer – which, like so many other things, was after our other friends had gotten one – Toby and I went wild with Microsoft Word templates. We created newsletters and brochures for fake companies with names like Bank of Scrooge and Ninja Turtle School of Karate. We wrote a fake soap opera called Guiding All My Children In the General Hospital of Our Lives, then wrote weekly synopses for our version of the TV Guide. Eventually, though, those things stopped. I don’t really remember when. It’s like there’s an ink spot on pages 15 through 22 in my memory book. One minute we were connected at the hip, and the next we barely knew each other.

“By the way,” Toby says, “I saw that guy the other day.”

Something clunks in the pit of my stomach. “What guy?”

“That guy,” he says.

A tiny creature, maybe a spider, crawls across my heart. “You really need to be more specific.”

“The one you were dating for like a month.” Toby hops over a tree root. “He came by the bar. He ignored me. Very unfriendly.”

The spider’s legs stretch until all eight of them have wrapped around my heart, and then they start squeezing, squeezing, and it’s so much worse than a web because there are no holes, no spaces to breathe.
“Seriously, he was kind of an asshole.” Toby squints at the sun. “So where exactly are we going?”

“I don’t know,” I say, and I really don’t.

“Well, where’d you see it last?”

“Sitting on the monkey bars at the playground.”

“There’s a playground here?”

“Just a little one,” I say. “There’s a surprising number of families in these apartments.”

“Young families?”

I eye him, and for a moment I think he knows, that he’s seen straight through my sweatshirt and my skin and my bones. But he’s not even looking at me; he’s studying the camera. “Some,” I say. “You’d know that, if you ever visited me.”

He punches me lightly in the arm. “I visit.”

“Sure,” I say, “when I tell you to.”

“It’s not like that.” We walk across the grass, leaves crunching under our feet. I make a point to step on them.

The other day, I saw an episode of Dr. Phil where one of his guests was deathly afraid of birds. She told this story about how, when she was little, her sister used to terrorize her by chasing her around the house with a feather duster. She didn’t go to zoos, this woman, and she sometimes drove around the block five times if there was a pigeon on her lawn. She’d wait until the pigeon flew away or got distracted by a breadcrumb across the street. I tell Toby this, tell him how awful it must be to not be able to go to
zoos, or parks, or certain aquariums with rainforest exhibits. He listens, silent, his eyes canvassing the rooftop of each apartment.

“That’s an irrational phobia,” he says when I’m finished.

“All phobias are irrational.” We walk past a row of first floor apartments to a grassy patch where I’ve seen kids play and teenage girls sunbathe. I sneak a peak at myself through the windows. Short, little. I still look sixteen. I put my hands in the kangaroo pocket of my sweatshirt. “Isn’t that part of the definition?”

“There are more important things to be afraid of.” He puts his arm out suddenly, and I run into it. “Up there,” he says, pointing to the top of the three-story building. “I think I saw something. You said it was red, right?”

I stare at him. He shifts his point to a nearby tree, its top the peculiarly golden color of dying leaves. “You can climb that,” he says. “Get a better look.”

Normally, I’d have no problem climbing a tree. Toby and I used to race up trees and fences. But now, well, there’s the thing.

“I’m not climbing that tree,” I say. “You climb it.”

“I can’t,” he says. “I hurt my ankle. Besides, you’re the better climber.” My younger brother walks to the tree and kicks the trunk with his foot.

“What’re you doing?”

“Finding a good place for you to start,” he says. He pulls the camera out of his pocket and starts twirling it by the strap.

“Don’t do that,” I say. “You’ll break it.”

“I got it,” he says, but he stops and slips it back into his pocket.
I cross my arms. “Anyway, Tobe, I can’t climb that tree. It isn’t our property. And are you sure you saw a bird? Maybe it was the sun.”

“I think I know what the sun looks like.”

“I can’t climb it,” I repeat. “It’s not our tree. The apartment police might release hounds, or something.”

“They have hounds?”

“Yes,” I lie. “Scary hounds. Hungry hounds. In fact, the hounds may have eaten the bird.”

Toby frowns. “God, Leya,” he says. “What’s wrong with you?” And I want to tell him – I really do – but suddenly this isn’t the time. Suddenly, this entire plan seems really, really stupid. Maybe I don’t need his help. Maybe I can figure this out on my own.

“Hey,” I tell Toby, as a way to procrastinate the climb, “remember that time we tried to make a tree house out of cardboard boxes?”

Toby smiles and shakes his head. “That so should have worked.”

“It would have,” I said. “You just didn’t use enough tape.”

“I refuse to take the blame for that,” Toby says. “You were clearly in charge of tape operations.”

I shuffle a pile of leaves with my foot. “What were we? Twelve?”

“You were thirteen,” Toby says. “I was nine.”

“Good times.” I shuffle the leaves back to their original spot. “It’s too bad people have to grow out of that.”

“Everyone does.”

“I know. But still.”
“Actually,” Toby says, putting his foot on my pile, “I didn’t grow out of it. Not when you did, anyway.” He swipes his feet and spreads the leaves. A ribbon of wind lifts and carries them a few blades of grass away from us.

“Yeah, you did,” I tell him. He’s still smiling, but it’s different somehow. Now, it looks like there are invisible strings on either side of his mouth, forcing an upward curve.

“You did,” I repeat. “We both did.”

“No, you grew out of it,” Toby corrects me. “You grew out of me. You had to go wax your gams and chase boys or some crap.”

“I didn’t chase boys,” I say, or snap.

Toby raises his eyebrows. “All right,” he says. “No need to get huffy.”

“I’m not a boy chaser,” I repeat.

“Okay,” Toby says, “fine,” and his tone is so condescending that I want to smack him.

“Don’t act like that,” I say.

“Like what?”

“Like you didn’t just insult me,” I say. “Like I’m blowing this out of proportion.”

“Well, I wasn’t,” Toby says. “But now, well, yeah. You kind of are.”

“Excuse me for being upset that you called me a slut.”

Toby raises his hands up in surrender. I can’t look at him; my face is so hot.

“That’s a pretty big leap, Leya. Don’t be so sensitive.”

“Sensitive?”

“I don’t understand why you’re getting so upset.”

“Upset?”
“Stop answering me with questions.”

“Well, stop being judgmental,” I say. “It isn’t attractive.”

“Your face,” Toby says, and I can tell that, as soon as he says it, he wants to take it back. That was always the comeback when we were little, no matter what. *Your face.* I take a step toward him, this six-foot man who I still know as a boy, a boy who cried once when he accidentally stepped on a butterfly. A boy who beat my bedroom door until his fists were sore, who begged to hang out with me, even for a minute. A boy who hated, more than anything else, being called Dopey Toby.

“Shut up,” I say. Then, “Dopey Toby.”

I haven’t called him that in at least ten years, and at first I don’t think he’ll remember it. But he does, because his nose flares in the way that’s always reminded me of a baby dragon.

“What,” he asks, “did you say?”

“I think,” I say, “that you heard me.”

“That’s so childish,” he says. “Grow up.”

“This from the person who resents me for growing up.” I shove him, and he almost loses his balance.

He shoves me back, so then I shove again, and then we both go at each other at the exact same time, so I’m crouching, which seems silly because I’m short, but yes, I’m crouching, and I have my head in his side and my arms wrapped around his waist, and I am pretty much just walking into him, slamming into him, my hip just above his knees. And for a minute I’m winning; my below-the-belt tactics are working, and I’m brilliant, brilliant! But then he pushes me off, quick, like a mosquito on a moose, and I fall, hard,
on the grass. And in the moment before the back of my head hits the ground, I remember the tiny thing in my belly, and I wrap an arm around my stomach.

Toby collapses next to me. He takes off his glasses and rubs his eyes. “You’re not bigger anymore,” he says. “I could totally beat you.”

We lie there, side by side, our shoulders touching. I look up at the tree’s top. Its limbs and leaves interrupt the sky’s perfect blue canvas. I follow the maze with my eyes.

“Leya?”

I pick out a patch of blue between two branches. “Toby?”

“This is a new low.”

“Sorry,” I say. “I’m a bit touchy today.”

“I noticed.” He pats me on the knee. “You’re still pretty good, by the way.”

I turn my head so that the grass tickles my cheek. “You’re not bad yourself.”

“Where do you think I got it from?” He picks up a twig and snaps it in two. “I learned all my best stuff from you,” he says, throwing one half to the ground. “You were a master.”

He looks at me, his gaze slipping over my body and through to the grass beneath me. Most people can’t look at me in such a way; I’ve worked hard to ensure that. Toby, though, he’s always been able to do that. Our mother used to say that we were born in the wrong years, that we were supposed to be twins. Maybe twins can do that. I don’t know.

“What’s really going on?” Toby asks, and the way he’s looking at me, well, I know he knows this isn’t about a bird.

“There’s no bird,” I say.

“Yeah,” he says. “I sort of figured that.”
“I really just needed to talk to you.” My mouth is dry, so dry, like it’s filled with cotton. “And yeah, I could have just asked you to come, but I thought you might be more willing if you thought it was for something important.”

“No lie,” he says. “I never thought there was a bird.”

“What did you see on the roof?”

“Nothing.” He throws the other half of the twig away. “I made it up. I was testing you.” He winks. “Can’t fool the master.”

“Damn.” I rest a hand on my stomach. “Well, Tobe. Since you’ve sort of figured this out, I might as well tell you I’m in trouble.”

“What kind of trouble?” He props himself up on his elbows. “We talking jail time?”

I pat my stomach.

“You’re getting fat?” His face scrunches up. “I mean, you’re not a size two or anything, but I’d hardly call you fat. Maybe if you stopped wearing such baggy clothes...”

“I’m pregnant,” I blurt.

He looks like I just punched him in the gut. He asks me who the father is, and I tell him. His face turns red, and for a moment I think he’s going to jump up and run to his car, and drive to the guy’s house and hit him or punch him or kill him. But his pupils widen – his eyes are all black – and suddenly it’s like I’m watching us from above, sitting on the grass. And I see him in that stupid denim jacket, and me in this giant sweatshirt, and we look so, so young.
“How did that happen?” He runs a hand through his hair. “I mean, I know how it happened, but how did it happen?”

“I don’t know,” I say.

“Did you use protection?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” His voice rises; I can’t look at him. “How the hell is that something you don’t know?”

“This isn’t helping,” I say. “It just happened somehow.”

“Oh my God,” he says. “And I pushed you. Are you all right?” He stares at my stomach. “Do you need to go to a doctor? Oh my God.”

“It’s okay,” I say. “It’s fine,” even though I don’t know if it’s fine, because I know nothing about babies, nothing about pregnancy or morning sickness or cravings or labor, and I sure as hell know nothing about raising a kid, and now that I’ve started thinking about it I don’t even want to cry, I just want to throw up.

Toby wraps his arms around his legs and rests his chin on his knees, like a kid at a campfire, waiting to hear a scary story. “Do Mom and Dad know?”

“Are you kidding? They’d make us get married.”

“Maybe not.”

“You know they would.” I tug on my hair. “We didn’t even date that long. I didn’t even know his favorite color. Remember, I always told you not to make out with a girl until you at least knew her favorite color?” Toby nods. “Well, I’m pregnant,” I say, “and I don’t even know if he prefers blue or green or yellow or black.”
Toby’s silent. I look at him; I stare until he looks at me. “Tobe,” I say. “What do I do about this thing?”

“First of all,” he says, his eyes dark, “it isn’t a thing.”

“Right,” I say. “I know.”

“Do you?”

“Toby—”

“Leya.” Behind his glasses, his eyes blink frustration and sadness and something else, something I can’t quite catch. “I don’t know what you should do,” he says. “I wish I did, but I don’t.”

I want him to get that determined look on his face, like when he decided to dig that hole to China. I want his eyes to start shining in that way that always lets me know he has a plan cooking. I want to cup one hand under his chin and the other on top of his head and pull, until I’ve opened him up like a pirate’s chest so that I can dig in his brain, pick and pick until I’ve found the answer. But he doesn’t, and they don’t, and neither do I, because I know, now, that it’s not there.
Some Things Can’t Be Unbroken
Red Elephant

Maggie shuts one eye and stands on tiptoe, pressing her body against the door. There’s her husband Charlie, standing on the front stoop, digging for his keys. The peephole distorts his body, but Maggie can tell that he’s holding something yellow. Tulips? She tugs the bottom of her black and white striped shirt and smoothes her crinkled red skirt before opening the door. There’s Charlie, not distorted at all, his hand still in his pocket and beads of sweat punctuating his forehead.

“Oh, hey.” Charlie stops digging for his keys and wipes his forehead. “It’s freaking muggy out here.” He leans forward and kisses Maggie. “You look nice,” he says, holding out the flowers. “Tulips, your - ”

“Thanks.” Maggie takes his sentence and her bouquet. “That’s sweet.”

“I made reservations at Lola’s.” His voice travels from the doorway to the kitchen, where Maggie’s stuffing the unwrapped and uncut flowers into a vase half-filled with tap water. “I figured that would be okay, because the food’s not too spicy, and you should be able to find something you can eat. Plus it’s nicer than, I don’t know, a Chili’s or something. You like Lola’s, right?”

“Sounds great.” Maggie walks to the small, round breakfast table, brushes aside a pile of unopened bills, and sets the vase near the center. Above the table, there’s a large painting of a dancing, red elephant. Charlie bought the print for Maggie’s twenty-fifth birthday, a few months before Maggie was hit with the one-two punch: hysterectomy, bam, cancer, smack. Like a comic book.
Set against the painting, the tulips look extra bright; they almost match the color of Charlie’s hair, which is always unruly no matter what he does to it. The messy yellow hair was only part of the reason why, two years ago, Maggie abandoned her original no-marriage-until-thirty plan. When they first met, Maggie thought that Charlie was tall and studious, with eyes like water. Plus, Charlie knew stuff. Maggie could debate with him, and even though they had their differences, Maggie thought they understood each other. She decided that maybe thirty was too late to wait for marriage, for life.

Maggie turns and looks at Charlie, who’s opening some of the bills. Most of them are from the hospital, detailing leftover surgery fees and recent chemo charges. She knows it hurts him to open the envelopes, to read the letters and numbers that serve as constant reminders. She watches the routine cycle of emotions flicker across his face, and when he moves from God-I’m-depressed, to shit-we’re-in-debt, Maggie breathes.

The first thing Maggie tells people when they ask about the cancer is that she won’t die. “If this were a TV special,” she says, “it wouldn’t be one of those depressing ones where you become emotionally attached to the person who dies in the second-to-last scene. Obviously, I’m still alive, so this isn’t about death.” She points out that, were this about death, she’d be just like all those other cancer patients, with a bald head and plenty of spunk and a tomb marker set behind rolling credits. Instead, she gets to be that cancer patient minus the marker. Actually, she doesn’t have a bald head, either, which is something most people don’t understand. Don’t all cancer patients lose their hair as soon as they’re diagnosed? Maggie doesn’t have the energy to explain the process of losing
patches during chemotherapy, a process she’s prepared for by purchasing two wigs: one brown, one pink. As for the theatrics, she’ll leave that to Jennifer Love Hewitt, who’ll play her in the Lifetime movie. The important thing to remember, she tells herself, is this: she won’t die.

When they arrive at Lola’s, Maggie and Charlie walk up to the hostess. “Two for Copper,” Charlie says. Maggie senses his hand near the small of her back, and a shiver scuttles up her spine like a centipede.

The hostess, a pretty Indian woman dressed all in black, flips through the binder. She stops on a page and runs her finger down the list. “Your table will be ready in a minute.”

“Thank you.” Charlie turns to Maggie. “Is the seafood smell too much? I didn’t even think of that.”

He looks so concerned, as though he’s ready to beat his head on the wall for this indiscretion. Maggie shakes her head, even though her stomach’s already clenching. As they wait for their table, she looks at the hostess, who offers a pearly smile. Maggie smiles weakly and wraps her arms around her body.

Two months ago, Maggie – half-naked and quite cold – lay on an examining table under the gloved fingers of a young Indian doctor who looked much like this hostess, only she wore a white coat instead of a glittering black top. She had fantastic hair, too. Her dark face had gone from friendly to inviting to interested, and that interest rapidly
turned to ill-concealed concern as her fingers tapped across Maggie’s throbbing abdomen.

“Are you on birth control, Mrs. Copper?”

“No,” Maggie said, “but I’m not pregnant.”

“I don’t think you’re pregnant.” The doctor pressed her fingertips on Maggie’s abdomen. Maggie flinched. “How long have you had this pain?”

“On and off for a months,” Maggie said. She wished she could lift her head and evaluate the situation herself. “I reached for a book, and suddenly I couldn’t stand up straight.”

The doctor nodded her head and motioned for Maggie to sit up. “You’re a relatively healthy young woman,” she said. “I’m afraid, though, about this.” Her fingertips, flesh on latex on flesh, rubbed circles on Maggie’s abdomen. I think we just got engaged, Maggie wants to say, but the words don’t come.

“There’s a sizeable mass here,” the doctor continued. “I don’t want you to be alarmed, but it’s something we should definitely check out so that we can eliminate the possibility of cancer. Do you understand?”

Maggie nodded, even though she didn’t, and the doctor said – and this just kills Maggie now, whenever she thinks about it – this doctor, with her terrible poker face and that fantastic hair, said, “We’ll do some tests to determine what it is. Until then, try to have a nice weekend.”

***
While Charlie deliberates over what to get for dessert, Maggie places bets with herself about how long it will take him to bring up her health. He goes back and forth, characteristically indecisive. Maggie personally doesn’t care which dessert he orders, and she says so. He studies the menu for what must be the fifteenth time.

“Maybe the fig cheesecake,” he mutters.

Even when Maggie was well, she wouldn’t have eaten fig cheesecake. She pinches a strand of hair between two fingers and tugs, elbows on the table. When the waiter comes, Charlie orders the tiramisu. They sit in a silence that’s interrupted by Charlie clearing his throat and asking, “How’d you feel today?”

Up until this point, the dinner conversation was largely dominated by small talk about Charlie’s never-ending job search and Maggie’s newfound addiction to daytime television, as well as a small but heated debate over who would win a fight between Wolverine and Legolas. Maggie claimed victory on behalf of Wolverine when she pointed out his powers of regeneration.

Maggie rubs her nose. “Fine,” she says, answering Charlie’s question as she always does.

“Have you tried the apples and peanut butter?”

Maggie knows Charlie’s referring to the list he made weeks ago, detailing energy foods in four neat columns: breakfast, lunch, dinner, snack. “I haven’t,” she tells him, “but I tried that pomegranate juice you bought.”

The silence returns until the waiter arrives with dessert. Maggie watches her husband take big bites, dropping dark crumbs onto the plate with each forkful. She wishes she had that appetite. She used to; when they first started dating, Charlie often
marveled at Maggie’s ability to finish off a giant plate of fried eggplant and crawfish and still have room for dessert. Now, chemo’s deadened her taste buds, and the foods she used to love revolt her.

Charlie looks at her, she looks at him, and she knows what’s coming between the clinks of fork and plate.

“Anything you want to talk about?”

“Nope.” Maggie inspects her hands; she twists her wedding ring.

Clink, clink. “Are you sure?”

Maggie knows Charlie’s eyes are on her, but she can’t bring herself to look up. She can’t even open bills by herself; how does he expect her to have a conversation about it?

“Yes,” Maggie says. “I’m completely, positively sure. Hundred percent.”

“Because I know this is rough,” Charlie persists. “Even without the added situation.”

“From personal experience?”

His eyes possess the same mixture of sympathy, kindness, and concern as those of the nurses, medical students, and hospital technicians. “Poor thing,” those eyes said, “and so young.” She didn’t want pity from them, and she certainly doesn’t want it from her husband. She just wants things to be normal.

His eyes remain fixed on her; they’re annoyingly sympathetic. “I just want to make sure you do everything possible to ensure a speedy recovery.”

Maggie tugs on her hair. “Okay.”
“Let me ask you something,” Charlie says. His face changes; Maggie knows he’s gearing up for a big question.

“Shoot,” she says.

Charlie looks behind him, then back at Maggie. “The scar.”

“We’re going to discuss this here?” Maggie shakes her head. “Unbelievable.”

“Mags, it’s not normal.”

“You’ve seen the other one,” she says, referring to the small port-a-cath scar above her heart.

Charlie leans forward, elbows on the table. “Don’t you think it’s weird that I’ve yet to see it since the bandages came off? I mean, you don’t need to start wearing midriffs or anything…”

“Oh, for God’s sake, Charlie.”

“…but you don’t have to hide this from me.” The fork hangs limply in his hand.

“I’m your husband. I don’t think it’s an unreasonable request.”

“You can’t go two months without being intimate,” Maggie says, mocking Charlie’s term for sex. “Incredible.”

“Is that what you want to talk about?” He puts down his fork. “Fine. I wasn’t going to bring up this intimacy thing, okay, because I was waiting for you to tell me when. But it’s getting to the point where I can’t even touch you without you pulling away from me.”

“Keep your voice down,” she hisses. “People are staring.”

“I don’t care.” Charlie’s eyes swim straight through Maggie’s, and she can’t look away. “I want to know why, every single time I touch you, you flinch.”
“I do not.”

“I went to touch your hair and you practically ran across the room.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Is it getting to the point where you aren’t even aware of it?”

Maggie rests a hand on her stomach and watches Charlie pass a hand over his face, briefly pinching the spot between his eyes. “I’m sorry,” he says. “I’m just frustrated.”

“Welcome to the club,” Maggie says. “Grab a nametag, have a cupcake.”

Charlie picks up his fork. “I wish this didn’t break apart so much,” he says. “Makes it hard to eat.”

Heat creeps up Maggie’s face, and she fans herself with her napkin. She looks past Charlie, at a window lined with strings of red and orange lights. Her eyes rest on a woman with all the signs of a late pregnancy, and she wonders if she should ask Charlie if it matters, if it changes anything. They’ve talked about the cancer, but they’ve yet to have the other conversation, the one about what to do after the cancer’s beat and licked and tucked in a drawer somewhere. The issue of forced infertility is easy to forget during treatments, when Charlie holds a can of warm Sprite while Maggie wraps her lips around the straw and wills herself to sip. But when they’re doing things that are almost normal, like now, the issue quivers and shakes until she’s convinced it’ll explode in their faces.

“Ready to head out?” Charlie’s finished the cake and paid the bill.

“Sure.” Maggie stands, her fingertips gripping the bottom of her shirt. “Let me just head to the bathroom first, ‘k?”
He nods and says he’ll wait outside. The smell of seafood, cornbread, and fried grits nearly smothers Maggie as she weaves through the maze of tables. When she enters the bathroom, she stands in front of the mirror and inspects her face: round, pink, free of blemishes. She fluffs her dark hair with the tips of her fingers then looks at the door. She checks behind her, making sure no one else is in the room. Turning back to the mirror, she lifts her shirt and folds over the top of her skirt. The red scar winks at her.

Maggie remembers when it was fresh. Silver staples lined it like little bridges over a bloody river. They glistened as they pinched the skin together, keeping her abdomen neat and tidy. In the weeks following the surgery, she sometimes wondered what might happen if the doctors were wrong about the staples’ strength. Maybe they’d snap off on their own, before she was ready. She’d peer down and imagine: pop! Staples flying, folds of skin peeling back and hot insides boiling over, red and purple and creamy white. Pop! Pop! Well, she’d just have to wait. There’d be no point in trying to interfere. Her insides would pour and pour until finally there was nothing left, just a frame and a big mess to clean up. She pitied the person who found her.

In the bathroom, she hears laughter and the clacking of heels. Quickly, she tugs her shirt over her stomach. A group of teenage girls pushes through the door, heavily made up and barely covered in slinky dresses that Maggie knows she could never have gotten away with wearing when she was in high school. They flow in as one fragrant unit, intoxicating Maggie with vanilla, berries, and something oddly like the Barbie perfume she had when she was thirteen. She watches through the mirror as they swarm around her, pulling at their dresses, smoothing ripples and accentuating curves amidst high-pitched prattle. Pink, red, black, silver - some of the dresses have no backs, some have no
straps, and one, shockingly, has no middle. The girls dig in their purses, slather on lipstick from a shared tube, and chatter incessantly about each other’s dates. Maggie feels invisible and, oddly, outdated.

The girl in the dress with no middle clutches the top of her outfit and wiggles in an attempt to free her repressed cleavage. Where do these girls get such cleavage? The girl checks her bare stomach from every angle, surveying what Maggie thinks must have been the work of a steady water and Ex-Lax diet. It’s flat, slick, untainted. Peaches and cream. Self-conscious, Maggie keeps her arms folded and her eyes averted as she squeezes out the door. Passing the bar, she looks out the window and sees Charlie standing under a street lamp, waiting patiently as termites hover above his blonde hair. Maggie wonders if he noticed the fresh-faced group of mini vixens, and whether he noticed them for two seconds or two minutes.

It was supposed to be a simple cyst removal. Small, horizontal incision; two hour surgery; two night hospital stay; home for Easter. Before the surgery, there had been a lot of tests, most of them involving vampirish amounts of blood. One test, the CA-125, was designed to test Maggie’s cancer antigen levels. She was told she’d be okay if the test came back as 35 or below. After two days of blood tests, ultrasounds, and X-rays, she went in for surgery. At that point, they didn’t have the test results back. The last thing Maggie remembered before going in was the good-natured anesthesiologist saying, “All right, Margaret, get ready to feel good.” And then, nothing.
It was sweet, the nothing. Maggie thinks she remembers some of it, but she’s not sure. One minute she was on her back, counting the cracks on the ceiling, and then she felt a flash of perfect blankness that was followed by white pain, pain like bricks pounding though her stomach and slicing up her skin with blades. She screamed, half-expecting it to come out mute like in a dream, only it wasn’t mute, and it wasn’t a dream. She was on her back, screaming, being wheeled through doors and down hallways, and no one would help her. They just kept saying, “Deep breaths, Margaret. Deep breaths.” She wondered if this was what it was like to be in labor.

Sometime between the blank and the pain, the CA-125 had come back: 146. So they decided, as Maggie slept, to do a vertical cut, starting from the very top of the belly button and then winding down, down. With this, the surgeons discovered that the cyst was actually many cysts, cysts that had spread through her abdominal region, into the ovaries and around the uterus, suffocating the pieces that made her, by the strictest definitions, a woman. So Charlie, who she’d signed off as her eyes, ears, and brain while she was knocked out, made the executive decision: cut her up. Remove it. All of it. When she woke up, she was ten pounds lighter.

It was inevitable; all the doctors have told her this. She still feels a little broken, though, and she’s not sure why. Maybe it’s because all the things she was taught about womanhood, and that she promptly rejected, have come back to haunt her. In Sunday school, she was taught that women had The Very Special Gift of Creation. Rainbows poured from parting clouds, and sometimes Burl Ives sang a song from *Summer Magic*. And even though Maggie never bought into all that, now it’s like something she owned
was ripped from her. She wants to punch someone, tear someone’s eyes out, but she doesn’t know who. She’d place the blame on someone, anyone, but she can’t.

At home, Maggie stands under the shower and flicks drops away from her skin. Water pours over her tilted head and falls from the ends of her hair in one long, liquid curtain. She covers the scar with her hands and tries to remember when the surface was all smooth and all pink. Peaches and cream. Eventually, she gives up and sits in the tub with her knees pulled to her chest. She reaches for the dry wash cloth and wipes her face as the water continues to beat her body.

She has to fight through fuzzy patches of memory when she tries to recall things, or when things decide to be remembered, without her consent. The haze always lifts when she gets to the part when she was wheeled out of Recovery and into a room where Charlie stood next to a window, looking pale and washed-out and, she can’t help thinking now, a little creepy. At some point, the nurses left, and it was just her and him. Maggie, her husband, and the truth, spoken in halting, stilted sentences.

In the bathtub, the water’s heat begins to suffocate her; it’s hard to breathe.

When her friends visited her in the hospital, it was amazingly awkward. They stared at Maggie from the foot of her hospital bed, their heads floating behind a tray of onion broth, Jell-O, and a thick, foul-tasting cranberry drink. In their bright clothes and matching purses, they looked out of place in the stark white room. Even Jaye, her straight-talking, tough love little sister, looked uncomfortable. Maggie could tell that they all wanted to ask questions, but the conversation just air-danced, never quite touching
ground. A few times, Maggie looked Jaye straight in the eye, silently begging her to ask something inappropriate. That would have been normal. But Jaye just stood near the back, her dark eyes puffy and red and absolutely heartbreaking.

Maggie looks down; her body is turning red, and the scar, wrapped around her belly button, glares at her. She stands, gives her hair one last shake, and turns off the faucet. She shivers as the air hits her wet skin.

“I’m out of ideas.”

Maggie’s just pulled on her blue polar bear pajamas when she hears Charlie’s voice from the other side of the door. He must be on the phone. Maggie’s heart beats in her ears as she presses against the bathroom door. “I thought about that,” Charlie’s saying, “but I don’t know.” Silence, then, “I just don’t know, you know? I didn’t expect any of this.”

No one expected this, Maggie thinks. She slams a shampoo bottle against the counter, and she hears Charlie say he has to go. A few seconds after she hears him hang up, she opens the door. "I think the tulips might be bothering my sinuses," she says, rubbing her hair with a towel. She picks up a bottle of Tylenol PM that’s resting next to her food list and sits next to Charlie, tucking her knees beneath her.

“Should a cancer patient take sleeping pills?” Charlie asks.

“Should a cancer patient be pestered?” Maggie asks, tossing the wet towel on top of an overflowing laundry basket. “You’re obsessed with health,” she adds, popping a pill. “You know that, right?”
“At least I care,” Charlie says.

“It’s just Tylenol,” Maggie says. “It won’t kill me.”

She can tell Charlie’s looking at her, but she refuses to turn toward him; she stays focused on the polar bear on her knee. “Never mind,” he says. “I don’t want to talk about dying.”

“I wasn’t,” Maggie says. “I was talking about not dying.”

“Don’t do that either.”

“Why not?”

“Because you don’t know.”

Maggie snaps her eyes at him. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“I just mean it’s not something to take lightly,” Charlie says, running a hand through his hair. “I mean, it’s cancer.”

“Fuck cancer,” Maggie says. “I’m nuking cancer, but this?” She puts a hand on her stomach. “Can’t nuke this, baby. This is forever. God, I wish people would just think about that for one second.”

Charlie’s eyes widen. “You think I don’t?”

“I’m just saying.” Maggie lays the bottle on its side and spins it on the night stand. “You handed them a permission slip to pick me apart.”

“What else was I supposed to do? Tell me what I should have done.” Charlie’s voice sounds pleading, and Maggie can’t look him in the eye. “You know that they’d have to go back and do it eventually. And there would be more risks if we waited.” Charlie rubs the back of her head with the tips of his fingers. Maggie used to like when he did that.
“The most important thing is that I have you,” Charlie adds, “and I need you.”

Maggie thinks that what Charlie really needs is to see what this whole thing looks like. He should see the scar stretch across her skin; he should feel the tissue sink beneath the weight of his fingertips; he should know the ugly emptiness. Silently, she lies on her back and rolls up her shirt, stopping when she hits right above the belly button. Then, she rolls down the polar bear pants, until the entire scar is revealed, crimson in the apartment’s dim light.

Charlie looks at it, and Maggie thinks his eyes are more than sympathetic; they’re disappointed, as though they almost expected it not to be there. She takes his hand and presses it against her skin, guiding him along the scar’s path.

“I’m sorry,” he says, softly, almost in a whisper.

“Me too,” Maggie says, and her voice is harder than she wants it to be.

She lets him keep his hand there, feeling it move up and down with her uneven breaths. Eventually, he falls asleep, and his hand slips off her stomach. Maggie looks down at her scar and touches the top, a thick red nub above her belly button. She stares at it, willing it to do something. It stares back.

She eases off the bed and pads into the kitchen. Pouring herself a glass of water, she notices a strip of moonlight stretched across the wall, right on top of the elephant painting. The animal stares at her. With the flowers hiding his feet, it looks like he’s dancing in a field of tulips. His trunk, lifted and wrapped around his head, has always been Maggie’s favorite part.

Tearing herself away from the painting, she returns to the bedroom. She stands, hip against the doorframe, in neither the kitchen nor the bedroom. She watches Charlie
sleep, his body hidden by four blankets he’d put on the bed to keep her warm. All she sees is his head, that tuft of golden hair, and she imagines him as her son, and she imagines herself as his mother, watching, protecting, as he sleeps.

She will leave the doorway; she will enter the bedroom; she will slip under all four blankets and sleep by her husband’s side. But for now, she stands and waits.
“The thing to remember,” Jaye says, as the three of us sit in the room marked Infusion, “is that we’re all just waiting for our turn at this.” She crosses her legs, and I study the paint splatters on her jeans. “We’re all going to be in these chairs one day, Maggie. You’re just particularly prompt.”

She, my sister, sits on a stool at my left; you, Charlie, sit on my right; I sit, reclined, connected to wires and tubes and a machine that Jaye’s named Natasha. My life preceding this point is scattered across the floor, clinging to walls, streaked on windows. I’ve sacrificed my body to chaos. We sit in a neat row of brown chairs filled with broken people: old, black, white. Cancer does not discriminate. I am the youngest person in the room. I am 25.

“Jaye’s right,” you say. You, my ever-practical, eager-to-please husband. I can’t even look at Jaye because I know she’s giving you a look, a look that plainly says she doesn’t need you to agree with her. A look that you, as always, will either not see or ignore. I never really know which it is.

Even though the words are supposed to be comforting – we will all eventually be where you are – I want to cry. But I don’t. I let the sob fester in my throat. I let it sit there for three, four hours. It’s been there since last Thursday, when the doctor called and told me I had ovarian cancer. You’ll remember that day as the day you bought me a chicken sandwich with extra pickles from McDonald’s. You didn’t want to – you prefer that I eat healthfully – but it was all I wanted. “You’ve got cravings like a pregnant woman,” you said, and you looked horrified as soon as you said it.
We will all eventually be where you are. Well, that’s not really the problem, is it?
The problem is that we’re here in the first place. I should be at a bar right now, knocking
back whiskey shots with Jaye, throwing ourselves into hysterical stupors. Or I should be
with you, in our apartment, watching old movies and sharing a mixing bowl filled with
popcorn. I shouldn’t be strapped to a chair, waiting to be invaded by IVs of helpful
poison. Helpful or not, poison will age a person in a minute.

“Do you want anything?” you ask. “Coke? Sprite?”

“I’m okay,” I tell you.

“I think I’ll get you a soda,” you say.

I watch you stand up; I watch you pat your pockets, checking for change; I watch
Jaye look at you, her eyes wide, and I wonder if she’s about to tell you to sit down. Or,
more accurately, sit your ass down. Jaye’s got the mouth of a sailor on leave. But you
know this; you’ve judged her for this.

“I think they’re about to start giving me meds,” I say, and as soon as I say it I feel
a bit stupid. It isn’t like I’m getting ready to step on stage to perform a saxophone solo at
the school talent show. This is chemo. I am only required to sit, to receive.

“I’ll be right back,” you say. “You should have fluids.” And then you pat my
head, kiss my cheek, and you are out the door.

“Did you want a drink?” Jaye asks.

I shrug.

“He didn’t even ask,” Jaye says. “Not really.”

We fall into silence, and it is in this silence that I throw a quick pity party for
myself. It lasts five minutes, tops. No tears. No complaining. Words, printed preschool-
big in my brain, punch through my head, one after the other. This. Sucks. I. Am. Too. Young. Jaye inches closer to me, resting her arm against mine. We have matching moles on our wrists, moles that kiss when they touch.

“I could have gotten you a drink,” she says. “Should I have offered?”

“No,” I say. “It’s fine.”

“Why didn’t he just wait?” Jaye grabs a Rolling Stone from the table behind us and flips absently through the pages. “Seriously, Maggie. The nurses probably bring around a cart or something.”

“Anything good in there?” I ask, nodding toward the magazine.

“He doesn’t get it,” Jaye says. She clears her throat in the way that she always does when she wants to keep talking but knows she should stop. “Anyway,” she says.

“It’s fine,” I say. I clear my throat in the way that always means it isn’t.

Jaye’s dark eyes focus on the television; I, too, pretend to be terribly invested in the soap operas. Three big TVs face the brown chairs, each one playing a different show. We choose NBC. Passions. There’s a needle in my chest, medicine in my veins, and trouble in Harmony.

“I thought Teresa was dead,” Jaye says.

We used to watch this soap when we were in high school, mocking it for its special brand of melodramatic magical realism. I’ve told you about those days, when Jaye and I would skip school on a whim, driving in our parents’ Subaru with the windows down, our school sweaters around our waists. Like a tame Aerosmith video. We drove up and down Lakeshore Drive, past the water – sometimes brown, sometimes blue – and
then, always, we ended up at home, watching soap operas and eating fudgesicles. We were fake rebels.

When I told you these stories, you thought they were cute. You said you wished you knew High School Maggie. You wanted to go back in time, to an alternate universe where we met when we were much, much younger. And even though you think this means we’d have had more time to spend together, I always wonder if all it really means is that we’d have tired of each other by now.

In the hospital, my head starts to feel woozy. “Teresa is dead,” I inform Jaye, “but she came back to life and tried to kill Alistair.”

“That’s fucked up,” Jaye says, and I know she says it just loud enough so that the nurses will shoot us stern looks. This makes me smile. Then a nurse walks up and tells me she’s going to start the Taxol drip.

“That’s going to take three hours,” she says, and Jaye raises her eyebrows just slightly.

“Want me to find Chuck?” she asks.

“He’ll be back,” I say as the nurse fiddles with a bag of yellow liquid. I actually have no idea if you will be back in time. Knowing you, you might be searching the entire hospital for the best drink machine so I can have the optimum can of Sprite. That’s the sort of thing you do; you obsess over the smallest details, trying so hard to do the right thing and go the extra mile. When all I want is you, not a Sprite, you. Right here.

The nurse leaves, and Jaye and I return to the alternate reality on television, the reality where no one wears the same outfit twice, where everyone has perfect hair even when they’re stuck in caves for four months, and where one day can last three weeks.
Five minutes after the first drop of Taxol enters my body, my breath trips over a cord and loses a step.

My face burns.

Fire-engine-red shoots out of my skin.

I am on fire.

I am burning alive.

I. Am. Too. Young.

Jaye, in mid-sentence – “So, what, people rise from…” – notices and shakes my shoulder. I choke. I try screaming to Jaye, to the nurses, to the man across the room in a blue hat, but I can’t form words. Only pictures. Jaye calls for a nurse, other patients look our way, but I don’t know any of these things because I’m motionless, I’m drowning, and I’m thinking that this isn’t the way to go, not at all. And I’m wondering where you are; where are you; why aren’t you here.

A nurse runs to my side and quickly disconnects the Taxol drip from the IV. Slowly, the fire trickles down my body, dripping off my face and sinking to my feet, until the only heat is in my toes. It’s even a little pleasant. This is when I notice other patients staring at me, and I feel like a sorority girl who can’t hold her own liquor.

This, you may recall, is when you return with two different types of soda in your hands. And the first thing you say when you walk up – before you ask why my face is white, before Jaye tells you, in her dramatically deadpan fashion, that I was allergic to the first round of chemo and that I almost died – you say, “Sprite or Diet Sprite?”

When it is all over, the three of us walk to the car. “Natasha’s a bitch,” Jaye says, and her voice is so tough that I know she’s scared. Terrified, like me, but we keep
walking. One foot, two foot, forward, go. And I know we’ll go home, you and I, and
you’ll make me soup and tuck me in a blanket on the couch, and you’ll make sure I drink
plenty of water. These are the things you do. And when you ask how it was, and you ask
how I am, I’ll say, as I always do, fine, fine fine.
They’re Sneaky, Sharks

Maggie’s husband strips down to his jalapeno boxers – the ones she hates – and jumps up and down, a gangly Peter Pan on a sugar high. Maggie hugs her body and curls her toes in the sand. On the way back to the beach house, Charlie had insisted that they go down to the bay. Maggie thought they’d walk along the shore, maybe search for hermit crabs or pick up broken shells. Instead, Charlie and two bottles of wine have decided to skinny dip.

“Midnight!” Charlie yells, his voice bouncing against the earth and sky.

“How can you know that?” Maggie stoops and picks up his jeans. “Here,” she says, shaking out the sand. “Get those scrawny legs back into some pants.”


Maggie holds out Charlie’s jeans. “Then let’s get inside, before I turn into a pumpkin.”

“Pumpkin,” Charlie says. “That’d be awesome.” He says it in his ‘frat guy’ voice, an imitation he and Maggie used to do when they’d see packs of college kids strut around the university area wearing pastel polo shirts and plaid shorts. The voice and tone are, like his current behavior, relics, artifacts from the days when Charlie was spontaneous and silly and, Maggie thinks, more interesting.

“We can swim tomorrow,” Maggie says. “Right now, we’d be shark snacks.”

“It’s already tomorrow.” Charlie’s voice switches from ‘frat guy’ to ‘know-it-all.’ It’s the voice he often assumed months ago, when he insisted Maggie drink water or eat fruit after chemo. For an instant, Maggie feels shrunken again, like she’s curled up on a
couch and unable to pull her own strings. Then she reminds herself that she’s looking at a twenty-seven year old man in pepper pants.

“Have you never seen Jaws?” Maggie asks, but Charlie’s already in the bay, his knees slapping the water. Soon, he’s disappeared, and the only sound is of sporadic splashing, and then, nothing.

“Wait,” Maggie shouts, and she wonders whose voice that is in her ear, the voice that’s yelling with the anger of a frightened girl. She drops the jeans and strains her ears for sounds of an attack: the roar, the crunch, the silence. Squinting, she sees Charlie swimming in circles, his head poking out like a fin. Maggie slips two fingers beneath the strap of her tank top and presses the pink scar across her heart, the scar that came from the small port-a-cath that was taken out only a few weeks ago. It’s smaller than the hysterectomy scar on her abdomen, but lately it’s the one she’s been more preoccupied with. She touches it when she’s nervous, but all it really does is remind her of her deepest, creeping fear. The reality that, at any moment, she could unknowingly slip out of remission. That she could go back to the doctors and hear them say, “Oops, missed a spot,” as though they skipped a patch while mopping up her insides.

As the water slips over her feet – over, out, over, out - her small toes sink into the moist sand. When she was a kid, she used to play a game, placing bets with herself over how long it would take the sand to cover her entire body. Now the sand weighs her down, and Maggie knows that if she waits any longer, she’ll lose the game. She lifts her feet, kicks the brown mush off the tops of her toes, and, holding the sides of her skirt in her hands, starts wading toward her husband. Her movements create a narrow, fleeting path, and when she turns around, she sees the tiniest ripples in the spot where she just stepped,
ripples that are, in an instant, replaced by calm. The shore beckons, tiny and far, and she wonders how she got from there to here so quickly. Maggie turns and faces the wide expanse of water. That’s all there is, water, and there’s no telling where it stops.

“What’s wrong?” Charlie calls out.

The wet cloth pinches Maggie’s fingers as she tightens her grip on the skirt. She tries to see beneath the water. Goosebumps scuttle across her skin like tiny spiders.

“What, are you scared?” Charlie asks, and Maggie detects a dash of tease in his tone.

“Sharks,” she snaps. They’re sneaky, sharks, and Maggie doesn’t like sneaky. She’d prefer a bear attack, because then she’d at least see it coming. She’d have time to think, “Oh, crap. A bear,” and then she’d go down fighting.

“I thought we’d settled the shark issue,” Charlie says.

“That’s not the point.” Maggie’s always prized her impervious exterior, but she knows, inside, that she’s pretty fucking terrified. Join drunken husband, she tells herself. Do it. But then she thinks about the unknown dangers, about sea predators and night ghosts, and she realizes that she didn’t fight so hard for life just to die from stupidity.

“I’m right here.” Charlie’s voice sounds fainter, as though he’s drifted farther away from Maggie. “Nothing happened to me. I’m right here, alive and well and kind of lonely all by myself.”

“We could get hurt,” Maggie says. She doesn’t hear Charlie respond, so she calls his name. When he still doesn’t answer, she tries running. She takes a quick step to the left, and her foot falls into a hole. In a flash, she’s under water, and even though she knows it’s shallow, she still panics. She flails her arms and kicks her feet, hitting mud
and water but no air. *Maybe Charlie will scoop me up,* she thinks, but nothing happens, and she almost breathes it all in, expands like a blowfish and drowns from the inside.

No. No more fluid. Maggie relaxes, pushes her body back, and floats to the surface. She gulps air, blinks drops away from her eyes. Looking up, she’s faced with blue-gray midnight sprinkled with silver stars. It was a warm day, but the night is cold, and the breeze chills Maggie’s wet face. She wants Charlie to have doubts, like she does, but for him it seems over. Solved. He’s collected his A and moved on. He doesn’t realize there are still risks to consider, decisions to make, worries to worry. Or maybe he does realize but finds it easier to ignore. Maybe he’s tired of all the worrying, all the decisions.

Well, Maggie’s tired too. She wiggles her toes, thinking that she should drift for a while; she’s ready to follow a current. It’s a comfortable kind of waterbed, and she wonders what it would be like to just sink right into it. As she floats, she marvels at the fact that her body’s warm until the wet parts are exposed to air. She picks out a star, makes a wish.

“Whatcha wish for?” Charlie asks, his voice ripping its way through the silence and into Maggie’s ears, and before she can see him, his hand grabs her ankles and drags her toward him, wrapping her legs around his waist. Maggie can feel him, feel her legs wrapped around his tight body, but she doesn’t lift her head to look at him. She floats on her back while Charlie drums his fingers against her thighs.

“This skirt can’t be comfortable,” he says. “Shall I help you out of it?”

“Jesus, Charlie. You scared the shit out of me.” Maggie keeps her eyes trained on the stars. “This is stupid,” she says. “You’re drunk, and if you go under, I won’t be able to pick you up.”
“Aw, Mags, you’re so serious,” Charlie says. “Lighten up. This is what we should be doing right now. We’re young; we’re healthy. It’s not like we have any kids to worry about.”

“Yeah?” Maggie lifts her head and stabs her eyes at Charlie’s. He lets go and says something like yes, yeah, this is the time to do these things, but Maggie doesn’t know exactly what he’s saying because she’s tipped her head back so that her ears are fully underwater. With only her nose poking out of the bay, Charlie’s words morph into warped noise, as though his batteries are running out and he’s about to break.

Finally, the noise stops, and Maggie lifts herself out of the water. She stands; something sharp hits her toe. Charlie pokes her stomach, then tickles her sides in the way that used to make her laugh, the way that made her twitch and scream and melt. Maggie pries his hands off of her body, holds them underwater and allows him to lace the fingers, locking her hands to his.

“I’m glad you came out,” he says. Maggie wonders whether she missed an apology or a lecture. “Did I tell you that yet?”

“I only came because I was worried about you,” Maggie says, trying to keep her voice level. “A shark attack isn’t the way I want to go.”

“I wouldn’t let you go,” Charlie says, and Maggie wishes he’d said won’t. The water hits at her waist, and she decides it’s too cold up top, so she squats down. The bay hugs, warms. Charlie’s standing, staring at the earth’s top, and if Maggie didn’t know better she might think he was a mythical creature, a merman, standing guard in the night’s hush.

“Amazing,” Charlie says.
His body looms, superimposed in front of the sky and the dark and the moon. Maggie’s eyes trace the shadows down his neck, across his shoulders, into the water. His hand releases hers, and he finds her heart beneath the surface, and his nails dance over and across and around her scar. Maggie looks past him, at the dark blue line dividing water and sky. She says his name, quietly, and he tilts his head and looks at her in such an honest way that her throat tightens. She dips lower in the water, freeing the scar from Charlie’s touch.

“We should get out,” Maggie says.

“I’ll protect you,” Charlie says, and his eyes meet Maggie’s at the exact moment that she’s thinking no, he can’t protect her. Charlie’s all about being the savior, being the protector, but the truth is that he can’t do it. And even though Maggie knows he tries to be that guy, she also knows that some things can’t be unbroken simply by giving points for effort. She shivers and wraps her arms around her submerged body.

“Hey,” Charlie says. He lowers himself into the water. She feels his hands on her hips, his pinkie fingers slipping beneath the band of her skirt, which has wrapped itself around her legs like a rope. It’s tight. Heavy. She twitches.

“I’ll protect you,” he repeats.

“Sharks are sneaky,” Maggie says.

“Yeah.” Charlie wraps his arms around Maggie, and she sinks into him, softly biting his wet shoulder before tucking her chin over it. The water whispers. She touches her nose to Charlie’s neck and, closing her eyes, inhales: aftershave, salt.

When she opens her eyes, she fixes them on the dark line ahead of her. When she was little – and even a year ago - she thought that line meant possibility. Hit that line, she
thought, and something good would happen. Maybe she’d discover a new country, or an
island. There’d be something; that was all that mattered. She’d never even considered the
impossibility of getting there.

“I feel like we’re in a snow globe,” Charlie says, interrupting Maggie’s thoughts. She feels his lips against her hair, hears his heart beating against her own. “Like that one
my mom gave us last Christmas,” he continues, “with the two skiing snowmen.”

“I still don’t understand why snowmen would ski.”

“Regardless,” Charlie says, “my point is that whenever I look into the distance, at
that part where the water touches the sky, I really see that we’re living in a sphere. Like,
the earth really is round.”

Maggie thinks of a quip, but says nothing.

“That probably sounded stupid,” Charlie continues, “but what I mean is that it
reminds me that we’re in the middle of this perfect little circle, and we’re just tiny people
in a gigantic world. And for what purpose? We’re just standing around, waiting to see
what’ll happen. Whether we’ll stay right side up, or if we’ll be shaken up.”

Maggie blinks. She feels something wet near the corner of her mouth. She thinks
it’s bay water, but when she licks it, it’s hot. She picks a star and stares it down. *Shake
me back up.* Eyes narrow, lips set. *Put us right side up.*

She shivers, and Charlie’s grip tightens. He hugs her too hard, and Maggie
imagines her bones squeezing together, smothering her lungs and her heart. “Too hard,”
she whispers, and he must hear her because he adjusts his embrace. But he doesn’t loosen
his grip; he only rearranges it.
Of Apples & Broken Scabs
Whenever Then Is

It rained all morning, the sort of rain that makes a person want to stay in bed. But now, the sky has opened into the ridiculously blue shade of blue that only comes out between storms. Penny cradles her chin in her hand and looks out her office window at the tall, swaying pine tree. It always sways, and even though she knows the tree must move in order not to break, she still wonders what might happen if it leaned so far left or right or over or back that the narrow trunk snapped, fell, and crushed something. She doesn’t know if she’d be quick enough to jump out of the way or if she’d run straight back. Or if, instead of these things, she might just sit and watch, chin in hand, waiting to see exactly what it looks like to have a tree falling on you and how it feels to be hit, really hit, by something that big.

Penny is thinking of these things – of where to run and what to do and whether to act – when Michael calls. She almost doesn’t answer; she almost lets the phone vibrate on her desk so he can leave her a message. But then she remembers the last message he left – *It’s not very nice not to answer the phone when someone calls you from another city, Penny* – and she picks up.

“The elusive Penny.” Michael’s voice always sounds deeper than Penny expects, especially over the phone. “I half-expected you not to pick up.”

“I’m at work.” She shuffles a few papers, degree applications and book order forms. “You?”

“Heading back from lunch.” His voice skips through static, and Penny imagines him walking down Halsted, weaving past people wrapped in heavy overcoats and
scarves. Or maybe he’s walking past Wrigley Field. Whenever Penny thinks of Michael in Chicago, she imagines him in a moving postcard.

“Anything good?” Penny asks. “Soup?”

“Tomato basil.”

Penny pushes her glasses up with her index finger. She used to curse the lack of a bridge on her nose. But then Michael said something one day, about two years ago, when they were first getting to know each other. Something about the way her glasses slipped down her nose, and something about liking it. Something – she wishes she could remember – that made her blush, and that made her suddenly appreciate both glasses and nose.

The sky slips back into gray, and Penny eyes the tree. Left, right, left, right. Down the hall, someone is microwaving popcorn, which makes Penny think that she’d like some popcorn, and so this is how it is, always. Her thoughts leap in fractures, and she can’t seem to keep one thought pinned down long enough to figure out a solution for any problem, much less her Michael problem. Or problems. Something’s happened in the four months after he moved to Chicago for the editing job. They still speak on the phone (like now, as Michael goes on and on about how great his soup was, and how much he likes soup, doesn’t Penny like soup?); they email each other, too, and once or twice a month he returns to New Orleans. And when he does, they eat at the same restaurants they always ate at, and they drink the same wine they always drank, and they end up, always, in the same bed, in the same comforting configuration of arms and legs and torsos and hearts.
“Right?” Michael asks, and Penny says, “Right,” as though she knows what they’ve been discussing. As though it’s four months ago, and they’re having a conversation about what to do over the weekend. As though he never left the city that he vowed, once, to never leave. She doesn’t know if she’ll ever understand that.

At Panola Street Cafe, ordering breakfast.

“Pancakes,” Michael told the waitress. “Extra butter, no syrup.”

“Two eggs,” Penny said. “Over easy. And bacon.” She tapped the tip of the paper menu against the table. She could feel Michael watching her from across the table, could have looked up at him and raised her eyebrows if she wanted to, but instead she kept her focus on the menu. “And a side of hash browns.”

“Over easy?” Michael folded a napkin four times, then pressed it between his palms. “You never get eggs over easy.”

“Sure I do.” Penny watched the waitress walk away. She had nice shoulders. Penny wanted shoulders like that, and maybe legs like that too. Penny wanted a lot of things. She looked at Michael and saw that he was also watching the waitress. “I get them over easy all the time,” she told him. And stop looking at her.

“I’ve never seen you order that.” Michael threw the napkin at Penny’s shoulder. It fell to her lap and she picked it up, shuffling it between her fingers. She knows now, though she didn’t know then, that this is the type of conversation they would have from now on. It was a month after he’d moved to Chicago, and his first visit back to New
Orleans. Already, they were acting like people who no longer knew each other but who were desperate to pretend.

“In Chicago, there’s this place called Tempo.” Michael sipped his coffee. “Great pancakes.”

He’d been doing this all weekend. In Chicago, there was great pizza. In Chicago, there were great festivals. In Chicago, there were many great things, probably great people, too, but Michael didn’t talk about that. Penny had no idea who his coworkers were, who he went out with on weekends.

“Who do you go with?” Penny asked.

“Go with?”

“Who do you go eat with?” Penny poured sugar into her coffee. “You don’t go by yourself, do you?”


*Who are these friends,* Penny wanted to ask, but she didn’t think she should have to. She thought that Michael should offer the information without prodding, because that’s what boyfriends were supposed to do. And so, instead of asking, Penny threw the napkin back at Michael, who was quick enough to catch it. “Pancakes without syrup,” she said.

“Yup,” Michael said.

* * *
The tree’s needles stroke the sky, and Penny thinks it looks like a paintbrush, coloring the sky gray then blue then gray. She’s never seen a sky change colors so quickly and so often. She tells Michael this, tells him that it’s a weird weather day.

“That’s New Orleans,” he says, as though the city and its weather are things that he never abandoned, things that he can still claim.

Rain patters against the window. “What’s it like up there?”

“Sort of gray,” Michael says. “And cold.”

“It’s cold here, too.”

“Yeah, but here it’s cold-cold. Capital C cold.”

“Well, I’m cold.” Penny stands up and touches the window glass. She traces a raindrop with her finger as it slides down. More drops follow until it’s a big, wet road map. “I am very cold.”

And then there’s silence. Penny watches the rain and Michael – Penny doesn’t know what Michael’s doing. Maybe walking. Or maybe he’s reached his office already, and he’s sitting at his desk. Maybe his office window has a tree in front of it, too. She wouldn’t know; he hasn’t told her.

“Well,” Michael says.

“Yeah,” Penny says.

Silence, and just as Penny is about to break it with something – *I miss you, I love you* – Michael says, “I need to get to work, I guess. You want me to call you later?”

Of course she does, she always does, but she says, “If you have time.”

“I’m going to dinner,” Michael says, “but, yeah, if I have time. Or you call me. You never call me.”
“Sure I do.”

“Lies!” He says it high-pitched, the way they both used to say it, as a joke. Penny offers a half-hearted chuckle. “Talk to you then,” he adds, “whenever then is.”

“Yeah,” Penny says, tapping her nails against the glass. “Then.”

On a streetcar, rambling down St. Charles Avenue.

On his second visit, they had breakfast at Panola and then took the streetcar down St. Charles, to the Quarter. Same routine as always, only different than before. Back then, they would bring books to Jackson Square and sit on the grass, reading next to each other and occasionally slipping into naps. They first kissed with Raymond Carver and Joyce Carol Oates at their sides, an impromptu moment that made Michael’s cheeks bloom. That was the same day that Michael, looking up at the Cathedral, said, “How could anyone live anywhere else?”

Now, they constantly moved from shop to shop, bar to bar, as if stopping would break something.

Michael looked out the window at the passing oak trees and homes, restaurants and hotels. Penny liked him in front of this blurred backdrop. Here, between an awkward breakfast and an altered day, things seemed right. With her back against the bench, Penny studied his neck. Two moles under his ear, a white scar from when he was twelve. Something about a dog. He’d told her the story when they first started dating, but she’d forgotten the specifics. The mark had simply become a part of his identity for her, a spot
that she sometimes traced or kissed when they were alone. She thought of kissing it now, then stopped.

His cell phone, balanced on his thigh, began to vibrate. She looked down and saw a female name she didn’t recognize. She tapped Michael on the shoulder.

“Your phone,” she said.

“Oh,” and Michael picked it up, and Penny picked up on something new in his face, a flicker of recognition that quickly faded.

“Aren’t you going to answer it?”

Michael shook his head. “No,” he said. “It’s nobody, really.”

That – the “really” – that’s what struck Penny. And the tone of Michael’s voice, the way he sounded like he was trying to convince himself of the validity of his own answer. She asked if it was a coworker.

“She works in the publicity department,” Michael said. “But yeah, we see each other a lot. She’s cool.”

If a word could shrug, then cool would have done just that, a quick, slight jerk to convey some sort of apathy, a false nonchalance.

After they hang up, Penny stands with her hip against the office wall, her forehead against the cool window. The sky is officially dark. She knows, when she chooses to admit it to herself, that she and Michael had begun slipping away from each other before he moved. They took turns blowing small things like missed calls and forgotten lunch dates out of proportion. Michael started complaining about New Orleans’s rough streets
and humid weather, and Penny took each of these comments personally, as though his loyalty to the city was inextricably linked to his loyalty to her. The night he told her about the job opportunity in Chicago, she opened the curtains over their bedroom window and pointed outside.

“How can you leave this?” she’d asked.

“That’s a fence,” he’d said. “You’re pointing at a fence,” and she knew, then, that he simply didn’t understand.

She stares out the office window, at the rain and the wind and the tree, and thinks of Michael in this new city, next to this new girl whose name starts with an F. The way he evades questions about who he knows and who he sees bothers her. Those sparks fly up in her stomach when she thinks of it, and she always, every time, wants to find a wall to punch. You’re becoming paranoid and bitter, she tells herself, but then she imagines him in this F girl’s house, in her bedroom, and the sparks return.

Envy is green, but jealousy, she’s decided, is red, bright red, the red of stop signs and fire trucks, of apples and broken scabs.

On the corner of Esplanade and Decatur, debating what to do.

“Are you hungry?” Penny pushed her glasses up. “Do you want to eat?”

Michael shrugged, hands in pockets. It was his third visit.

“I don’t know,” he said. “We always eat.”

“You choose,” Penny said. “Since you’re visiting.”

“I always choose,” Michael said.
“That isn’t true.”

“Yes, it is.” The breeze played with his hair; his back tensed; he hunched up his shoulders. “And you always play that card, by the way.”

“What card?”

“The since-you’re-visiting card. It’s like you forget I lived here for three years.”

“I don’t forget.” It came out in a tone she didn’t intend. But there it was, anyway, and Michael caught it.

“Let’s not fight,” he said. “Can we go one day without fighting?”

“We aren’t fighting,” Penny said. “Why do you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Say that we’re fighting when we’re not fighting.” Penny looked over Michael’s shoulder, at a pair of tourists with a camera and a fistful of maps. A girl in overalls passed them on a bike, her pink hair tipped black. “We’re not fighting,” Penny repeated. “We’re discussing.”

“No,” Michael said, “we’re fighting.”

Penny leaned against a tree, propping her foot on the trunk. Her bare knee poked out of a hole in her jeans. “If you don’t want to eat,” she said, eyeing her exposed skin, “then we can just walk down Decatur.”

Michael squinted up at the sky. “Looks like it might rain.”

“Are you made of sugar?”

“See?” Michael raised his eyebrows. “You’re being snarky, so we’re fighting.”

“We only fight because you pick fights,” Penny said. “It’s like you enjoy it.”

“Right,” Michael said. “I enjoy fighting with you.”
They stood, hands in pockets, and in the moment before Michael took her by the arm and led her down the street, Penny let herself become the girl with the cotton candy hair, riding a bike across slated sidewalks: maybe riding in circles, maybe heading toward somewhere specific, but not concerned with the uncertainty.

There’s lightning now, and thunder, and Penny hears her coworkers in the hallway, talking about street flooding and leaving early. Outside, the tree waves furiously, playing dodge ball with the lightning.

Penny picks up her phone and dials Michael’s office number. She will tell him she misses him; she will tell him she loves him; she will tell him all the things she should have been telling him this entire time. The phone rings and rings and finally a voice interrupts it with a bright, decidedly female hello.

“Hi,” Penny says. “I’m sorry, I might have dialed the wrong number. Is this” – and she hopes the answer is no, she wills the answer to be no – “Michael Mozende’s office?”

There’s a pause, and Penny thinks she hears recognition on the other end, and she sees her now, suddenly sees F, right there on the other end. “Yeah,” F says. “This is Michael. But I’m not Mike.” F laughs. “Though I guess that’s obvious, right?”

A clap of thunder shakes Penny’s building, and she wonders if F can hear it all through the phone, inside Michael’s tidy office.

“Anyway,” F says, “I’m sorry he’s not here. I’d try to help you out, but I know nothing about editing.”
“What department do you work in,” Penny asks, because she can’t help herself.

“Publicity.” She tells Penny her name, and asks if she can take a message, but Penny can’t think of anything now that she’s heard the name, heard it spoken by the actual person, in her ear.

“Hello?” F’s voice doesn’t sound impatient. In fact, it sounds nice. Very nice. And not at all like Penny would expect. It isn’t soft, or light, or high. It’s a grounded voice, very distinct. She imagines F must tell good stories and funny jokes.

“If you could just tell him Penny called,” Penny says.

“Penny?” F’s voice changes now.

“Penny.” She picks up a pencil and taps it on her desk. “His girlfriend.”

“Oh.” And now F sounds shaky, off. And Penny aches, because it sounds like F didn’t know Penny existed. And Penny thinks that maybe she and F have both been duped this entire time, and that maybe, if she and F had met under different circumstances, they might be friends, and then Penny would be comforting F, who had the misfortune of getting involved with an involved man.

But then F’s voice comes back, strong. “I’ll let him know you called,” she tells Penny. “And it’s nice to finally meet you. I mean, sort of. Virtually. Over the phone.”

“Yeah,” Penny says, even though she knows F never heard of Michael’s girlfriend, and she never heard of F, either, not really. “Me too.”

“Take care,” F says, and there’s the silent hum of nothing before Penny has a chance to answer.

* * *
In the car, crossing the bridge over the Mississippi River, before he moved and before she missed him.

Penny rested her head on the door, her face turned up to the wind. Michael was driving. He had one hand draped lazily over her knee, and even though he was speaking to her, she couldn’t really hear him, because of the wind. She could have rolled up her window, but she liked the way it felt on her face, the way too much air made it difficult to breathe.

He was moving, and soon, but she hadn’t quite decided how to deal with this. She thought about suggesting that they take a break from one another, but every time she’d start to bring it up, he looked at her so earnestly, his brown eyes filled with such dark intensity that she couldn’t think of the right way to say those words without sounding hurtful. She would miss him – she knew this – and so she said nothing.

They exited the bridge, and the wind died, and Penny heard Michael say, “We’ll be okay, though.” She lifted her head to the sky. “We’ll be okay,” he repeated, “right?”

“Yes,” Penny said to the clouds.

“And you’ll be there soon,” he continued. “Once I’ve been there for a while, once I’m settled. Or now. Why don’t you just come now?”

“I can’t.”

“You can get a job there. You’ll make friends. And you’ll have me.”

Penny didn’t know, then, how to explain it to him. How to explain that it wasn’t about the job, or the friends, or even about him. It was her city. She wanted to tell him this, to explain it in some poetic way with pretty words. Words that might convince him
to stay, too, except that she knew Michael. He wasn’t built like her, to stay in one place for very long.

Michael squeezed her knee before repeating, “We’ll be okay,” and Penny wonders, now, why neither of them had the courage to admit that they were wrong.

Wind whips needles off the tree. Some fall to the ground; others stick to the windows; others fly out, far, to where Penny can’t see. She watches the tree sway – left and right and over and back – and she hears, mixed with the hammering rain and cracking thunder, the familiar ring of the phone. She almost answers it, almost makes the ringing stop, but she doesn’t. She knows the words won’t come out yet, not quite.
See Jane Spin

“We need frozen yogurt, Jane.” Molly says this to me very seriously, as though we’re in a crime drama and the yogurt’s crucial evidence in the case of Monty the Mall Killer. I’ve always wanted to be in one of those shows, playing the brassy, smart, and surprisingly sexy forensics expert. “The amusement ride operator wasn’t killed,” I’d reveal. “He’s the killer!” And then the FBI chief, unable to resist my surprising sexiness, would seduce me into the back room and out of my forensics gear.

Being an expert in nothing, as well as not even predictably sexy, I instead sit at a table in Woodbury Mall’s food court with my fraternal twin sister, Molly. It’s the summer, a three-month hiatus between college graduation and careers we’ve yet to choose. I’m spending this break working a part-time job at Music Depot; Molly’s spending it doing nothing and living with our parents. Pretty much the same thing she did in college.

“Frozen yogurt?” A grease-splotched cheese pizza rests between us. I’ve already eaten two pieces, and I’m eyeing a third. I’m bored.

Molly swivels in her chair, and the light catches her hair in that brilliant way that, no matter how much I love her, makes me profoundly depressed. It makes me wonder how she got to be the one with fire hair, and why I’m the one with muddy eyes.

I turn around and face one of the multiple mirrors set up around the food court. People hunch over their tables, self-destructing by way of tacos and Hello Panda’s egg rolls. I scowl at my reflection. I’ve never been like Molly, with petite features and delicate limbs. “My little porcelain doll,” our mother would call my sister. And when I
bowed my head and sulked, my father would put his arm around me and say, “And you’re our tough little cookie. Smart and strong.” Now, Molly’s the chick with the lampshade on her head at the end of the party, and I’m the one cleaning up, asking people to please deposit all beer cans in the recycling bin.

“So?” Molly plucks a bottle of hand sanitizer from her purse. Flipping open the top, she offers me a theatrical wink and nods in the direction of Todd’s Frozen Yogurt. I follow her gaze and see an attractive guy with one blue streak in his hair standing behind the counter and pulling a lever. He swirls frozen yogurt into cake cones and plastic cups.

“I don’t know,” I say.

“What do you mean you don’t know?” Molly asks.

“He isn’t really my type,” I say.


I want to ask how she could have possibly mentioned Luke accidentally. I want to ask if she knows that every time I hear his name, or see someone who looks like him, or see the car he drove — ’95 Camry, blue — every single time, a brick socks me right in the stomach. And that brick is wrapped in a note, and that note says, “Dear Jane: In case you forgot, Luke did not choose you. He chose San Francisco and Atsuko, his pocket-sized girlfriend. Thanks, bye.”

I want to ask these things of the girl in front of me, the girl who is me but also is not. Instead, I tear a triangle of pizza from the pie and plop it onto my plate after taking a bite. “Too young.”
“You always think up excuses.” Molly fluffs her high ponytail. In denim cutoffs, fake band tee, and bright plastic bracelets, she almost passes for a hip adolescent.

“I’m just being practical,” I say, picking up my Music Depot nametag and slipping it over my head.

“Exactly.” Molly stands up. “You Capricorns.” She raises an eyebrow, and for a moment it’s like I’m looking in a mirror. Then she smiles a broad, particularly Molly sort of smile, and the moment passes. “I bet he’s a Scorpio,” she says. “Scorpios love me.” As she walks away, I watch the mess of red curls bounce against the nape of her neck. She doesn’t have to settle for yogurt.

As I descend the elevator, heading to the job that pays enough for my rent and half of my utilities, I watch Operation Flirt. Molly’s leaning on the yogurt counter, rubbing the pointed toes of her pink cowboy boot against the back of her leg. No frozen treats in sight. Molly’s flirt laugh, a sexy little purr, rumbles after me as I glide downstairs. And I wonder how she puts the boys of her past behind her, how it’s so easy for her to flirt with someone she’s barely met. In the back of my mind, always, there is Luke.

Luke and I were that pair of unfortunate friends who were often confused for lovers. When we went out to eat, we were given cozy booths in the back of the restaurant. When we encountered parents walking with their children, they’d ask us how many we had, and then tell us we’d love having our own one day. It amazed me sometimes the things that people would say to complete strangers. The fact that we were one female and one male,
walking down a street together, within a relatively close proximity, tricked people into thinking we were something more than what we were. Luke never corrected them. He’d just laugh and play along, and then, as we walked away, he’d say something to me, like, “That’s funny, isn’t it?” And the thing is, it never was funny for me. Not even a little bit.

I think about this on the way home from work, and as soon as I get home – before I even take off my nametag and kick out of my shoes – I check my email. No messages from Luke. I go to my bed, pull a pillow to my chest, and switch on the movie projector in my brain.

I start the scene at my favorite part: as I walk across campus, a gust of wind blows through my body and sends slanted sheets of rain into my face. I run clumsily across the grass and duck into the nearest building.

“Is it raining?” a voice asks. I turn my head and see a tall, blue-eyed guy. I’ve always had a weakness for tall. The wide green eyes of an anime character stare at me from his T-shirt.

“No,” I say, wringing my hair out until there’s a puddle at his feet.

“Okay,” he says. “Stupid question.” He takes off his cap, runs a hand through his hair, and fits the hat back over his head. “At least you look pretty wet.”

“Really wet,” I say.

“No,” he says, “I meant you’re pretty. When you’re wet.”

I can’t decide whether he’s creepy or nice or cute. Well, I know he’s cute. So, really, the question is whether he’s creepy or nice. I go with the latter.

“That’s sweet,” I say. “Random, but sweet.”

“Random’s one of my strengths.” He smiles; he has nice teeth.
This is where I always stop. This is when I pull my knees in and bury my nose into my pillow, breathing in the sweet lavender scent that’s left over from my discount dryer sheets. It’s my favorite memory, this meeting, because it’s the one time when we had no past to look back to or reference. I know Luke wasn’t any kind of boyfriend – Molly is always quick to remind me of that – but he was some kind of something.

The phone rings. I shoot up from bed, stub my toe on the end table, and hobble to the desk. In the process, I knock over a bottle of vitamins and a dusty debate team trophy.

“Yeah,” I say into the mouthpiece.

“Okay, seriously? You were sleeping?” I don’t know how Molly knows this, but she always can tell. I squint and look at the clock. 8:00 pm.

“It was a long day,” I say, rubbing my temples. “I’m tired.”

“The night is young,” Molly says. “Should I come over? I’m coming over.”

“The night is not young,” I protest. “The night is old, and so are we.”

“We aren’t old, weirdo.”

“I’m going back to bed.”

“You’re silly. And anyway, Mom wanted me to call and remind you about Sunday. You didn’t forget about Sunday, did you?”

Sometimes, I think our mom should just pay Molly to be her secretary. “I work on Sunday,” I say, falling into the armchair and draping my legs over the armrest.

“Who works on Sunday?”

“Smartass,” Molly says. Then, the inevitable follow-up: “This is why you’re single, J. You’re too harsh. You have too much testosterone. That’s common for your sun sign, by the way.”

Molly once read my palms and informed me that I would enjoy passion for many years of my life. “Sunday’s the day Ian is coming over,” she continues. “You remember Ian? Ms. Rosie’s son?”

“Ms. Rosie has a son?”

“He’s a Sagittarius.”

“Well,” I say, “in that case, let’s start picking out curtains.”

“The important thing,” Molly says, “is that he was born in the Year of the Cock.”

I hear Molly’s laugh, a hard, thick sound that doesn’t at all fit her tiny body. It’s her real laugh, the one that trumps the girly giggle and the kitten purr. It’s the laugh I love, the one that forces my mouth to turn upward.

“That’s the worst thing you’ve ever said,” I tell her.

“He really is a Cock,” she continues. “And apparently Cocks and Rats – ”

“Tell Mom I’m working Sunday,” I interrupt. “Tell her I don’t have time to meet a Cock.”


The problem, as far as I can remember, is that Luke never belonged to me. The entire time we were friends he had Atsuko, who went to school somewhere far away. Where
she went didn’t really matter; what mattered was that, without her physical presence, I could pretend she didn’t exist.

And yet, even when we went out to movies, just the two of us, and even when we stayed in his apartment until the sun came up, there was always this third person sitting between us. I felt it, and I think he must have, too, because he would mention her at odd times. “Do you have any orange juice?” I’d ask, and then he’d say something like, “Yeah, Atsuko bought some last week when she visited.” And I’d say, “Oh, right,” as if he’d even told me she was in town. As if the fact that he’d ignored me the previous week hadn’t bothered me.

We only crossed a line once. It was the week before graduation and a month before he left for San Francisco, to live with Atsuko while she studied film. Luke and I had been sitting on his couch, heckling old episodes of Who’s the Boss and pretending we didn’t actually like it. Time passed quickly there; I never wanted it to end. But on that night, he eventually turned to me and said, “Hey, I’m sleepy,” and I took that as my cue to leave.

At the door, he held the knob as though he were about to open it for me. Then, he turned around.

“Well,” he said, “thanks for coming.”

“Thanks for having me,” I said.

“Hope you enjoyed being had,” Luke said, and then we both laughed. He was acting weird, almost nervous, and I couldn’t figure out why. And then he gave me a queer sort of smile, a smile I’d never seen. It was more than lips; it was cheeks and nose and eyes, and that, that right there, that’s what I work so hard to remember. It was the most
honest face I’ve ever seen. I started to say something – I can’t even remember what it was – but it doesn’t really matter, anyway, because Luke stopped my words with a kiss. And he was there, and I met him, and everything was darkness and light and stars, falling, falling, to where I didn’t, to where I can’t, know.

“I’m glad you decided to come out,” Molly says, as we drive down a well-lit, suburban street. “You’ll like Kyle. He’s very nice, and he promised a ton of beer at this party.”

Where does Molly meet these people? “I don’t want to stay out late,” I say.

“J-a-a-a-ne.” Molly stretches my name like elastic. “When’s the last time you went out?”

We pass a street called Daphne, and I wonder whether there’s a street named Jane anywhere. “I don’t know,” I say. “Last year?”

“Maybe last century,” Molly says, and my mind briefly plays a clip of Luke, our junior year of college, asking me why I never wanted to do anything. “I know you’re busy,” he’d said. “But you can’t study all the time.”

“I don’t,” I said.

“Well, you study a lot.”

“It’s biology,” I said. We were in the University Center, eating nachos. I licked cheese from my fingers, then picked up a napkin absentmindedly. “It requires a lot of studying.”
“Atsuko’s busy, too,” he said, and I burned. “She’s already working on her senior project, but she finds time to go out.” He looked sad for a minute, then said, “Or, hey, look at Molly.”

What Molly lacked in academic drive, she made up for in social activities. She didn’t have a declared major yet, but she had a date for every weekend. She rarely held down a boyfriend, but that’s not what it was necessarily about for her. I think she was more concerned with the excitement, the thrill of new boys. And I hated that, with each new boy, Molly’s interests changed. One week, she loved salsa music; the next, just salsa. With every boy came a new favorite, a new norm.

Me, I just wanted one. One who would always be there, who wouldn’t require anything of me except that I be Jane. I wondered, briefly, if Atsuko was tearing up the social scene wherever she was, and if this idea made Luke burn the same way I was, at this moment.

“Don’t compare us,” I said, referring to Atsuko.

“I didn’t mean to,” Luke said. “But you’re sisters. It’s a little weird you don’t go out together, is all.”

I wanted to wad up the napkin and throw it at his forehead. I wanted to say No, no, you never get it. I didn’t mean Molly, why would I mean Molly? But instead I ripped the napkin into a pile of snowflakes.

In the car, I pull at the bottom of the denim micro-mini that Molly had me wear for tonight. My thighs have never been so exposed. The car stops, and I look at the house we’re in front of. It’s big, with two rocking chairs on the front porch and a giant
American flag by the door. Cars line the street, and a few couples appear to be groping in the darkness.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “Are we in a teen movie?”


“Oh, no.” I sit back. “No, no. Let’s go.”

“Oh, come on,” Molly says. “Lighten up. We’re not 85. We’re not even 25. We are totally young enough to go to this. And besides, half of them aren’t in high school anymore.”

“Because they just graduated?”

Molly waves a hand in the air, and a whiff of perfume hits me. “Details.”

I look out the window. One couple – the one on the steps – is really going at it. Another, beneath a tree, appears to be fighting. I look back at the couple on the steps and try to remember if I ever had that experience. Then I remember that I didn’t, and that my first kiss was when I was thirteen, and I wasn’t kissed after that until the night in Luke’s house. Two kisses, and neither they nor I went anywhere.


“Free booze,” Molly says, as though this would entice me. “Just keep telling yourself that.”

Inside this Kyle guy’s house (or, more accurately, the basement), Molly and I find ourselves surrounded by what our grandmother would call whippersnappers. Identical people, all from the same cookie cutters. Hip-hop blares from a stereo in the corner, and a kid in a backwards Knicks cap pours drinks and shots for a crowd that certainly isn’t
supposed to be having drinks and shots. Girls with long, fried hair bump and grind against each other, their short skirts inching up their thighs, while guys in popped collars and baggy jeans watch, beers in one hand, crotches in the other.

“They look so young,” I shout over the music, nearly crashing into a very busy dancer to my left.

“Yeah,” Molly shouts back, and for the first time she looks worried. I realize that even she, in her strappy dress, heels, and giant accessories, appears outdated. The other girls shoot us evil looks, and one little firecracker even body slams me as she walks by, spitting out an angry, “Watch it, fucking ho.”

“You’d better be talking about a garden tool,” Molly yells after her.

“I’ve never been called a fucking anything,” I say.

“Girls didn’t say that word in our day,” Molly says, and I want to hug her for acting just a little bit like a grandma. “Oh well,” she says, squaring her shoulders. “Minor setback. Let’s go find some fellas.”

“No,” I say, grabbing her arm. “No fellas. For God’s sake, Molly, they aren’t even legal yet.”

“Some of them must be,” she says, pulling away from me. “Just got to find the right ones.”

At that moment, someone steps on my heel. I crouch down; a large red welt rises from the top of my shoe. “I blame you,” I shout up to Molly, who’d suggested that I wear one of her many pairs of platform heels. With one hand tugging my skirt and the other patting my injury, I look up and notice Molly’s already halfway across the room, chatting up a group of guys in fitted T-shirts and faded blue jeans. There, in the middle, is
a guy with one blue streak in his hair. Yogurt. I spin around to find an exit, then hit my
nose on something hard. Suddenly, I’m face to chest with a boy in a black T-shirt.

“Shit,” he says. Bright green eyes shine from skin the color of sweet tea. “I
didn’t mean to hit you. You okay?”

“Sure.” I pull on the bottom of my skirt. “Yeah, okay.”

“Are you one of Kyle’s friends?” His hair is fixed in tight cornrows, and I
wonder how long it took him to do that. I’m pondering how to sneak in a Molly purr
when a cluster of drunken cheerleaders walk behind me, and I’m pushed closer to him.

“This is a nice shirt,” I say. Our sudden proximity makes it difficult for me to
look up at him, so I’ve just said this to his incredible chest, the chest capable of breaking
women’s noses. “Is it cotton?” Geez, Jane, get some social skills.

“I’m Ryan,” he says, and I mentally add up the years between us. If he’s
eighteen, then that’s six years. Six, six, a lot happens in six years. Then I think about my
own life, and I realize that not much actually did happen in those six years. So, really,
we’re practically the same age.


After three beers and two shots that burn like dragon fire, I find myself in the
difficult position of determining whether I am a) drunk, or b) acting drunk. In my hazy
mind, these seem like two completely different things. I turn to Ryan, convinced that I
have all of my faculties and that I’m simply playing drunk in order to win him over. It’s
all part of my master plan because I am suddenly sly, sly. But then, just as I am certain in
these cunning maneuvers, I sense the ground beneath me starting to slant, and I topple a
little to the left, a little to the right, until I’m eventually in Ryan’s arms and doing something like a dance.

“We’re dancing,” I say, feeling both giggly and slightly stupid for feeling giggly. But then Ryan grins and pulls me closer, and I decide that he, too, is a tad drunk. I shut my eyes, push my nose against his shirt, and breathe. He smells like a hundred other boys I’ve never known.

Every now and then, I scan the area and wonder if I’ll see Molly holding up a wall with the blue-streaked kid, or even just Molly, sitting in a chair and watching me dance. I’d prefer that. I want her to see me having a good time; I want her to know that I’m capable of dancing with a boy and completely keeping my cool. I step on Ryan’s toes.

“Sorry,” I say, and he answers me with a kiss on the head, and my body answers this kiss by buzzing warm all over.

A new DJ takes over at some point, and he must prefer country music, because every other song is Shania Twain or Toby Keith or some other twanged vocalist. For a while, I drown it out. But then, a song comes on that I can’t ignore. Ryan keeps his arms around me but he lifts his head, as though he’s looking for some prankster in a cowboy hat. “This is fucked up,” he yells. “Play real music!”

Luke likes country music. Or, he did. Perhaps I’m no longer qualified to define his likes and dislikes, his favorites, his aversions. Perhaps San Francisco has changed him. But I remember hearing this song on the radio once, during a day trip to the beach. We sometimes had days like that, days when I allowed myself to play pretend. There’s a line in the song, how’s it go? If we were lost in fields of clover – yes, that’s it, it’s playing
right now, in this basement. And Luke liked this line so much that it became his mission to collect four-leaf clovers throughout the day. At one gas station, he actually crouched on the ground and searched the soft green clusters while I held drinks in my hands and studied the top of his golden head.

“You’d think we’d find at least one,” he said.

“Keep looking,” I said, and I meant it. I wanted more time to study him.

“I should have brought my camera,” he said, bending forward. The tips of his boxers peeked from his jeans. I blushed.

“I’ll take a mental picture,” I said.

“Good idea,” he said. “And then maybe we can draw it later.”

“With finger paints.”

He turned around, and his eyes curved into perfect moons as he smiled, and now I saw his face and those eyes and that smile and, still, those boxers. I raised one of the drinks to my neck and pressed it against my skin.

“Or sidewalk chalk,” he suggested.

I crinkled my nose in the way that I knew he liked, the way that made him make that face. “Perhaps,” I said, “we should do it in blood.”

He laughed. “You’re so weird.”

“Yes,” I said. “This is true.”

He shook his head, then returned to the ground. He spread his fingers and ran his hands across clover tops, across unlucky clusters. “You’re funny,” he said. “Do you know that? That you’re funny?”

I shrugged.
“You are,” he said. “It’s why I love you.”

He didn’t mean it the way I wanted him to. Or maybe he did. Sometimes I think he did, and other times I’m convinced he didn’t. And sometimes I tell myself it doesn’t matter, and other times I know it does. Of course it does.

We didn’t find any four-leaf clovers. Not a one.

In the basement, our bodies dance, but I don’t. The room spins around me and all I can do is watch the blur of colors and shapes whisk by. The song drives an ice pick through the back of my head – or maybe it’s the liquor – and it tunnels through my brain and impales me right between the eyes. If I try to move, I think, my head will split and splatter on the ground, like some gruesome scene from a Japanese film.

But if I do move – if I tilt my head up, if I face my lips to Ryan’s – but before I finish this thought, I catch sight of Molly, hands on hips, talking to two boys at once, and I wonder how she does it, how she doesn’t let the past hold her back. I picture her brain, open and empty and free, and I decide I want that, too. So I move my head, expecting everything to tumble out like a filmstrip, only it doesn’t, and now I’m just staring at Ryan, and he at me, and I, for the first time, make a move.
When I was ten, I had an imaginary sister named Lulu who only appeared when I was sitting in the back seat of my parents’ Toyota. I’d look out the window and watch as she ran alongside the car. She always wore the same thing: a torn white pirate shirt, dirty cropped cargo pants, and no shoes. Her hair flew behind her, sometimes red, sometimes blonde. It was never the jet black that my father and I shared. She didn’t look like any other girl I knew, but, then, neither did I. She was just Lulu, and she always ran.

At first, she ran alone. She jumped over canals, climbed trees and hopped from one to the other with effortless ninja skill. After a while, she started running with, but never from, creatures: squirrels and rabbits and deer and birds. I’d squint and press my nose to the glass, wishing I could leap out of my parents’ car and run, run with Lulu, and run with the animals.

And then I met Kate.

Kate chose me. This is true, even though she wouldn’t agree if you asked her. And if you did ask her, if you walked right up to her and said, “You chose Yoshi,” she’d be able to convince you that we chose each other. Kate’s persuasive. But take my word for it. I was there.

I stand on Kate’s stoop, waiting for her to answer the door. She hasn’t left her apartment since her surgery two weeks ago. I come every day, sit with her on the couch, and try to get her to at least walk around the block. “Doctor’s orders,” I tell her. “You
should at least stretch your legs.” She doesn’t listen, though. She wants to sit and watch Food Network while she doesn’t eat, waiting for the phone to ring with news from the oncologist. Waiting to find out if all the bad stuff got out in surgery, and if she needs injections of “good” poison to zap whatever it is that’s there, growing, killing.

Pulling my hair into a ponytail and holding it up with my hands, I stand on Kate’s front porch and look across the street at the cemetery. It’s not like other cemeteries in New Orleans, the ones with graves above ground. This one hides everything deep below, crooked stone markers popping out of the dirt and grass, blindingly white in the hot September sun. Sometimes, when I’m waiting for Kate to answer the door, I look at the cemetery and wonder what would happen if our little city filled up, if everything we kept hidden floated to the top.

Today, I don’t think about that. Instead, I stare at one of the tombstones, one that looks a little whiter and a little newer, and think of other things.

The door opens, and a paper-doll of Kate greets me with a thin smile. Thin like her arms and her legs and her hair and her face. I wonder what she’s eating, and then I wonder if she’s eating. It’s the same script in my head, day in and day out. I push my way through the door. The cat immediately starts rubbing its head against my ankles, winding its body around my feet so that I can’t move.

“See?” Kate stoops to pick up the orange cat. “I told you Ginger likes you. Don’t you, Ginger?” Ginger purrs.

“Ginger and I have a mutual understanding,” I say. I look around the apartment. Kate’s always been a very neat person, but lately her apartment has crossed the line between organized and unlived-in. A rumpled afghan, a dented pillow, and scattered kitty
litter are the only signs of life. I peek into the kitchen and eye the layers of dust on the appliances.

I’m back, I tell the dust.

Still here, it responds.

I turn to Kate. “So,” I say, “you’ve been cooking.”

“You know me, Yosh,” Kate says, and I wish I did. She sits on the couch and pulls her knees to her chest, then wraps the afghan around her body like a cocoon. “Food Network?”

I sit on the couch, next to her feet. “We could,” I say. “Or we could take a walk.”

Kate stares at me, a blank stare, and I stop myself from saying something irrationally sarcastic like, “You know, a walk? Two legs, moving, down the street? Remember those?” Instead, I say, “Just around the block. It’s a really nice day.”

Kate picks up the remote. “I thought it was going to rain,” she says, and even though there isn’t a cloud in the sky, I let her flip channels and sit on the couch like a turnip. She flips until she gets to a show with a group of guys on motorcycles, the round Food Network symbol on the right corner of the screen. “Have you seen this?” she asks.

“Doctor call yet?” I ask.

“These guys travel all across the country, looking for road food,” Kate continues. “I think I’ve seen this episode. It’s a good one, though.”

I tear my eyes away from Kate and onto the television screen. I watch as one of the motorcycle guys – I think he’s the host – digs a hole in the snow and tries lighting a flame. He tries two, three times, but no go. We watch, silent; finally, a lick of fire shoots up. “That’s it,” Kate says, and she says it so quietly that I almost don’t hear it. Two
minutes later, the entire crew is driving their bikes down a steep, snowy hill. I look at Kate, who’s watching this with so much intensity that I wonder where she’s gone. For the first time in weeks, I see something flicker in her eyes.

Lately, I’ve been dreaming that I’m eleven years old again, sitting in the back of a Toyota. I start by watching Lulu, and she runs. I’m laughing and shouting from inside the car, “Run, Lulu, run!” And then I’m twenty-six, and no one is driving the car, but I’m still in the back seat. I yell out the window, “Lulu, no one is driving! You need to come drive!” And Lulu turns, and her face is Kate’s, and her eyes flash deep with fear. And she’s running from foxes, foxes with giant white wings. And the foxes rise and fall, rise and fall, snapping at her heels. And I want to scream, I want to yell that this is not how it happens, this is not how it happens, but nothing comes out of my mouth except for a cold, aching silence.

Before anything else, I saw Kate’s feet. It was the first day of sixth grade, at a brand new school with brand new kids who weren’t interested in a scrawny, black-haired girl with dark eyes and a face full of freckles. So I sat on a swing, between chubby Georgia Bovine and crater-faced Walter Carter. The Swing Set Losers. If I have to sit here for three years, I thought, I might never make it to high school.

And then a pair of feet appeared, right in front of me. And before I looked up – before my eyes traveled past the white knee socks and over the plaid skirt, around the
heart-pointed chin and into her very brown eyes – before all of that, I studied her shoes. They were tiny.

“Hi,” she said, standing on the packed dirt. Her feet pointed outward, like a dancer or a duckling.

That’s when I looked up, thought that her brown hair was the curliest I’d ever seen.

“Want me to give you a push?” the curliest-haired girl asked.

“Sure,” I said, and I realize now that I didn’t even think about it.

She walked behind me, and I felt myself rising backwards. I looked at Georgia, then Walter. They both stared at her as though she’d come from outer space, and for the first time in my life I felt a surging wave that I’ve since defined as superiority. Turning my head, I saw her hand gripping the swing chains. “Kate,” she said, as though twelve-year-olds always introduced themselves formally before engaging in swing pushing.

“Ann,” I said, “but you can call me Yoshi.” In an effort to make myself less boring, I’d chosen the nickname from a Nintendo character. It had yet to catch on. I felt heat prick my cheeks.

“Awesome,” Kate said. “Yoshi.”

She said it perfectly, and as soon as I thought this she released me, and I felt myself fall and rise, fall and rise, and I wondered why I never realized before that I might need a push. And I wondered why, out of the Swing Set Losers, Kate came to me, grabbed my chains, let me go and caught me again.

* * *
In the apartment, Kate’s legs bounce with nervous energy. The motorcyclists are still eating. I watch Kate watch television, and I feel frustrated. What are we doing, I want to ask her. We’re doing nothing, that’s what we’re doing. This is crap.

I’m not doing nothing, she would tell me. I’m waiting. This is how I wait.

We’re spending so much time waiting that we aren’t living, I want to tell her. What are you afraid of? You’re a survivor, you’re aces, why don’t you see that?

If I did this – if I posed these questions and forced these answers – then she might look at me, and her eyes might blanket me with hurt and fear and pain, and I might almost understand how she feels. I didn’t survive, she might say. Not yet. And if she said that, I’d slap her, right in the face, even though I know it would make my hand burn for the rest of my life.

Sometimes I want to ask Kate where she went. Sometimes I want all of the specifics: how the needles felt, how soon the anesthesia kicked in. Whether she saw a light, and whether that light was white, or yellow, or black, or nonexistent. Sometimes I want to know how it felt when she woke up, whether she felt everything or nothing. I used to be content to keep it buried, far and under and away from me, so that I didn’t know anything about it. Now, there are times – most of the time – that I want to know, I need to know, all of it. I know I should be able to ask, but I can’t, so I don’t.

* * *

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After the motorcyclists ride down the mountain, they eat fried pies outside a rundown gas station. A giant prairie dog statue stands guard atop the porch overhang. Below him are big, red letters: PRAIRIE DOG TOWN, HOME OF FRIED PIES AND THE 8,000 POUND PRAIRIE DOG.

“Are fried pies the official food of prairie dogs?” Kate asks.

“I don’t know enough about fried pies to answer that,” I say.

Kate sits up and rubs her eyes. “Maybe I’ll take a nap.”

“You sure you don’t want to stretch your legs?”

“I’ll stretch them,” Kate says. “I’ll stretch them all over this couch,” and she puts her feet on my lap.

I tap my fingers on her ankles. “That doesn’t count,” I say. “I bet you’d stretch them for an 8,000 pound prairie dog.”

Kate cocks her head, as though she’s really considering this. “Maybe I would,” she says, and when I laugh she shakes her head. “I mean it,” she says. “I’ve never seen an 8,000 pound prairie dog.”

“I’ve never eaten fried pies,” I say.

“Let’s do it.”

“Eat fried pies?”

“Well, yeah. We’ll take a road trip.” Kate throws off the afghan and heads to the back of the apartment. Ginger and I exchange looks. Kate returns two seconds later with her laptop. I watch as she types, quickly, then hands me the computer. Across the screen are pictures of dancing prairie dogs, with a headline that says, “The Pride of Oklahoma!”

“You’re ridiculous,” I say.
“I know,” Kate says. “But read.”

I read the screen: “Prairie Dog Town, Home of the 8,000 pound Prairie Dog!” A picture of a five-legged steer accompanies a caption that says, “Come see animals you normally wouldn’t see at a zoo. We also sell pies, gas, soda, and disposable cameras, all at a reasonable price.”

“What do you think?” Kate asks.

What I think is that I don’t know what to think, that maybe she doesn’t even know what she’s thinking. Why would a person who won’t leave her couch want to cross state lines? But then I see her face, and I see how much older she’s grown in just fourteen days. I see us in a car, windows down, driving past cornfields and cows and windmills. And I see us walking nature trails and swimming in creeks, and then I see Kate, Old Kate, slowly evolving into something three-dimensional, something real. And I think to myself that an 8,000 pound prairie dog might be something worth seeing if that’s what it takes to get Kate back.

“Well,” I say, “if it’s at a reasonable price.” And at that moment, the phone rings. I look at Kate, and she looks at her feet. Don’t be stupid, I should tell her. Answer the phone. But she just looks at her feet, and I look at them, too, and I decide I really don’t want to answer it, either.

There are only two times in my life when I honestly thought I might die. The first was entirely my fault. Kate and I were nineteen, on our way to a party, and I took an illegal left turn. And then we were spinning, spinning, and a bright white light clouded my
vision. My screams clashed with Kate’s until they were one, until we slammed to a stop. And the light snapped off, quick as it came, to reveal a starkly faded reality.

“Kate,” I said, eyes on the broken windshield. “Kate, Kate.” Each time I said her name, and each time she didn’t respond, my voice hammered louder in my ears. Someone appeared at my window and asked if we were all right. “Kate,” was all I said, all I could say. I hadn’t even registered yet that smoke was rising from the hood of the car, that the airbag had burned my wrists and my neck. All I could register was the terrifying thought that I might be sitting with a corpse.

I turned my head, and I saw her blink. “Kate,” I said, and she turned to look at me. A trail of blood trickled from her ear, down to her cheek. “I think I hit my head,” she said, and her eyes, full of confusion but empty of blame, filled my own.

Once we were in the ambulance, Kate worked on preventing us from getting amnesia. “What did you have for breakfast this morning?” She quizzed me as we lay in adjacent stretchers.

“I didn’t have breakfast,” I said.

“You didn’t have it?” Kate asked. “Or you don’t remember it?”

“You two are a pair,” the EMT worker said.

“Sisters,” Kate corrected him.

“Lucky sisters,” I added.

“Luc-kay!” Kate said, then she asked EMT Guy what he’d had for breakfast.

By the end of the day, Kate had stitches in her head, and I had two crutches. She had to shave a chunk of hair by her ear, and my left knee swelled to the size of a grapefruit. But we were alive and ready to tell the tale of near death to anyone who would
listen. We were celebrities, girls who’d cheated fatality, and even though the accident was completely my fault, Kate never once made me feel like she had to forgive me. It was never “Yoshi’s accident”; it was always “our accident,” “our fault,” “our story.” Always our.

When we got into the car accident, I thought, “This is not how we die.” Years later, when Kate and I went on a roller coaster and the security bar wouldn’t fit over our laps, and I felt myself rising off the seat, I thought, “This is certainly not how we die,” and I slammed all of my weight against the bar and held us down. And when Kate got sick, when I first got the call, I thought, “This isn’t how we die,” and then I realized that it had nothing to do with we. It was about Kate, just Kate, and for the first time I confronted the possibility of a life where I existed and she did not.

It happens again tonight, the dream of Lulu with the Kate face. She runs in puddles, falls in mud. It’s raining. She’s ahead of me; she looks so tall; and I am moving fast. Too fast, I think, and so I tell myself to slow down. But my legs keep moving, and my arms keep moving, and I realize that I’m running on all fours. And I look down, still running, and see fur, burnt orange, and claws with black and red, and I don’t know what the red is but I cannot stop running. The dirt beneath me slowly falls away from my feet, until I realize that I’m flying. And to my surprise, it feels good.
The air rushes beneath my paws, and I feel a breeze by my ears as I reach Kate, and I fly low to the ground and try to grab her ankle, tell her to stop running, but she simply says, “Let me go! Let me go!” But I won’t - my heart hurts too much - and I say that she needs to return; she needs to come back; I need her back. But all that comes out is a bark, a growl, and she falls beneath me as I pounce. And I tear at her clothes, her hair, her fingernails. I rip off her skin in one, two, three easy snips. I search and search for what I miss, what I need. What has to be there, somewhere, deep inside. And in the end, I find nothing but bones.

The next day, we plan the trip. I get maps and a trip-tick and I even buy some Oklahoma guidebooks. I get Kate a cowboy hat and make her wear it, and I make myself memorize the look on her face as she laughs, really laughs, the hat perched on her head as silly as a cowboy hat always looks on a person who isn’t a cowboy. We discuss which fried pies we’ll eat, and in what order, and Kate tells me that what we really need to do is go to Turner Falls, see the natural pond beneath the waterfalls, amidst mountains and cliffs and hills. And I say yes, of course, we’ll do all of those things. We must.

When the phone rings – and of course it does - we let the noise wash over our heads as we plot, we map, we plan. There may be a day when we can confront the light, and the needles, and our fear. There may. But today is not that day, because today is the day we prepare – for waterfalls, for prairie dogs, for things we’ve never known but must discover before we die. And when we are done, when we’ve seen all there is to see, I will sit in the shadows while my sister swims, renewed, in water that’s blue, blue, blue.
Evolution of a Smart Girl

He was the first one to look at you like that. That smoky look with the boyish grin. All fun and games, you hot little thing. That’s how he worked what he worked on a girl, but you didn’t know that yet. He knew the way to a girl’s heart was to make himself look like two things at once: the movie star she had inappropriate dreams about, and the boy she caught frogs with when she was eight and developed an unrequited crush on when she was nine.

You never wore pink when you were growing up. You preferred blue jeans, T-shirts, dirty sneakers. You can’t climb trees in dresses. Others told you how to be a girl, and you didn’t trust them. You never believed that being a girl had anything to do with pink or princesses. Those were stereotypes. You knew, because you were smart, that being a girl meant more. To be a girl, you needed to know how to play the game: how to be coy and cute and tough as nails. All things at once.

When you were sixteen, you played flag football with the boys in your neighborhood. You liked dodging the assault, proving that girls can be quicker than boys. And on that day when you scraped your knee on your way to snatching a flag, you fell into him. And you looked up and into his eyes, with pupils so big and black that they swallowed all of the brown, brown that matched his eyebrows, which were raised, and then his smile, that smile, a smirk so lopsided that all you could do was stare at it, begging it to stay directed at you, always.

* * *
Others told you to let the boys win at games, or to not play the games at all. But you played the games, and you showed them you’re good. You showed them you’re better, even. You were so good that they weren’t even aware of the game. Only you: the tilt of your nose, the dark pools of your eyes, the curve where neck meets shoulder meets back. You were so good that these were the only things they could see, that they wanted to see. You made them crave you, and, at first, you didn’t even know it.

You felt pressure, so much pressure, and you were sure it wasn’t supposed to be like this, you were sure it was supposed to be different. It hurt too much; was it supposed to hurt? You realized that you’d stopped breathing, so you forced yourself to breathe in, breathe deeply, and all you smelled was the dinner that this first boy’s mother was cooking, downstairs. Something with onions. You heard him above you, but he wasn’t talking to you. You’d stopped talking a while ago. You wanted to readjust, you wanted to move, maybe stop, but you stayed. You hated yourself for being silent. You bit your lip, broke skin, tasted blood.

You thought it would be nicer.

You didn’t think you’d smell onions.

But then, smart girl, you pushed into him. And the onions and sweat and blood filled you, but you pretended they didn’t. You pretended you were somewhere else, diving in a bay, swimming deep past the breakers to a point you knew existed, and once you got there, you vowed never to leave, ever.

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In school, they taught you that good girls wore skirts that reached past their knees. Good girls crossed their legs when they sat down. You weren’t interested in being good, or even bad. You just wanted to be you. Things weren’t black and white; you knew that, because you were smart. All you needed to be was better than boys at the game. Good girls – smart girls – can surprise a boy with the sharp bite of teeth upon a neck, with the slow scratch of nails against a back. Scratches that start slow, slow, and then quicken, quicken, quicken, until they’ve made the sort of mark that stays with a boy, even when he’s wilted into a grave man.

In a ’97 Buick, your second boy’s hands moved down your back. You still refer to him by his first and last name; he’s that insignificant. Parked outside of school, just before lunch ended, you let the sun cast a hot eye on both of you as you lay there, restless. The hands traveled to the band of your plaid school skirt, and even though it wasn’t hostile, it was clumsy, led by a boy who didn’t really know what he wanted. All he knew was that he needed to prove his self worth, and the way to self worth was paved with sex, sex, sex. If he could please you, or believe he had pleased you, then, yes, he won.

This was the first time you pitied a boy. The first time you looked into a boy’s eyes, at the little gold haloes right around his pupils, and thought, “God, I feel sorry for you.”

And yet, you let it happen. You let him worm his way through you and you even shifted, even offered a cry so that he’d think he was doing well. And you saw yourself, and you saw him, and it was just parts, legs and arms and feet and hands, here and there,
and you couldn’t even tell whose was whose. And you saw yourself looking up at the Buick’s gray roof, fabric sagging like a circus tent, and you thought, *When will this end, when will this end*, and you wondered, as this boy tried desperately to navigate you, why you didn’t just get up.

College boys were different from high school boys. You figured this out in your first week as a freshman, dashing across campus with your arms full of books. Some girls only walked with purses or boys on their arms, but you always had your books, ready to read and research and learn at any moment. And the college boys, you learned, had experience, and stories to tell. The older ones, anyway. You didn’t bother flirting with the ones your own age; you preferred the older ones, the ones who had just returned from semesters abroad, who knew foreign languages and the difference between Nice and nice. Educated boys. You flirted like it was a sport, and when they expected more, you lied to them, told them you had a boyfriend. You were good at setting boundaries.

Some girls rotted boys’ teeth, but not you. You made them work to figure you out, and whoever could stick with it the longest and sweat the most would win. You learned to pick boys like fruit, to weigh them and inspect for bruises. You turned them in your hands and studied the curves because, yes, some boys had curves. And there were times when you wanted the bruised ones, the ones who were so banged up that they didn’t seem, on the surface, as though they could possibly be worth it. But you knew that once you removed the skin – once you cut deep, deep, deep – you’d find the good parts. Parts so good they could make a girl go stupid.
The third boy – your bruised boy – you met in the library. Or at the student union, or across the quad. Somewhere. The thing about this one is that you can’t remember the very first time you saw him. You met, and suddenly it was like he’d always been there. You don’t even know why you ended up choosing him. Maybe it was because you couldn’t have him.

When he paid attention to you, it was sometimes stifling. He was insecure, passive aggressive and needy. You concocted imaginary fights with him, moments when you’d throw a glass of water in his face or kick him out of your car on an isolated highway. And yet, when he ignored you, you could think of nothing but him. You needed to see him give you the look that made your heart sink to the bottom of your feet and then rise, as if winged, up your body and into your head, dizzying you with want.

You liked to think that both of you knew exactly what you were doing. That you knew exactly why you were doing it. He was lonely, and missed Her. He never told you Her name. All you knew was that She was never home, always working, never had time for him. And you, you knew that you were simply a replacement, a temporary elixir. You told yourself you were practicing on him, learning from him. You liked thinking that you knew you could leave this one at any time, just like you’d left the other two. And yet, you never did.
You didn’t know what you were doing. Or did you? This, you knew, was the trick: don’t let him know. Make him guess. Torture him with the puzzle of whether or not you are aware of your magic. Let him chase you as far as he can run; just don’t get caught.

He came to your apartment every Wednesday night, because that’s when She taught a class across town. You used to eat chocolate that he brought home from the drugstore where he worked part-time, between classes. Tiny squares of rich, brown sugar. The first bite was always the hardest, and you waited for your teeth to finally sink into it, to snap off a piece that would then sit in your mouth as you waited for it to melt.

He never let it melt. He just ate it, licked his fingers.

For a while, you wouldn’t with him. He wanted to; he would tell you all the things he wanted to do to you, then apologize for wanting to do them. You rationed your self like candy, piece by piece, one at a time, and never too much at once. Every night, you gave him something else, until the night there was nothing else left to give.

At the time – in the moment – you were as sure of yourselves as any two people could be in a dark room, beneath sheets and sheets of black. It was the moments after then – the hours, the days, the ticks and tocks that carried you further and further from that moment – that you doubted. But at that moment, there was nothing but the two of you. And you, you were smart enough to know what it was.

Love and sex are two different things. You were always careful to remember that, before you ever said the word, you had to make sure that you were the only one. You always paid careful attention to the moment when a boy first said it. You took note of
where you were, what you wore, where he looked. If the answers were horizontal, naked, and eyes closed, then you didn’t believe the sentiment.

When this one said it, though, it didn’t matter. You always believed it. You kept it under your pillow, safe and warm and close, close.

You practiced until you’d mastered the look: *foster/fear/fuck me*. All at once.

His eyes were blue, so blue, and there were times when you wanted to swim right through them, straight into his brain, and then down, down to his chest, Chutes and Ladders, and into his shared heart. Some nights, you studied his face in the dark. You skimmed your fingertips across his forehead, dipped them down the cliffs of his closed eyes, brushed his eyelashes right, left, right, left. You memorized that. And you slipped down the slope of his nose to his mouth’s narrow hills. And when you reached his neck, you wrapped your hand around it like a lover, or a killer. And you wondered – every time – if you could ever really conquer his body’s terrain.

It ends. You see them one night, after it’s over. Him and Her. You watch the littered dance floor from above, on the balcony with the yellow chairs. Drink in hand, you see the bodies sway, rub, slide, connect. You watch them weave, needle and thread, through the patchwork of mini dresses, knee-high boots, black leather. In, out, in, out, over and knot.
She, with hair like wildfire, lays a hand on one of your bruised boy’s hips (my hips, you think), her shoulders moving in ways you never knew shoulders could move. And heat fills you, and you try to remember that you don’t care, that you know better, that you’re smart, smart, smart. But then his eyes, arrows, catch you.
Our author was born Casey Lefante, but she now goes by various monikers, the overriding theme of which is her height: Little Foot, Halfling, KC, Little Sister, Mustardseed, Hey You, Lefante (in its various, incorrect pronunciations), Sugar, Fox, Little Narcoleptic, and, of course, Bandit. She currently lives in Mid-City, though she’s originally a West Bank girl. It’s true.

The first story in this collection, “Plastic Parts,” will appear in the Spring 2008 issue of *Third Coast*. She has previously been published in *Ellipsis*, and she has been honored with the GCACWT Graduate Award in fiction, as well as the Samuel Mockbee and *Ellipsis* awards in nonfiction. Neither she nor her mother has been nominated for a Pushcart, but they are both remarkable spellers.