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Nothing Remains Still

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Nothing Remains Still

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theatre, and Communication Arts
Creative Writing

by

Thomas Kiczula

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Part One:

A long way from home.

CLARISSA.

Beyond the woods, in the park, through the pine and naked maple trees, down the man-made path from Blair's house, Clarissa descends the blue spiral slide. When she reaches the bottom, she sits on the edge and decides that it's now or never. She has been waiting too long, and she takes a deep breath and exhales, steam pouring from her mouth as the hot air collides with the cold, damp of the winter night. Blair follows, screaming down behind her on the slide. As Blair connects with Clarissa, her legs spread around Clarissa's waist, and they both burst into giggles as they crash down onto the red-mulch-covered ground. Blair begins tickling Clarissa, and Clarissa cries, "Stop! Stop! Oh, please, stop!" and snatches at Blair's gyrating hands. With a jolt of strength, Clarissa pushes Blair off of her and runs up the small grassy hill that she and Blair and numerous other children sledded down when they were younger. Now, in their teens, the hill is a mere bump to the girls. Heading down the other side of the hill, Clarissa scampers toward a

set of bare trees, her long, midnight-black hair bouncing behind her. She rests against one of the tree trunks, the last leaves gripping tight to the limbs above, frozen from the previous night's rain. Clarissa catches her breath, her chest tight from the cold air.

"Where do you think you're going?" Blair cries as she chases after Clarissa. When Blair reaches Clarissa, she wraps her arms around her, Blair's ear sliding across Clarissa's cheek in the process, and continues tickling her, this time wedging her ice-cold hands under Clarissa's jacket and sweater.

"Stop!" Clarissa cries. "Stop! You're freezing!" Her screeches mix with her giggles into nearly incomprehensible words.

"Yeah, and you're warm," Blair replies, refusing to discontinue her onslaught. "Why should I stop?"

"Because I have to ask you something. Will you *please* stop?"

"Oh *yeah*?" Blair asks, her head tilted down and purses her lips together in a pout. "Like what?"

"Like, what would you do if I did this?" Clarissa asks and plants her dry, cracked lips on Blair's thick grin.

Blair pulls back, and her eyes go wide. She looks at the frozen ground, shoves her hands into the pockets of her coat, and asks, "What did you do that for?" She looks up with her eyes but not with her head into Clarissa's eyes and waits.

"I don't know," Clarissa says and shoves her hands into her own pockets. "No, I do know. I wanted to do it." But should she have? Should she do everything she thinks she wants or needs to do? "Did you not like it?"

“I’m...” Blair bites her bottom lip. “I’m not sure.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry,” Blair says, gathering her hair into a ponytail and looping a hair-tie around it.

“What are you sorry for?”

“I don’t know.” Blair glances at her watch. “Oh no! It’s six forty-five! You’re going to be late for the big dinner!”

“Yeah. I guess I will be,” Clarissa says and on cue, her phone begins buzzing in her pocket. She cancels the call without removing the phone from her pocket.

“I’ll go ask my dad if he can give you a ride.”

“No, I’ll just walk.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah,” Clarissa says and begins walking away.

“I’m sorry I tickled you!” Blair calls after her.

“I’m sorry I kissed you,” Clarissa exhales, and the steam from her breath hits her in the face.

BETH ANN.

“Mom!” Beth Ann calls into the kitchen where her mother stands in front of the stove, waiting for a pot of water to boil. She is making penne pasta with vodka sauce, her brother Johnny’s favorite. Johnny is on his way home from college for winter break, which falls, fortunately, exactly the day before his Uncle Patrick’s wake. “Mom!” she calls again. “I’m done vacuuming the living room!” The remnants of cat fur and dust her mother found scattered around the edges

of the carpet signified that the maid forgot to vacuum it herself. How hard is it to use the hose and attachments in the corners? Wordsworth the cat walks along the walls and collapses in a corner as if to say, “Don’t worry. I’ll give you more work to do.” With yet no response from her mother, Beth Ann sighs through the hallways to the kitchen.

“Mom! Mom! Couldn’t you hear me calling you?”

“Oh. No. Sorry dear. I must’ve been off in my head somewhere.” Her mother tinkers with her pearl necklace and stares at the pot full of water on the stove. It sits tepid. Still. “Beth Ann, do you know anything about salt?”

“Salt?”

“Yeah, Mrs. Manolio said that when you add salt to water, it makes it boil faster. Is that true?”

“Actually, I think it makes it boil slower. Just at a higher temperature.”

“Oh no,” she says, lowering her head but with her eyes still on the pot. “I kept adding more salt to this when it wouldn’t boil.”

“How much did you put in?”

“Just a few tablespoons. Maybe eight.”

“Eight! Jesus, Mom.”

The bird clock on the wall above the sliding glass doors that leads to the Braco’s enormous wraparound deck sounds. A group of chestnut sparrows chirp erratically.

“It’s six o’clock already? Oh my. Beth Ann, do me a favor and go vacuum the living room. The maid forgot to.”

“I know, Mom. I already did. That’s what I was shouting for.”

Beth Ann's mother begins pacing around the dining room table, eyeing each fork, spoon, and knife, adjusting and readjusting them, making sure they are all straight and in proper order.

"Mom, they're fine!" Beth Ann shouts. "They're fine," she says, lowering her voice.

"Beth Ann, will you wash this glass for me?" her mother asks, handing her the crystal wine glass.

"What's wrong with it?" Beth Ann asks.

"There's a spot on it. Right here." Her mother points to a tiny white spot where the hard water must have dried on the glass. "Don't you see it? It looks like milk or something. The dishwasher must've missed it."

"It's fine," Beth Ann says.

"Please?"

Beth Ann takes the glass to the sink, wets it, and dries it. Her mother returns to her place in front of the stove, staring at the water.

"So how can we get this salt out?" her mother asks.

"You can't really get it out, Mom. But the good news is that when you finally put the pasta in, it'll cook faster."

"Really?"

"The salt raises the water's boiling point. So when the water boils, it'll be much hotter."

"Oh good. Will it boil soon?"

"I don't know, Mom," Beth Ann says as she crosses the room and places the glass back on the table.

“I’m really glad you were able to come home from school early. And that the coffee shop let you take time off. It must’ve been stressful getting all that done so quickly. Were your exams difficult?”

“I mostly just had papers. I still have to finish one. My professor said I could e-mail it to him. I should probably get back to working on that soon.” Beth Ann investigates the rest of the glasses on the table, trying to get ahead of her mother before she finds something else for her to do. “And The Bean knows I’m just there part time and would be going home for breaks.”

“Well it’s just nice to have you home. I never see you anymore. How’s Joshua?”

“Joshua and I split up two weeks ago. I threw him out.”

“Oh my. I thought you two were doing well. I liked Joshua. He was a nice boy, I thought.”

“We’re not children,” Beth Ann says.

“What happened?”

“He met someone else.”

“Oh, how could he replace you?” Her mother smiles. “Is she another girl at your school?”

“It wasn’t a girl. And I found them in my bed.”

Her mother inhales sharply.

“I went home early from work, and there they were.”

“It wasn’t a girl? What do you mean it wasn’t a girl?”

“I mean it wasn’t a female.”

“Well, how do you know they were, umm, together?”

“Because, Mom. They were naked in my bed together. Is that clear enough?”

Her mother tilts her head and maintains her eyes on the pot of water. “That’s terrible,” she says, mostly under her breath. “Well, then he doesn’t deserve you.”

“Thanks, Mom. That makes me feel a lot better.”

“Where is he now?”

“I don’t know. Probably somewhere with his boyfriend. Unless he’s still in the closet about it, which he probably is.”

“He’s not still at your apartment?”

“No, I told you I kicked him out.”

“So you’re paying the rent all by yourself? You should ask your dad for some money.”

“I’m all right. I’m making money. Josh never contributed much anyway.”

Her mother sighs. Beth Ann grinds her teeth.

JOHNNY.

The air nozzle overhead is turned to full capacity but is not helping. Johnny sweats. He turns the knob on his watch clockwise so that the hour hand spins around the clock face to the six from the three. He nestles and wrestles his back and neck against the plush-cushioned airplane chair and stretches his legs so that the tips of his shoes barely nudge the seat in front of him. It was nice of his father to book him for first-class. Johnny skips the track of Phantom Planet’s “California” on his iPhone. As the next track begins, there is a low mumbling which Johnny believes is John Lennon saying, “Ghosts come out now,” and then a chorus of Lennons scream:

She came in through the bathroom window!

Protected by a silver spoon!

But now she sucks her thumb and wanders!

By the banks of her own lagoon!

And as he closes his eyes, the song plants images into his brain of a translucent, teenage girl with long dark hair and wearing a dark, low-cut dress, and who vaguely resembles his sister Clarissa, climbing and stumbling through the window in the bathroom off of his bedroom. She holds a bouquet of black roses in one hand and a large silver spoon in the other. As she falls to the floor, she drops the spoon and draws the thumb of her free hand to her mouth. A tall, shadowy, nude girl dances in the corner of the room, beckoning her with an extended finger. The nude girl has ribbons in her hair that appear to be made of steel. The Clarissa figure walks toward the shadow girl, and, together, they remove the straps of Clarissa's dress. A phone begins to ring, and someone screams in a deep, throaty voice, "Sunday's on the phone to Monday! Tuesday's on the phone to me!"

Johnny removes the headphones, looks up, and glances at the Hispanic couple that sit in the row across from him as they giggle in Spanish. Johnny understands *baila* and *naranja* but not much else even though he's taken six years of Spanish and once travelled to Guatemala with his father during one of his parents' larger feuds. A few minutes earlier, the captain proclaimed that their flight from LAX would be landing safely in Newark in approximately fifteen minutes. Johnny returns to the Kindle sitting in his lap, *Thursday Night Dinner* on the display, knowing he'll never have time to finish it between winter break and the next semester, especially with his Uncle Patrick's funeral hanging over the family's heads. And not to mention his father's hounding him to get a goddamn internship somewhere, anywhere, for the spring.

Johnny sips the dry martini that he was only able to order because he slipped the flight attendant a fifty when he asked for his ID. "Extra olives, please," he said. The flight attendant tucked the bill in her pocket and took his credit card to the back of the plane. Johnny doesn't get

not being able to get served alcohol before the age of twenty-one. He's about to turn nineteen, and he's already drunk plenty of alcoholic drinks. But he also doesn't mind spending any of his father's money. His father has enough of it, and this poor, forty-, maybe fifty-year-old flight attendant, her hair disheveled and her makeup caked around her eyes, looks like she could use it.

Johnny glares at the NO SMOKING sign above his head and turns the Kindle off. He draws a Camel Light from the pack in his left blazer pocket and pops it into his mouth. For a second, he thinks of lighting it but then thinks about the *comfort* and *safety* of the other passengers. Not that anyone has proved that second-hand smoke is harmful anyway. But he couldn't light it even if he wanted to, he remembers, since the airport security confiscated his lighter before he went through the metal detector. But what would they do if he did light it? Throw him off the plane? They were thirty-thousand feet in the air, and the closest airport was the one they were currently heading to. If only he had matches.

Placing the cigarette back into its pack, Johnny glances again at the Hispanic couple. So happy together. Just like he and Laura would be if her parents would cough up the money for her to go to USC with him. Instead, Laura receives her education from Montclair State University—what a shithole—while Johnny basks in the California rays beneath palm trees, pretending to study business (as far as his father knows) except that he's recently changed his major to Creative Writing, focusing in poetry. His father doesn't *get* poetry. Laura gets his poetry though. She understands him.

Johnny scratches at his crotch, hoping that it's nothing serious. Just genital warts or a rash or something minor like that. It'll go away in time, especially with some cream. He didn't even mean to sleep with the girl. In fact, he was dreaming, passed out on his buddy's couch. He woke up, and she was already on top of him, and his pants were around his ankles, and she just

kept panting and shushing him. And that was that. He didn't even know her name. And when he would see her around campus, she would snub him and pretend that she had no idea who he was. Not that he really wanted to talk to her anyway.

Johnny lifts his hand under his shirt to where the skin over his abs folds over while he sits. He runs his hands over his thighs and pinches underneath his chin. Johnny feels fat.

"This is your captain speaking. We are now beginning our descent to Newark International Airport. I hope you have enjoyed your flight, and we hope to see you again. This is Captain Kenny signing off."

Johnny downs the remainder of his martini and stuffs his Kindle into his Zoo York backpack. He wonders if he'll be able to see Janson before the wake and thinks about how great it will be to see Laura again, to run his hand through her long brown hair—is it brown or dirty blonde? Maybe she's dyed it platinum blonde again. Maybe it's red now.

The time is 6:06, and the moon slowly waxes in a sky that bursts with clouds of violet and indigo in the new evening darkness.

SAMUEL.

That kid's gonna get his, Samuel thinks as he walks into his house through the front door. He fingers the quarter-shaped hole in the elbow of his sweatshirt where Bobby Sheldon, a hot-headed kid on the wrestling team, burned it with a lighter while they were playing football on the lawn outside of their middle school. "Whackjob prick," Samuel says, words he's heard his brother, Johnny, use hundreds of times while referring to jackasses like Bobby Sheldon.

"That's what you get for talking to Cherry," Bobby said to Samuel as Samuel put the fire out with his hand. "Now go home and get your daddy to buy you a new one."

Samuel has never punched anyone before, but he's watched kids fight before school. Fifteen-year olds, upperclassmen, mostly. He wants to smash Bobby's face against the chain-link fence like Steve Maione did to Aaron Brorino. Smash his face against the fence until Bobby Sheldon's blood covers his shirt and Samuel's hands. But as he tightened his fists, Jerry Butrico grabbed his shoulders.

"Forget it," Jerry said. "Bobby's just an asshole."

Samuel put his hands in the pockets of his sweatshirt. "I didn't talk to your dumb girlfriend. She came and talked to me."

"You better leave her alone," Bobby said. "If you want to keep your shoulders in their sockets."

"I can't control if your girlfriend needs help with her math homework and can't go to your dumbass for help."

"You piece of shit," Bobby said. "I'll kick your ass."

"Go kick your own ass," Samuel said, wishing what he'd said made more sense. "I'm outta here."

And Samuel walked away, the ridiculing words of "pussy" and "crybaby" following him home.

BETH ANN.

The front door slams as Beth Ann decreases the flame on the stove. Mom's gonna scorch the hell out of this pot, she thinks.

"Samuel? Is that you?" her mother calls. "Clarissa?"

But the only response is a scrambling up the stairs.

“Was that Samuel?” Beth Ann’s mother asks her.

“I don’t know.”

“Maybe I should go check on him. He’s been having a tough time with a boy at school.”

“Like a bully?”

“Sort of,” her mother says. “He’s just this mean kid in Samuel’s circle of friends. He likes to pick on Samuel. Would you watch the stove for me, please? And throw the pasta in the water when it starts to boil?”

“Sure,” Beth Ann says. And under her breath, “If it ever boils.”

As her mother starts to walk away, the smoke detector blares above the stove. “The rolls!” her mother cries as she rushes to the oven, slips on oven mitts, and lowers the stove door. “Oh, they’re ruined!” she cries, pulling out the metal tray covered with black, smoking, plastic-looking blobs. “Beth Ann, can you put some new rolls in too, please? Johnny loves rolls.”

“Sure, Mom,” Beth Ann says, thinking that she likes rolls too.

“And can you try calling Clarissa? I haven’t been able to get a hold of her. She never answers her phone. I don’t know why we even pay for it.”

“Sure.”

“She’s probably out with Blair. She’s always with Blair. Can’t stand to be apart from her for a single minute. And Clarissa never brings her here. Like she’s ashamed of us or something. They always go to *Blair*’s house. Or the park. I wish she’d stop going to the park after dark. She knows it’s closed. She could get arrested for trespassing.”

“She won’t get arrested for being in the park after dark,” Beth Ann says. “If anything, the police will just bring her home.”

“Well I wish she wouldn’t go there anyway. It’s dangerous. And remind me to ask Clarissa for Blair’s phone number. I’d like to speak with her parents sometime. Make sure they’re good people.”

“Sure, Mom.”

“Thank you, Beth Ann. It’s so nice of you to come home to help me with Johnny’s homecoming dinner.”

“Of course. Johnny’s dinner.”

Beth Ann throws the burnt rolls away, and as she does, a bubble bursts in the pot on the stove and water sizzles on the burner.

CLARISSA.

The wind beats at Clarissa’s face, but she inches her scarf from her mouth to drink from a water bottle full of Smirnoff that she takes from her purse. Vodka always makes her feel better. At least momentarily. Two years earlier, when she was fourteen-years old, on one of her insomniac nights, Clarissa found a bottle of vodka in the fridge and, not seeing any bottles of Pellegrino and thinking it was a different brand of water, poured herself a glass. She took it up to her room, took a big a gulp, and had to force herself not to spit it all over her bed. It burned her throat and her chest like the time she accidentally swallowed mouthwash. She dumped the remains of the glass into the toilet in the bathroom connected to her bedroom and filled the glass with tap water, which she thought tasted terrible but better than the horrid liquid she had just swallowed. She slugged back the glass but couldn’t get the burning sensation out of her chest. But when she got back into bed, she was overwhelmed by this newfound moment of happiness. And within a few

minutes, she was fast asleep. The next night, again unable to sleep, she filled a small glass with the vodka, and chugged it all down.

Why did she kiss Blair? Why did she think Blair would be fine with it? Why did she think that Blair would want her to kiss her? The thoughts circled through her brain as she debated taking another sip. She pushed branches out of the way as she ascended the path to her house. The path to and from the park had been much better manicured when Clarissa was younger, but with the neighbor kids much older and Johnny and Beth Ann no longer using it, the path was becoming overgrown. Grass even grew where there used to be just hard dirt. Clay, maybe. Everything was changing.

Clarissa thought about turning around. She did not want to go home. She didn't want to hear her mother's questioning. *Where have you been? Why don't you ever want to be here? Why won't you answer my questions with full sentences?* And she really didn't want to hear her mother's delight at seeing Johnny. *Johnny does this and Johnny does that. Johnny's such a perfect boy.* Johnny doesn't do anything except get drunk and smoke cigarettes. But at least during her mother's gloating over Johnny, it will take the focus off of her. Nearing the back door, Clarissa takes another sip of vodka and then pops a piece of gum in her mouth.

SAMUEL.

Someone tries to open his bedroom door, but Samuel locked it on his way in after tossing his backpack onto his desk and throwing the burned sweater in the garbage can beside his bed. He wishes he could stuff the sweater down Bobby Sheldon's throat. Make him choke on it and taste the burned elbow.

"Samuel, are you in there?" his mother calls.

“Uh-huh.”

“Can I come in? I’d like to talk to you.”

“I don’t really want to talk right now.”

“Well, can you at least help me with something?”

“With what?” Samuel growls. He doesn’t mean to sound as angry as he does, but he’s aggravated. He wants to be left alone.

“I need to move the Halloween decorations out of Johnny’s room and into the attic.”

“Fine,” Samuel says. He throws the covers off of him and slips his shoes on. He crosses the room and opens the door.

“How was your day, sweetie?” his mother asks and reaches down to give him a hug. His mother is not very tall, but Samuel is still short for his age. His doctor said that he’d hit a growth spurt soon but that there is a chance that he wouldn’t grow much due to an iodine deficiency at birth.

Samuel places a hand on her back but doesn’t hug her completely. A hug two close friends might share. “It was fine,” he says.

His mother releases him, and he follows her to Johnny’s bedroom, which is covered in boxes marked such things as “wreaths,” “ghosts,” “lights,” and “costumes.” Samuel’s cowboy and ninja costumes are in that box as well as last year’s zombie costume. He decided he didn’t want to dress up as anything this year.

His mother opens the small door that leads to the crawl space at the lower part of the wall behind the roof and climbs in. “Can you hand me the boxes, and I’ll slide them into place?”

“Sure, Mom.” Samuel picks up the largest box first, figuring the other boxes would be easier to squeeze in around it. He’d watched Johnny do this before. A few times a year, actually, before Johnny left for college in September. Now, Samuel guessed, it was his turn.

“Did you have fun playing football with the boys?” his mother asks.

“It was okay.”

“Did you score any points?”

“I had a touchdown and an interception.”

“That’s great, Samuel!” his mother says.

Samuel hands her the box of costumes. “Yeah.”

“Are you still having problems with that Sheldon boy?” his mother asks.

“He’s fine. He’s just a jerk.”

“Just keep being nice to him. Or ignore him. He’ll get the hint.”

“Yeah,” Samuel says but thinks he’s ignored the prick for too long.

JOHNNY.

Three hundred stations to choose from and not a damn thing on. In the passenger seat of his father’s Limited BMW Hybrid, Johnny scours through the stations on the XM Satellite Radio, as he and his father head south on Route 1 toward Middleboro. The signal fades as they go under a bridge, and as the sound comes back, a rapper screams, “Got racks on racks on racks!”

“Turn that shit off,” his father says. “How’s the internship search going?”

“Good,” Johnny lies. “Morgan Stanley sent me an e-mail the other day. They said they’re very interested in me. They like my résumé. But they haven’t made a decision yet. They only hire one intern, you know.”

“That’s some good news. I knew you could do it.”

“I didn’t get it yet.”

“You will,” his father says as he slides the BMW into the left lane, cutting off a minivan.

The minivan’s horn blares, and the driver flips him off. “Damn chinks.”

“Easy there, Dad,” Johnny says. “Have fun at the airport?”

“I stopped in a bar there. Got bored waiting for you so long.”

“Sorry.”

“Yeah, so I went to the bar. Place called Static Movement. Had some Heinies. Real weird place. You would’ve liked it. They had all these weird paintings of deserts and clocks on the walls. They were all painted funny.”

“Funny?”

“Yeah, funny. Like weird. Different shit.”

Johnny rolls his eyes. “Those are Dalis.”

“Dollies? What the hell are you talking about?”

“Nothing, Dad.”

The car shakes as Johnny’s father slowly swerves into the rumble strips. “How were your exams?”

“Good. Aced them all.”

“So you’re starting off with a four-oh GPA? Better keep that up. Pretty important for getting into law school.”

Law school? “I won’t know for sure until they post grades.”

Johnny coughs and rolls down the window to spit out a gob of phlegm.

“Got yourself a cold?”

“Something like that,” he says. “Hey, I don’t know if I told you, but I also picked up a poetry class. It was pretty interesting—”

“Poetry? What do you need that for?”

“I dunno. It’s fun. I enjoy it. It’s good to *broaden your horizons* sometimes.”

“Don’t waste your time. Poets don’t make any money. Does anyone even read poetry?”

“I guess not as much as they used to.” Johnny coughs again and racks his brain for something new to talk about. “Got any major business deals brewing?”

“Yeah. Big one. Just sold that shithole of an apartment complex. Heavenly Homes. More like Whackjob Central. That place was such a pain in the ass. Not worth all the work. The maintenance. All those old wires running through the walls. Some asshole even got me to install a handicap ramp.”

“How much did you get for it?”

“Eight hundred thou.”

“Wow. That’s a lot of money,” Johnny says, somewhat interested and impressed.

“Yeah, this guy Russell Wilcox is gonna knock it down and turn it into a strip mall. Fast food places and hair salons and that shit. Demolition starts on Wednesday.”

“What about the bar?”

“Yeah, Box’s Bar. Held onto that. Those people in Smeidelberg sure like spending money there, gallivanting and causing riots. Cranking up the jukebox. Dancing like lunatics. Couldn’t let that investment go. Would like to change the name though. The guy running it thinks that’s a bad idea.”

“Everybody already knows it as Box’s,” Johnny says and draws his Kindle from his backpack and picks up *Thursday Night Dinner* from where he left off.

Traffic builds up ahead, and Johnny's father slams on the brakes. Police lights flash in the distance.

"Fucking shit. An accident. Rubberneck city!"

Johnny shrugs his shoulders as his father takes the next exit and begins taking the back roads to Middleboro.

His father hits nothing but green lights and crosses the narrow bridge over Catchum Creek. He passes Lanza, Lanza, and Lanza Law Firm and crosses the border into Middleboro where Kylum Street becomes Oak Tree Road.

"Still smoke?" his father asks.

"Hardly."

"You better not let your mother see you smoking. That'll kill her."

His father turns the car right onto Goldman Street and ascends the small hill toward the Braco house.

"Smoke anything else?"

"No, Dad!" Johnny shouts. "Jesus."

"Good."

Johnny spies his older sister Beth Ann's silver Honda Civic parked in front of their house along the cul-de-sac. As they pull into the extended driveway in front of their house, Johnny eyes a brand new, red, two-door Porsche in front of their garage. "Whose car is that? Did you get that for Clarissa? A little young to have a car, isn't she?"

"It's for you, son. A welcome-home present and a little inspiration to get on that internship."

"What happened to my old one? The *black* Porsche?"

“Sold it.”

“But I *loved* that car.”

“You’ll love this one just as much. It’s better. Newer. Even looks more expensive.”

I knew I should’ve taken that car to college with me, Johnny thinks. But no, *doesn’t make sense to have a car in the city. Not as a first-year at least.* Bastards.

SAMUEL.

After helping his mother lug the Halloween decorations from Johnny’s room into the attic, Samuel watches the first season of *The Twilight Zone* on Blu Ray, a present from his Uncle Patrick. On the thirty-two inch flat screen, Nan, a young woman on a road trip, passes a dirty, bearded hitchhiker who appears to be following her. Every turn she makes, even after switching highways, the hitchhiker is there ahead of her, pleading with his extended thumb for a ride. Samuel has watched this episode at least a dozen times. When he was younger, the show would scare him. But he’s not afraid anymore. Across the room, Samuel’s pet hamster Skittles carries a mouthful of food up a red vertical tube to the Skyview Lookout where he has laid out his bedding. Must be nice, Samuel thinks. Just go up and down tubes all day. With no one to bother you. Just up and down tubes all day.

Samuel takes his iPhone from his pocket and Googles “how to understand girls.” The first post is from wikiHow and is called How to Understand Girls. Perfect.

1. If a girl likes you, she will most likely touch her neck or face, play with her hair or stare at you when you are around her or talking to her.
2. If you want a girl to like you, then find out what she likes. This will especially work if she likes things that most people don’t like. For example, if a girl likes punk rock and your town mostly likes hip hop, show an interest in it.

3. If you really don't like, for instance, punk rock, then just learn some bands. You don't have to listen to it.
4. If you want a girl to know you like her, just talk to her every chance you get. Stare at her and be bashful. Girls usually find that cute.

Dammit, none of this helps. I don't want Cherry to like me. Samuel backsteps and looks up a different website, but before he's able to open it, there is a knock at the door.

"What, Mom!" Samuel calls.

"It's not Mom."

"Clarissa?"

"Yes."

"Come in!"

Clarissa crosses the room and plops down on the bed beside Samuel. Clarissa smells funny like she does sometimes. Her eyes look funny too. Like they're blurry. Clarissa nods in the direction of the TV. "You shouldn't watch that stuff. You know how much it scares you."

"Uncle Patrick got it for me. And it doesn't scare me anymore."

"You a big tough guy now that you're in middle school?"

"Yeah. I mean, no. I'm just not afraid of dumb TV shows any more. It's not real. There are real-life monsters to be afraid of."

"Like what?"

"Nothing," Samuel says. "Clarissa, why do you smell funny?"

"Funny? What do you mean?"

But then Beth Ann walks in the room. “Samuel, have you seen...oh, there you are Clarissa. Glad you’re home. Mom’s been looking for you. And, you know, she really could’ve used some help this evening.”

“Wonderful to see you too,” Clarissa says, placing a finger toward her mouth and making a gagging sound. “I was busy. Why are you here? Why don’t you stay in New York or wherever you ran away to?”

“I’m here, *Clarissa*, because our mother’s brother is dead, and she’s having a rough time. And going to college isn’t exactly running away.”

“She seems fine to me. She’s more concerned with Johnny coming home. More concerned with him coming home than you coming home I bet.”

“That’s a nice thing to say to your sister,” Beth Ann says and then glares at Samuel. “You have nice things to say to your sister too, pipsqueak?”

“No. And I’m not a pipsqueak.”

“I see. Well, you two should both come downstairs. It’s almost time for dinner.”

“Johnny’s not even home yet,” Clarissa replies.

“He will be soon.” Beth Ann lowers her head to eye level with Samuel and twists her neck in a way that doesn’t seem to Samuel to be possible. “Still seeing ghosts, Samuel?”

“No. There’s no such thing as ghosts. Why don’t you leave me alone?”

“Because I have to make sure that you two help our mother. She really needs us right now.”

“Maybe she needs us now,” Clarissa says. “She was fine before *you* came home.”

“You’re still such a little shit,” Beth Ann says. “What’s your problem?”

“My problem is that everyone was happier when you went away a year and a half ago. You’re such a drama queen.”

“*I’m* a drama queen?”

But their argument is broken up by a series of much louder exclamations from the living room: “Johnny’s home! My baby! Everyone come downstairs! Johnny’s home!”

Part Two:

Who would like to say grace?

The family gathers around the mahogany dining room table and takes their respective seats, seats that they have all claimed over the years. A lit candelabra acts as a centerpiece on the table.

Surrounding it is the penne pasta, the new, unburned rolls, and a pot full of vodka sauce. Salads of lettuce, tomato, cucumber, black olives, anchovies, and jalapeño peppers fill bowls in front of

each family member. The salads are drenched in Italian dressing. Glasses of Pellegrino and wine stand erect adjacent to the bowls.

“It’s so wonderful that you’re home, Johnny,” Georgette says. “The whole family is back together again. And you too, Beth Ann. It’s good that you’re home too.”

“Thanks, Mom,” Beth Ann says.

“Can we eat now?” Joseph asks.

“Well, wait, Joseph,” Georgette begins. “Would someone like to say grace? I know we don’t normally say it, but this is a special occasion.”

No one moves. Joseph eyes the steaming penne pasta while Johnny eyes Clarissa who has her own eyes on Samuel. Beth Ann stares straight ahead.

“I’m sure someone would like to say grace.” Georgette looks around the table.

Johnny’s glance moves to his bowl of salad, his fork in his hand. Samuel stares at his brother, noticing how big his biceps have gotten, how he seems taller. Clarissa flicks her long hair and half-rolls her eyes, and Beth Ann maintains her glare at the wall. Joseph smirks.

“Well fine, but I would like to say something,” Georgette says, clasping her hands and lowering her head.

The rest of the family follows suit.

“I would like to thank the Lord for providing us all with such great fortune: a decent meal, beautiful children, and a wonderful house. And also that the Lord has provided us with such an opportunity for us all to be together. Thank you, Lord, and may our time together continue to be blessed and full of happiness. Amen.”

“Amen,” answers the chorus in a tone that grazes sarcasm.

“Can we eat now?” Joseph asks.

“Yes,” Georgette replies. “We can eat now.”

Johnny plunges his ready fork into his salad and shoves a large wad of lettuce and tomato into his mouth.

“Little bites,” Georgette says to Johnny. “Human bites.”

“Sorry, Mom. I haven’t had much of a real meal in a while.”

“And don’t talk with your mouth full. Chew your food. You’ll choke.”

“We sure wouldn’t want that to happen,” Beth Ann says.

“Shut up!” Clarissa shouts.

“Girls! Girls,” Georgette says. “There will be no shouting at the dinner table. This is a happy time.”

Is it? Beth Ann thinks.

Joseph shakes his head. “Can someone pass me a roll?”

Samuel reaches for the basket of rolls but knocks over his glass of milk instead. Milk streaks across the table toward the pot of vodka sauce and cascades down the table and onto his mother’s dark red dress.

“Dammit,” Samuel says.

“Oh, no!” Georgette cries as she jumps out of her seat and runs to the kitchen to get paper towels.

“Now look what you did,” Beth Ann says.

“Will you just shut up!” Clarissa shouts. “Why do you even open your mouth?”

“You shut up, you little brat!” Beth Ann shouts back.

“Will you two both shut up?” Joseph says with a mouth full of salad. “You’ll upset your mother.”

Georgette returns to the dining room, blotting her dress with a clump of paper towels and then begins wiping the spilt milk. “No one cry now,” she says, but no one laughs.

“I’ll do it,” Samuel says.

“You’ll just make it worse,” Beth Ann says.

Clarissa glares at her, a warning. *You open your mouth again, and I will leap across the table and put my fist in it.*

With the milk spluff all cleaned up, Georgette returns to the kitchen to throw away the soaked paper towels.

“Will someone pass me the rolls now?” Joseph asks. “*Beth*, perhaps?”

Samuel scowls as Beth Ann leans across the table and lithely passes the basket to her father.

“Thank you. *Christ*.”

“Lemme get one of those too, Pops,” Johnny says.

“Go long!” his father jokes, and Johnny positions himself as if he is running to catch a touchdown pass. Joseph tosses a roll, and Johnny grabs it out of the air.

“Nice *snatch*, son.” Joseph laughs.

“I don’t like it when you say that word,” Georgette says as she sits back down to the table.

Joseph rolls his eyes. “Sorry,” he mumbles.

“So does anyone have any good news to tell the family?” Georgette asks.

“Johnny got an internship with Morgan Stanley,” Joseph says, scooping up the detritus of salad dressing in his bowl with the end of his roll.

“That’s wonderful!” Georgette cries. “Congratulations!”

“I don’t know for sure yet,” Johnny says, sliding his salad bowl to the side.

“He knows,” Joseph says.

“So does everyone know what they’re wearing tomorrow?” Georgette asks.

“I’m gonna wear the black dress that I wore to Grampa’s funeral,” Clarissa says.

“Oh, that is such a nice dress,” says Georgette.

“You brought your suit home, right?” Joseph asks, peering at Johnny over a forkful of pasta.

“Yeah. I think so.”

“Well, I’m going to wear my red dress that your father bought for me for our anniversary last year,” Georgette says with a smile.

Beth Ann’s fork screeches against her plate. “Don’t you think you should wear black? Or at least *something* dark?”

“I like the red one. And I haven’t had an occasion to wear it yet.”

“Well I don’t think it’s *appropriate* for the occasion,” Beth Ann says.

Clarissa appears ready to pounce, fork held upright, neck angled.

“Don’t. Look at me like that,” Beth Ann says.

“Shut. Up,” Clarissa says.

Beth Ann shakes her off. “And you sure are chipper, Mom, in the event of Uncle Patrick’s death.”

“I hate you,” Clarissa says. “Why can’t you just shut up?”

“Girls, behave!” Joseph warns.

“What are you yelling at me for?” Beth Ann asks.

Johnny shakes his head.

“I don’t see what the big deal is,” Georgette says.

“You don’t see what the big deal is?” Beth Ann shouts. “Your brother is dead! It’s like you don’t even care.”

“I hate you so much,” Clarissa mumbles.

“Girls!” Joseph shouts.

Johnny shakes his head

“It’s okay, Joseph. And I do care, Beth Ann. Uncle Patrick is dead. But I was never very close to him. In fact, I can’t say that I liked him very much. Your Uncle Patrick was a menace.”

“A menace!” Beth Ann shouts. “He was your brother!”

“If you’re not going to shut up, maybe you should just leave,” Clarissa says.

“Why should I?”

“Because nobody wants you here,” Clarissa retorts.

“That’s enough,” Joseph says.

“Yes. That is enough, girls,” Georgette says. “No more fighting. We can get along. I know it.”

A new silence fills the house to the point where the family, if listening, can hear the clicks of Wordsworth’s nails on the wood floor upstairs. With everyone picking at the last scraps of their dinner, Georgette asks, “Now, what are everyone’s plans for tonight? I was thinking that we could rent a movie.”

“I’d like to watch a movie,” Beth Ann says.

“I don’t want to watch a movie with *her*,” Clarissa says with glaring eyes on Beth Ann.

“Fine,” Beth Ann says. “You want me to leave? I’ll leave.” She tosses her napkin onto her plate. “Sorry, Mom,” and she leaves the table and heads out the front door.

“Beth Ann!” Joseph shouts. “Get back here!”

Beth Ann slams the door.

“Oh, my,” Georgette says. “You should go apologize to her, Clarissa.”

“Why?” Clarissa asks.

“Because she’s your sister!” Joseph shouts.

Clarissa sighs angrily and lifts her plate from the table, carrying it to the dishwasher in the kitchen. Hidden in the empty kitchen, she grabs the open wine bottle and takes a large swig.

“What about you, Johnny? You’d like to watch a movie with the family, wouldn’t you?”

“Actually, I was hoping to go see Laura. She got home for break last night.”

“Oh. Yes. Laura. Well. I understand.”

Johnny stands up from the table and carries his dishes to the kitchen. Samuel follow suits as Georgette stares at the streaks of vodka sauce on her plate.

JOHNNY.

As he leaves the house, Johnny sees Beth Ann sitting on the front steps smoking a long cigarette. By the smell, Johnny assumes it is menthol. Menthols always have a different smell. Not like mint. More like whatever fiberglass must smell like as it burns.

“*You* smoke?” Johnny asks, drawing a Camel Light from the fresh pack and popping it into his mouth.

“*You* smoke?” she replies.

Johnny shrugs. “Not anymore.”

“Since when?”

Johnny shrugs again. “Dad said Mom would have a heart attack if she saw *me* smoking. You’d better be careful.”

“Oh, like she really cares what I do,” Beth Ann says.

“What’s your problem with Mom?”

“She’s just losing it. And she only cares about you. She doesn’t give a shit what the rest of us do.”

“Maybe you should just be nicer to her. She could use some help.”

“You’re not nice to her. And she likes you plenty.”

“Yeah, well. I’m her first son.”

“And I’m the first child.”

“We’re here, aren’t we?”

“You’re going out.”

“That’s true,” he says and walks away.

In his brand new red Porsche that is not black, Johnny takes a left off of Goldman Street to Oak Tree Road. He jams the new clutch and stalls a few times while exiting the street.

“Damn new car.”

He maneuvers the car up the street at forty-five miles an hour, twenty over the speed limit, and takes a sharp turn at Cotton Street. He taps his lit cigarette out the window. The waxing moon is just overhead.

Johnny turns onto Dogwood Avenue and pulls the Porsche up to the curb in front of Laura’s house. He shifts to neutral and lifts the emergency break. Getting out of the car and letting the door close on its own—new hinges—he stomps out his cigarette and heads up the stone walkway. He rings the doorbell,

Dwee-do, dwee do,
dwee-da, dwee-do,

and Laura's mother answers the door.

"Hi Johnny!" she exclaims. "Just get home from school? Oh, you're so tan!"

"Couple hours ago. It's freezing here."

"I'm so sorry to hear about your uncle."

"Thanks."

"How's your mom handling it?"

"She seems fine. So, is Laura home?"

"Yes, she's in her room. Let me get her for you." Laura's mother heads up the stairs, and Johnny can hear her knock and call her name.

"Laura! Johnny's here."

"What?"

"Johnny is here!"

A few seconds later, Laura descends the stairs wearing a navy blue tank top and light red sweatpants with a white Montclair State crest on her left hip. The waistband is folded over at least twice so that about an inch of Laura's midriff shows.

"Johnny," she says.

Johnny notices her hair is a bit disheveled, and as if Laura realizes that Johnny is seeing this, she tilts her head, and with an eye-rolling look she begins running her fingers through her hair. "Hey, baby," he says, taking a step forward and shutting the door behind him.

"Johnny, what are you doing here?"

"I came to see you," he says and kisses her cheek.

She flinches and takes a step back. “Oh. Umm. I wish you would’ve called first.”

“Were you taking a nap? I don’t mind seeing you in sweatpants. I wouldn’t mind seeing you *not* in your sweatpants either though.” He laughs.

“Johnny, it’s not that. There’s someone here.”

“Oh yeah? From school? Can I meet her?”

“He’s not a she,” Laura says, crossing her arms.

Johnny tilts his head and scrunches his brow. “What do you mean?” He’s not a she?

“I *mean* there’s a boy here. Upstairs. And my mom doesn’t know he’s here. He came over before she came home. So please keep your mouth shut.”

“What do you mean?” he repeats. “Why?” he asks.

“Johnny, you never even called while you were away.”

“I called!” he shouts, hands raised.

“Like once. And keep your voice down.”

“More than once,” he whispers. He lifts his hands, fingers clenched, as if he is about to break something. Like the air. As if he is about to break the air.

“Johnny, you know what I mean.” A tear wells up in her left eye, and she wipes it away.

Laura’s mom calls from the kitchen, “Would you like some pie, Johnny? It’s just out of the oven!”

“He doesn’t want any pie, Mom!” Laura shouts. “Johnny’s leaving!”

“Oh, so soon?” she calls.

“Maybe I *would* like some pie,” Johnny says.

“Yes, Mom!” Laura directs her eyes at Johnny. “He has to go.”

“Maybe I would like to have some pie and talk to your mom about who’s upstairs.”

“Johnny, you have to leave.”

Johnny opens his mouth, ready to call to Laura’s mom, but a tear leaks down Laura’s face, and he closes it, looks to her, and says, “What are you crying for? *You’re* breaking up with *me*.”

“Johnny, you broke up with me a long time ago.”

“I never broke up with you.”

“You didn’t have to. I got the hint.”

“So,” Johnny begins and reaches out to her, but she takes a step backward. “That’s it?”

“That’s it. Good bye, Johnny.”

CLARISSA.

The horrendous dinner over, the fighting and screaming still seeming to echo through the house, Clarissa lies across her bed as she stares at the plastic stars scattered across her ceiling. Johnny is gone already, escaping from the feud after only being home from school for an hour, Beth Ann choosing to lock herself in her room. Wordsworth the cat hops up on the bed and spreads himself out at her feet and begins licking his paws. Clarissa rubs her foot against the cat’s head, and he begins to purr. Clarissa’s father wanted to name the cat Diesel because of how loud the cat’s purr was, even as a kitten. But he was Johnny’s kitten really—he was a birthday present their parents got for him after the family cat, Silverton, died—and he decided on Wordsworth because their grandfather gave him a leather-bound collection of Wordsworth’s poems that he had had when he was a child. Johnny didn’t really understand any of the poems, but he liked to look at them, especially the included pictures. Starry skies, a castle, Tintern Abbey. A couple of weeks after Johnny left for college, though, and even a bit beforehand as Johnny’s presence in the house

became minimal—going over to Laura’s house and out drinking in the park with his friends—Wordsworth had chosen Clarissa as his owner.

Clarissa’s black dress hangs from a hook on her closet door that stands ajar. The matching black heels sit beside the door, a pair of black stockings draped over them. Next to her heels sits her black Louis Vuitton purse that her father bought her for Christmas the previous year. Actually, he had bought her a tan one, but she had exchanged it for the black one. It was nearly Christmas again, and Clarissa wondered what ridiculously expensive item in the wrong color her dad had in mind for her this year.

Downstairs, a Great Horned Owl hoots ten times, signaling the hour and that Uncle Patrick’s wake is in nine hours. From the stars overhead, Clarissa picks out Crux, Draco, Lyra, and her favorite: Boötes, the Bear Guard, son of Zeus and Calipso, forever protecting and circling the bears Ursa Major and Minor around the North Pole. Johnny had helped Clarissa put the stars up in the room with a star map he found online and had told her the story of Boötes. Now, there are gaps between the stars forming Boötes, and every day Clarissa finds dead stars stuck to the bottom of her feet.

Clarissa’s cellphone vibrates twice against her stomach. She lifts the phone to eye level and reads the message from Blair: “Where r u rite now?” She texts back: “In my room. Y?”

A moment later, there is a *thud* at her bay window. The noise startles Wordsworth, and he scampers out of the room, knocking over Clarissa’s purse on the way and spilling out a crème compact, light red lipstick, Clarissa’s wallet, and a water bottle refilled with Smirnoff. Clarissa goes to the window and grasps the two brass knobs. It has begun to flurry outside, and Clarissa shivers as she pushes open the two sections of window. On the snow-dusted and frost-covered

ground in Clarissa's backyard, Blair stands clad in a pink tuque-like hat, a black North Face jacket, and a tan pair of Uggs. She holds a long, thick rope.

"Catch!" Blair whisper-shouts and tosses the rope up to Clarissa. After three failed attempts, Clarissa catches the rope.

"Tie it to something sturdy!" Blair calls.

Clarissa ties the rope around her bedpost. She puts on a pair of black mittens and throws on her black and white, skull-covered, zip-up hoody.

"Now jump!"

Clarissa, grasping onto the rope, slides down and chokes back a scream. Be brave. When her feet hit the ground, she tumbles, and Blair grabs her by the waist to steady her. She lets go the moment Clarissa is balanced.

"What are you doing here?" Clarissa asks. "And why did I have to swing from my window?"

"I don't know. I thought it'd be fun."

"You don't know?"

"I thought you were mad at me."

"Why would I be mad at you?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know."

"I don't know. But I wanted to talk."

"About what?"

Blair kicks at the snow accumulating at her feet. "About earlier."

"I'm sorry, Blair. I shouldn't have done that. I'm sorry."

“Don’t be sorry. It wasn’t a bad thing. It just made me feel weird, you know?”

“Weird? I know. But I’m—”

“We’ve been friends for so long. I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t understand why you would want to do that.”

“I don’t know either,” Clarissa says. She shivers and wraps her arms around herself.

“It’s freezing out here.”

“But I’ve wanted to do it for a while.”

“But why?”

“I don’t know, Blair!” Clarissa realizes her volume and quiets. If her mother came outside right now, what would she say? I mean, yes, I snuck out, but I’m not really sneaking out. I mean, I’m not going anywhere. I’m coming right back in. Yes, I know what it looks like. It was Blair’s idea? Yeah, *perfect*, just blame it on her. Haven’t you messed her up enough in one day? “I don’t know, Blair. I just get this feeling when I look at you.”

“You’ve always thought this?”

“No, not always. More recently.”

“Well, it’s kind of weird.”

“*Weird?* My body creating feelings that I control is *weird?* What do you want me to...I know. It is a bit weird. But I don’t know how else to act. Blair, I’m sorry. Can we just go back to being friends?”

“When did we stop being friends? I still want to be your friend. But I don’t want you to kiss me.”

Clarissa feels pressure build in her face as her mouth turns in and her brow wrinkles, but she smiles it away. She still wants to be friends. Could she just be friends? “So what now?”

“Well, for one, I have to go home and sneak back in my house. My dad thinks I’m in bed.”

“Go home? But you just got here. And it’s early.”

“Maybe it’s early for you. Some people go to bed at a normal hour.”

“But we don’t have school tomorrow.”

“Clarissa, I’m tired. I’m used to going to bed at this time.”

“Well how am I going to get back inside?”

“The front door?”

“Locked.”

“Oh. I guess I didn’t think this through. Climb the rope?”

“Climb the rope! What is this? Gym class? I can’t climb the rope!”

Blair lifts her arms out and a bit over her head as if to say, I don’t know what to tell you.

“I’m sorry.”

“Well since I can’t get back in anyway, can I walk you to your house?”

“Walk me home? It’s far!”

“I walk to your house all the time!”

“Not both ways at once!” Blair makes a face that says, Just. Drop. It.

“I’ll be fine. I want to. I’m not even cold.”

“Clarissa, it’s not a good idea.”

“I could stay at your house.”

“Don’t you have, like, a *wake* to go to very early tomorrow? Won’t your mother not be very happy about you staying at my house?”

“She’ll be fine. I just—”

“Clarissa, it’s just not a good idea. I’ll help you find a way back in the house if you want. Or, why don’t you call Samuel? He’ll let you in.”

“Oh, and then tell Samuel *what* about why I’m out here? It’s fine, Blair. I think there’s a spare key in the shed.

“You think?”

Clarissa slides the shed door open and reaches behind a cabinet door for an object that she knows does not exist. “Here it is!” she calls. “Good bye, Blair!”

SAMUEL.

On the television, Steve Brand, a resident of Maple Street, screams at his neighbors: “You’re all standing out here, all set to crucify somebody! You’re all sent to find a scapegoat! You’re all desperate to point some kind of finger at a neighbor! Well, believe me friends, the only thing that’s gonna happen is that we’re gonna eat each other up alive!”

I can’t believe this shit used to scare me, Samuel thinks. He’s glad he can watch it now. And if he keeps watching it without being scared, maybe everyone will stop teasing him about it.

Samuel looks over at Skittles and thinks about how old he must be. He was in, what, third grade when he got him? That would make Skittles around three-years old. And that’s in human years. How long do hamsters live? He pulls Google back up on his phone and sees the search for “how to understand girls.” Yeah, I’m the sure the Internet knows all about it. Maybe Clarissa will know better. He knows it’s late, but Clarissa always has trouble sleeping anyway. He goes to her room and cracks the door open, checking to make sure she’s not changing or anything but not wanting to knock in case he would wake her up. But when he peeks in, her bed is empty. “Clarissa,” he whispers. But she doesn’t respond. He walks in and searches around, but she’s not

anywhere in sight. But then he hears her. She's talking to someone. And as his eyes adjust, he notices that her window is open. And there's a rope hanging through it. A fog lingers in the window as the cold air reacts with the heat, and he watches snowflakes land on the windowsill and melt. It must be freezing outside. He walks to the window and peeks over the ledge. And there's Clarissa. Clarissa talking to someone. He recognizes the girl from pictures Clarissa has hanging in her room. He knows her name is Blair, but Clarissa doesn't talk about her to him much. He watches as they talk, nice at first, but then they seem to get angry. Why is Blair yelling at Clarissa? Clarissa looks upset and this makes Samuel start to get angry. He doesn't like when people upset Clarissa. Even though she's tough and tends to hold her own. He likes it when she smiles though. And she really doesn't smile enough anymore. Samuel wonders why she isn't happy, what could be eating at her. Clarissa used to talk to him more, but recently she's grown more distant. As Samuel watches, he thinks Clarissa is about to cry, and he doesn't want to interrupt, but he can't watch anymore, so he creeps back to his bedroom, leaving the window ajar, and climbs into bed. He turns off the TV with the remote control and stretches out as far as he can in the bed, trying to make himself bigger, taller.

JOHNNY.

After driving rather aimlessly up and down Dogwood Avenue, Oak Tree Road, and Cotton Street while smoking nearly all of his cigarettes, Johnny digs his phone out of his pocket and calls Janson.

“What's up? You home?”

“Yeah, I got home earlier. Winter break. Wake. You know. What are you doing?”

“Sittin on my dick.”

“Sittin on your dick?”

“My *deck*,” Janson says.

“Your deck? Did you actually say *dick*?”

“Maybe. I dunno.”

“But you’re on your deck?”

“Jesus Christ. That’s what I said!”

“But it’s snowing.”

“Oh, I got this space heater out here. It’s working pretty well. And the chiminea’s going.”

“Are you supposed to have a space heater *and* a chiminea on your *deck*?”

“Why not?”

“You’re crazy. Who else is there?”

“Sidney just got here. Just got finished doing her hair after four hours of shampooing and conditioning and re-shampooing and re-conditioning and drying and straightening and re-straightening. She takes forever.”

“I get it. Mind if I stop by?”

“It’d be a pleasure, my good sir,” Janson says.

“You want anything from Quick Chek?”

“Yeah. Get me a Fiji water. And a pack of Camels. Oh and maybe an icee-pop. We got this heater crankin. I’m sweating.”

“Sure thing.”

BETH ANN.

“Well, the Chinese, first they screw a little bit, then they stop, then they go and read a little Confucius, come back, screw a little bit more, then they stop again, go and they screw a little bit...then they go back and they screw a little bit more and then they go out and they contemplate the moon or something like that,” states the surround sound speakers. Beth Ann sits reclined in the living room watching *Chinatown* with her parents except that her parents are both fast asleep in their reclined seats. Her father has spilled the remainder of his popcorn into his lap. A half-full glass of red wine sits beside her mother’s hand on the marble-topped end table.

“Well, family, I think it’s about time for me to go to bed.” She turns off the TV, carries her father’s bag of popcorn to the kitchen and throws it away. She goes back to grab her mother’s glass of wine, takes a sip and thinks about downing it, thinks twice, and carries the rest to the kitchen to dump down the drain.

SAMUEL.

While under the covers, unable to sleep but eyes closed, Samuel is jolted upright by a loud bang at his window.

“What now?” he nearly shouts. “I’ll just ignore it.”

Again a bang. Smaller though. More of a tap. It hits the glass like *tink*.

He must just be hearing things.

But then there’s another *tink*. Samuel wipes his running nose on his sleeve and, one step at a time, creeps to the window. Okay, now he’s kind of scared, he admits. He stares at the curtains, waiting for them to open themselves. Waiting for something else to open them and cackle in his face. A beast with black eyes. Or a girl with no pupils with scars all over her face. Like that girl from the *Exorcist*. Something that will grab him by his face and devour him whole.

Samuel grabs the curtain and throws them open. There are no monsters. Of course. Why did he let himself get so worked up? It's just a window. And beyond, a girl. Samuel spies Clarissa standing in the snow that has accumulated almost an inch.

When Samuel opens the window, Clarissa, pebble in hand, whisper-shouts, "Samuel, the door is locked! Can you let me in?"

"Why are you outside?"

"Samuel! Let me in! It's cold out here!" She adds, "And don't tell Mom or Dad!"

"What are you doing out there?"

"Samuel!"

Samuel closes his window and begins walking toward his door when he hears a thump in his closet. Samuel freezes. And then lets up. It's just Skittles. Jesus Christ, why am I freaking out?

Samuel trudges through the family room where his parents are passed out. He trips over the end table beside the loveseat, and a candle crashes to the floor. Samuel hears his mother, still asleep on the couch, begin to stir.

Dammit!

"Who's there?" his mother grumbles.

Samuel unlocks the back door and slides outside to Clarissa who is shivering in the cold, snow now falling in sheets, the wind whipping around them blowing waves of snow at the house.

"What are you doing out here?" she asks. She is shaking, and Samuel grasps onto her side, trying to provide as much warmth as possible.

"I woke up Mom."

"Fuck," Clarissa says.

Samuel's eyes widen.

"Sorry," Clarissa mutters.

"No, it's fine. I just never heard you say that word before."

"You hear that word a lot?"

"At school sometimes. Especially from that prick, Bobby Sheldon."

"Who?"

"Nobody," Samuel says. "So what are we going to do?"

"I don't know. Mom will probably fall back asleep. Or she'll go to bed. Maybe."

"So we'll just wait? For how long?"

"Shit! There's Mom!" Clarissa cries as she watches her mother walk toward the back door. "Come on! She's coming!" And the two of them run to the side of the house and hide around the corner where the bathroom meets the family room. Clarissa sighs, her breath visible.

"Did she see us?" Samuel asks.

"I don't know," Clarissa replies. "I don't think so."

"Why did you go outside?" Samuel blurts out.

"I needed some air."

"Blair too?"

"I guess you could say that. You saw us?"

"Why were you yelling at each other?"

"I don't know," Clarissa says. "I don't know."

"You can tell me. Not that I understand girls at all."

"It's complicated, Samuel!"

Samuel stares into Clarissa's eyes. Eyes that are confused. Eyes without answers.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have yelled at you.”

“It’s okay,” Samuel says. “I was just worried about you.”

“Oh shit!” Clarissa shouts as she hears her mother lock the back door.

JOHNNY.

Sleigh bells jingle as Johnny lets the door shut behind him and steps into the bright fluorescents of Quick Chek. The store has been remodeled, and it is way too white, empowering the brightness.

“Hello buddy,” a young man says from behind the register, peering over his inventory.

“Yo,” he replies and meanders down an aisle of candy, tampons, pain killers, cough medicine, and pet treats—how do they organize this shit?—to the back of the store where the wall is lined with clear glass doors that reveal bottles of water, soda, juice, energy drinks, and milk. Opening one of the doors, Johnny snags three large bottles of Fiji water. After stopping at the small food section at the other end of the back wall and grabbing an icee-pop, he proceeds to the counter.

The clerk, whose name Johnny sees is Harif from the man’s nametag, begins ringing up the items. “Anything else, buddy? You need Parliament Lights?”

“No, uhh, I smoke Marlboro Reds now. And also a pack of Camel Lights.”

“That all? You want Philly Blunt?”

“No, err, that won’t be necessary.”

“Cherry? Vanilla? You like flavored Blunts?”

“No, no Blunt, thanks.”

“You sure, buddy? Everybuddy gets Philly Blunt.”

“Do I look like someone who would buy a Blunt?”

“Buddy, I seen you buy Blunt before.”

“Yeah, well.”

“Thirty-eight sixty-one, buddy.”

Johnny swipes his debit card and punches in his pin, 3825.

“You want a bag, buddy?”

Johnny gives Harif a look that says, How the fuck am I gonna carry all this shit in my hands? and says, “Umm, yeah.”

Harif bags the purchases using two bags and hands them to Johnny, who takes them and leaves the store, sleigh bells jingling after him.

CLARISSA.

Sitting on one of the benches adjacent to the fire pit, Clarissa shivers as Samuel rubs her shoulders.

“We’re gonna freeze to death,” Samuel says. “Can’t we just ring the doorbell? Mom will let us in.”

“No, Samuel. Then she’ll wonder why we’re out here. Any why there’s a rope hanging from my window.”

“Well that’s not my fault,” Samuel says, regretting it as soon as the words leave his mouth.

“She’ll freak out. She’s got enough going on.” Clarissa removes her hoody and wraps it around Samuel.

“Keep it,” Samuel says. “You’ll be cold.”

“Samuel, you’re wearing a T-shirt.”

“I’m fine,” he says and then shivers. “Can we light the fire pit?”

“We don’t have any logs. The starter logs are inside. And we don’t have a way to light them anyway.”

“This is ridiculous,” Samuel says. “Was it that important for you to come outside?”

“I told you, Samuel. It’s complicated.”

“So we can’t ring the doorbell. We can’t light the fire pit. We’re going to freeze to death.”

“We’re not going to freeze to death.”

“Well what *can* we do?”

“We’re just gonna wait out here until someone comes for us. Hopefully Johnny will be home soon.”

“Great. Did you call him?”

“I did. Twice.”

“Where does he go all the time?”

Clarissa wipes her running nose with her mittens. Even through the cloth, she can feel that her nose is freezing. “Probably to Laura’s house.”

“Why does he go to school so far away?” Samuel asks. “What’s so good about California?”

“It’s beautiful there. Palm trees and beaches. And there’s deserts. And it’s always warm.”

“I want to go to there.”

“Me too,” Clarissa says. “We can pretend to be there now. On the beach. In our bathing suits. With our feet sinking in the sand at the edge of the water, sun shining down on us.”

“I’d like that,” Samuel says. “Far away from here.”

BETH ANN.

After screening sixteen calls, the chorus of Adele’s “Someone Like You” repeating over and over again—“Sometimes it lasts in love, but sometimes it hurts instead”—Beth Ann picks up, snatching her phone from atop her bureau.

“What do you want?” she asks, violence in her voice. She wipes sleep from her eyes and clears her aching throat. “I don’t want to talk to you anymore, Joshua!”

“Why? What did I do?”

Beth Ann groans. “Joshua, you’re pathetic. I tell you that you’re pathetic and that I don’t care about you, and you just say you’ll do better. But you don’t. And you can’t change.”

“Doesn’t the fact that I love you mean anything?”

“No. No, Joshua, no it doesn’t.”

“I’m willing to forget what happened. I just want us to be better again.”

“I hope you never forget what happened,” Beth Ann nearly yells. “You’re completely pathetic. And that’s why this is over.”

“I can change.”

“I’ve already told you that you can’t change. And you know this.”

“Can I come over for a little bit? We can talk about this.”

“Joshua,” she begins and grabs her glasses from the nightstand, “it’s four thirty in the morning. And I’m not even there. I’m at home. In Middleboro. If you paid any attention to me and my life, you’d know that I’m going to my uncle’s wake tomorrow.”

“I do pay attention to you.”

“You pay attention to all the wrong things. You don’t understand that we want different things.”

“And I’m sorry about your uncle.”

“As you should be. It doesn’t matter. He was a scumbag anyway. When my grandmother died, he wrote my mother out of the will.”

“Did you tell your parents we’re not together anymore?”

“What does it matter?”

“Did you tell them?”

“Yes, I did. And I told them that *you* cheated on *me*. My mother’s lost all respect for you. And now she’ll stop telling me how great you are. I’m so fed up with you. And I’m sick of you apologizing and telling me this will work itself out.”

“But maybe in the future we can be together? Try again in a few months?”

“Joshua, I don’t care about the future. I don’t want to think about it. And I’m done thinking about you.” She hangs up the phone, pressing the *END* button and wishes that she was on a land line instead of her cell phone so that she could slam down the receiver rather than press a button. She lies back in her bed and pulls the yellow sheet and paisley purple comforter over her. She takes her glasses from her face to put them back on the nightstand, and then the house phone begins to ring.

“Jesus Christ!” She jumps to her feet and grabs the receiver from the nightstand. “Don’t call my house, you crazy prick! You’ll wake up my parents!”

“Whoa whoa! Is this the Lombardi residence?”

“What? No.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry. I must’ve misdialed. I really am sorry for calling so late, but—”

“Just be more careful when you’re dialing, asshole.” And her anger is punctuated by her slamming down the receiver. As she lies back into bed she can’t help but think that the voice on the other end of the phone sounded a lot like her Uncle Patrick’s.

JOHNNY.

The streets at this time of night are mostly empty. Only the local loons walk along the sides of the road at this hour. Uncle Shuffles who has no toes—frostbite. Screaming Louie who howls at the moon. A man who goes by Fuzzy and whose only spoken words in the last ten years are, “Where can I see some tits?” As far as anyone knows, none of these men has a home. It is possible that they walk the streets all day too. But they stand out more at night.

Johnny takes Oak Tree Road to Plainfield Avenue and makes a left past an abandoned church as Third Eye Blind’s “Blinded” blares through Johnny’s speakers: “Never look back / at all the damage we have done now / to each other.” He passes another strip mall, all the stores closed except for 7-11 which glows red and green on the otherwise dark street. CLOSED signs barely illuminate the windows of CVS, The Bagel Pantry, and Cost’s Jewelers. Johnny makes a right onto George Street, skids slightly over a patch of black ice, and regains control as the fresh tires connect with the pavement. Johnny pulls up in front of Janson’s house, lowers the music, and kills the engine. He lights a fresh Marlboro, grabs the bags from Quick Chek, and exits the

car. As he walks up Janson's driveway and enters the backyard through the plastic fence, jerking the jay-rigged string to release the lock on the other side, he wonders if Sidney is still single. She has been on and off with some guy called Skillz for a while, but Johnny is pretty sure that they finally called it quits. Unless they were just fucking now. Skillz lived near Johnny's house. The previous summer, Johnny would look for Sidney's car parked near Skillz's house—he thought it weird, like he was stalking her somehow, but it wasn't like he was driving out of his way to see it—but never saw it even though if she was spending time with Skillz, it had to have been at his house since his attempted armed robbery had left him on house arrest. Johnny figured that Sidney would park far away from the actual house since her family hated Skillz and mostly forbade her to see him.

Johnny passes Janson's eight-person hot tub and walks up the stairs to the deck in the center of his yard.

"Yo, bro. It's been a long time." Janson's eyes are almost shut, but there is a wide smile on his face. He takes a long drag of his cigarette before hopping, unbalanced, out of his lounge chair and wrapping an arm around Johnny's back. Three taps: I'm not gay.

"Hey stranger," Sidney says with a smile that reveals a mouth full of bright white teeth.

Johnny gives Sidney a smile and a wink and looks to Janson. "So I notice you're not surrounded by your normal potent odor."

"Yeah. Gave that shit up. Smoke a whole lot more of these now, though," Janson says, taking another long drag.

Johnny takes a seat in one of the chairs surrounding the glass patio table. "Here's your icee-pop." While Johnny likes the idea of Janson no longer getting high, he doesn't believe him.

His eyes say that he's lying. And so does his lack of balance. Especially since he doesn't drink. And the icee-pop? Well, it's not a cheeseburger. "Jesus, it's hot as hell up here."

"I told you."

And then Johnny decides he's actually a bit disappointed. He would actually like to get high right now, after this day, even though he doesn't normally. Normally it makes him way too paranoid and not paranoid like, oh the cops are gonna get us, but paranoid that he's not doing enough with his life. But today, fuck it, Johnny thinks. "And here's your cigs and your water. I got a bottle for you too, Sidney." And even if Janson is lying about not smoking anymore, he's obviously hiding it. And therefore, no THC for Johnny. "Janson, you have any beers?"

"In the fridge in the garage."

"Mind if I snag a couple?"

"Not at all."

"You want one?"

"I'm good."

He's good. No weed and no beer. Curious. "Anything for you, Sid?"

"Yeah. Where's *my* icee-pop?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't know you wanted one." Why didn't he get her one anyway? What would it have hurt? "You should've asked." Clever. Blame her for it. "You want a beer?"

Sidney makes a disgusted face.

"Yeah. Forgot you don't drink. Weirdo."

"*I drink*. Just not beer."

"Grab her the bottle of Captain Morgan from the freezer," Janson says. "And some Coke."

“*Diet* Coke,” Sidney says.

“What do you need *Diet* Coke for?” Johnny asks. “You’re skinnier than that fencepost.”

“And how do you think I *stay* skinnier than that fencepost? Sugar’s bad for you.”

“And artificial sweetener—*chemicals*—*is* good for you?”

“You smoke,” she says.

“Diet Coke it is,” Johnny says. From the garage, as he loads up his hands with cans of Coor’s Light, Johnny calls, “Hey Janson, George out yet?”

“Not yet. Give it time, bro.” And then, “And keep it down. My parents are sleeping.”

SAMUEL.

“I freaking hate that Bobby Sheldon,” Samuel says and punches his knee with the bottom of his fist.

“Who’s Bobby Sheldon?” Clarissa asks.

“He’s this jerk at school who thinks I like his girlfriend because I help her with her math homework that she *never* does. Mostly, she just copies mine in homeroom.”

“Why do you let her do that?” Clarissa asks.

“I don’t know,” Samuel says. “She’s nice.”

“Is she just nice to you when she wants to see your math homework?”

“No! Well, maybe. She doesn’t talk to me much otherwise.”

“Uh-huh,” Clarissa says. “Well, do you like her?”

“Not like that. She’s Bobby’s girlfriend.”

“Do you think she’s pretty?”

“She’s pretty. But in a dirty kind of way. You know, like those Juggen boys. They always look messy. Like their hair.”

“Well, maybe you should just stop letting her copy your homework. Then maybe Bobby will leave you alone.”

“I don’t think so. He used to make fun of me before. But now he’s being meaner than usual. I wish I could just beat him up. Then he’d leave me alone. If I just punched him in the face like Steve Maione would.”

“Steve Maione is not a good kid, Samuel. You don’t want to be like him.”

“Nobody gives Steve Maione shit!” Samuel shouts. “Sorry.”

“Just don’t go getting yourself in trouble at school. And if you fight him, he’ll just be more of a pain in the butt to you.”

“Not if I hurt him enough,” Samuel says.

JOHNNY.

The snow accumulates on Janson’s deck and everyone’s shoulders. Johnny has placed the unopened remaining beers in a large clump of snow that he formed to keep them cold. Probably unnecessary since everything is cold. Except next to the chiminea where it seems to be burning up.

“*Saving Silverman*,” Johnny says, placing the empty can of Coor’s Light next to the other three empties.

“*Saw Two*,” Sidney replies.

“You can’t say sequels,” Johnny says, staring her down.

“Can too!” Sidney shouts.

“Shh! My parents are sleeping,” Janson says.

“You can’t say sequels. Can you?” Johnny says, exhaling a cloud of smoke at Janson.

“We started saying sequels. It makes the game last longer.”

“You can’t change the rules of Movie Game. It’s like...the Ten Commandments.”

“It’s *not* like the Ten Commandments,” Sidney mocks and rolls her eyes.

“Whatever.”

“*Saving Private Ryan*,” Janson says.

“Shit,” Johnny says. “I was saving that one. Umm *Space Jam*.”

“*Saw Three*,” Sidney says and cracks herself up.

“This is bullshit!” Johnny cries.

“Shh!”

“Fine.”

“*Swordfish*,” Janson adds.

“Nice one,” Johnny says. “*Saw Four*.”

“You bitch,” Sidney says. “*Saw Five*.”

“*Saw Six*,” Janson chimes in.

“Let’s not do *S*,” Johnny says.

“Let’s not play this game at all,” Sidney says. “It’s stupid.”

“*You’re* stupid,” Johnny says.

“Good one,” Sidney replies.

“You just say that because you suck at Movie Game!” Johnny shouts.

“Guys! Shh!” Janson says, lighting a fresh cigarette with the ember of the previous one.

“Look, George is here!” Johnny cries as the light from the porch on the house next door goes out, signaling that it’s two o’clock. The fencepost casts a shadow onto Janson’s garage wall that eerily resembles George Washington wearing a three-pointed hat. Johnny had spotted it about a year before. Sidney thought Johnny was an idiot, but Janson agreed that it did look a lot like George Washington.

“All right, that means I have to go,” Sidney says.

“Go?” Johnny asks. “It’s still early.”

“If George is out, then it’s late. And I have to work in the morning.”

“Who works?”

“Everyone who’s not spoiled like you.”

“I’m not spoiled,” Johnny says.

“Yeah? Well then tell me how you got that Porsche.”

“My dad bought it. Graduation present.”

“See.”

“See what?”

“You’re spoiled.”

“That doesn’t mean I’m spoiled.”

“Does too!” Sidney shouts. “You haven’t worked ever, and you drive a nicer car than anyone we know.”

“Yeah? Well I got a new one,” Johnny says.

“I told you.”

“Whatever.”

“Guys!” Janson shouts. “Shut up!”

“She started it,” Johnny says.

“Real mature,” Sidney replies.

“I should probably go to bed too.”

“What? Really? Dammit.”

“Last cig?” Janson asks.

“Last cig.”

CLARISSA.

Samuel’s statement that they’re going to freeze to death resonates and repeats in Clarissa’s brain. She’s called Johnny at least six times without an answer. She is about ready to give in. To just ring the doorbell and face her mother. Tell her what happened. It’d be better to tell the truth than to freeze to death out here. Especially for Samuel whom she can’t seem to stop from shaking. He won’t take her sweatshirt, and he won’t let her put her arms around him. He’s so stubborn. But she shouldn’t have dragged him into this. She shouldn’t have gone outside at all. What did she think was going to happen? That Blair was going to grab her tight and kiss her and tell her that they could be together? Tell her that she wanted to be more than friends? Tell her that she loved her? Of course that wasn’t what she wanted. But then why get her to come outside at all. Why not just call her to talk. Why did she make her climb down from her window? This is all Blair’s fault. She couldn’t have just left her alone. Now she’s going to freeze to death, and, worse, so is Samuel.

A shadow emerges in Clarissa’s room and a figure approaches the window.

“Now we’re in for it,” Samuel says.

“Get down!” Clarissa whisper-shouts.

Clarissa and Samuel dive to the ground and climb behind the bench they were sitting on. They raise their heads just high enough so they can peek over the bench.

“Who is it?” Samuel asks.

“I don’t know.” Worried, Clarissa thinks about running. Just grabbing Samuel and dragging him to the other side of the house. What if it’s one of her parents? What will they say? Before this point, she was getting ready to tell them anyway, but now, the event imminent, she’s afraid.

The figure grabs the rope and leans out the window, looking around. “Clarissa! What is this?”

“Beth Ann!” Clarissa cries. “Thank God! Can you let us in?”

“What are you doing out there?” Beth Ann demands.

“It’s a long story,” Clarissa says.

“I have time,” Beth Ann replies.

“Umm. Well. You see. I wanted to see if I could actually climb out of my room with that rope. You know, like they do in the movies. I just, um, wanted to see if it was possible.”

“I don’t think so,” Beth Ann says. “What are you really doing with this?”

“Jesus Christ! Just let us in!”

“And Sammy, what are you doing out there?”

“None of your business,” Samuel shouts.

“Keep it down,” Clarissa says.

“What does it matter?” Samuel asks. “We’re caught.”

“Uh huh. So why are you sneaking out, Clarissa?”

“What do you care?” Clarissa shouts.

“Then maybe you’d just like to stay out there.”

“Fine!” Clarissa shouts. She can’t let Samuel stay out here any longer just in a T-shirt. “I snuck out. To see my friend. Please don’t tell Mom or Dad.”

“All right, I won’t tell,” Beth Ann says. “But if you want to be out of the house so bad, maybe you should just stay outside!”

“You can’t just leave us out here,” Clarissa says.

“I’ll let you in, Sammy.”

“I’m not coming in without Clarissa!” Samuel shouts. “And it’s Samuel.”

“Fine! You can both stay outside and freeze to death!”

Freeze to death.

Beth Ann slams the window shut.

“Great. Just great,” Clarissa mutters. “She’s such a bitch.”

“Whatever.”

“Fuck,” Clarissa says.

“She *is* a bitch, huh?” Samuel says.

JOHNNY.

“Thanks for bringing me home,” Johnny says. “My father would kill me if I crashed that car. Or got a DUI.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t drink so much,” Sidney says, turning onto Plainfield Avenue.

“I only had like three beers,” Johnny says.

“Three?”

“Okay, six.”

“It was more than six.”

“Not a chance.”

“Then why can’t you drive?”

“Precaution,” Johnny says. The thing is, Johnny could have driven. Definitely should not have. Especially in the snow. But *could* have. However, he knew that Sidney wouldn’t let him walk home like he said he was going to. And this would give Johnny time to be alone with Sidney. To try to have a normal conversation with her. To maybe make a move. But he can’t get any closer to her with the drive shaft in the way. And he can’t make eye contact with her eyes glued to the road. Which is probably for the best, but it’s not helping Johnny’s chances of kissing her. “You drank too,” Johnny says, trying to even the score. To make himself look a little better.

“One drink. Not twelve.”

“But it was rum.”

“Don’t you remember driver’s ed? One shot equals one beer. So it doesn’t matter.”

“And I didn’t drink twelve! Maybe nine. And that’s pushing it.”

“*You’re* pushing it.”

Johnny fiddles with the sun visor, watching the lights go on and off as he flips the vanity mirror up and down. This is not going well. He needs to say something.

“Will you quit playing with that?” Sidney snaps.

“Sorry.” Johnny returns the sun visor to its original position. “Are you still with that Skillz guy?”

“No, not really,” Sidney says. “I see him once in a while. He’s pretty much just a jerk.”

“You like jerks,” Johnny says. He’d like to light a cigarette, but he knows how much Sidney hates smoking. She’d probably let him too. But he doesn’t want to push his luck.

“I don’t like jerks,” she says.

“All the guys you date are jerks.”

“I never dated you.”

“So I’m a jerk?”

“Sometimes,” she says. She gives him a look that says she’s just joking. Mostly just joking. But then her eyes are back on the road.

Johnny needs a new route. To turn the conversation. Something that will make him look good. The car approaches Oak Tree Road, and Johnny gets an idea. “Turn right at Oak Tree,” he says. “I want to show you something.”

“Johnny, it’s late.”

“It’ll be real quick. I promise. It’ll be fun.” Johnny is not sure if it’ll be fun. But he needed to do something. He wants to take Sidney to Heavenly Homes. He thinks it’ll be creepy since nobody will be there, and they could sneak around and something would scare Sidney, and she’d latch onto him. It’s an idea. It’s something.

“Where are we going?”

“It’s a secret.”

Stopped at the light where Oak Tree Road becomes Kylum Street, Sidney says, “I’m not going any further until you tell me where we’re going.”

“It’s *farther*.”

“What?”

“You say *farther* for distances.”

“Johnny, shut up. Where are we going?”

“I told you, it’s a secret.”

“I’ll just bring you home.”

“Heavenly Homes.”

“That place your dad owns? Why?”

“He sold it. It’s abandoned. They’re going to tear it down.”

“So?”

“So it could be fun. It’ll be like going to one of those *Weird NJ* places.”

“Those places are stupid. And they kind of freak me out.”

Perfect. “They’re not stupid. They’re interesting. C’mon, just oblige me.”

“If I must.”

The light turns green, and Sydney accelerates up the street, a bit too fast. They drive beside Splitz Stream, which, for the most part, is frozen solid. The street is empty. It is late.

“Turn right and then a quick left,” Johnny says.

And a block later, the massive building looms before them, pitch black. It seems even that the streetlights are out on the block. This will be perfect, Johnny thinks. One groan of the building and Sidney will jump right into his arms.

Sidney kills the engine, and they both step out. Johnny wishes Sidney would have waited and let him open her door for her. But she’s out of the car before he is. An ominous owl hoots, and Johnny is surprised to hear it. He does not hear owls often in New Jersey. Maybe it’s a different kind of bird.

“It’s really dark in there,” Sidney says.

“That’s what makes it fun,” Johnny says.

They step into the building, Johnny holding the door open for Sidney. It’s freezing. Perhaps even colder than it is outside. Johnny flips the light switch beside the door, but the lights

don't come on. His father would've turned the power off the minute the deal was completed. All of the doors in the hallway are ajar, tilted into the center of the long, dark, narrow hallway. Their shadows play games on the walls as a lone car passes and its headlights shine through the windows.

"It's freezing in here," Sidney says.

Johnny begins to take off his Calvin Klein pea coat, be a gentleman, drape it over her shoulders.

"I'm fine," she says, holding her arms.

Johnny peeks in some of the rooms: 100N, 100S, 101N, 101S. Sidney remains in the center of the hallway. Each of the rooms are dark and empty. C'mon, house, make a noise, Johnny thinks. Just a creak. "C'mon," he says as they make it to the spiral staircase at the end of the hallway.

"Johnny, this is stupid," she says. "And a waste of time. It's late. What do you expect to see?"

"Ghosts?" Johnny shrugs. "I don't know." And he grabs her hand, perhaps a bold move, but it didn't seem like she was going to move on her own, and leads her up the stairs.

"Johnny, you're squeezing too hard."

"Sorry," he says and loosens his grip. She didn't tell him to let go.

When they reach the top of the stairs, they are greeted by another hallway, identical to the previous. Four open doors. Dark, empty rooms.

"This is stupid," Sidney repeats.

"One more floor," he says.

But the next floor appears to be the same. Just another dark hallway. Johnny leads her through it anyway. One empty room. Two empty rooms. And then Johnny steps on something. Something solid.

“Jesus Christ!” he yells and grabs onto Sidney.

“What the hell, Johnny?”

“There’s something there. I stepped on something.”

Sidney casually removes her cellphone from her purse and shines the light on the floor. There, lying on its side, on the floor is a lone black heel. “You’re such a chicken,” Sidney says.

“I thought it was rat,” he says. “I hate rats. Or worse, it could’ve been an arm.”

“An arm?” she asks and makes a face that says, what are you on? “You’re such a chicken.”

“And, here, I was trying to scare you.”

“Scare me? Why?”

“I don’t know. So I could rescue you.”

“That’s dumb,” she says.

“I know,” he says.

The two begin walking down the hallway, no longer holding hands, but as they reach the last door on the left, Johnny sees something. “What is that?”

“Johnny, stop.”

“No, there’s something in there.”

Johnny enters the room and walks toward a wall near the corner of the room. There on the wall, a framed picture hangs. Johnny holds his cellphone up to the picture, and, even with the glare, he recognizes all four people.

“What is it?” Sidney calls from the hallway.

“A picture,” Johnny says. “And I’m in it.”

CLARISSA.

It is nearly three in the morning. Clarissa and Samuel have moved to the front steps of their house, waiting for Johnny to get home and let them in. Samuel is asleep. Or at least seems asleep. His eyes are closed, and he hasn’t said anything in a while. Clarissa is too cold to bother him. Clarissa has called Johnny ten times now and sent five texts. She has given up on believing that he will come home at all. How could he stay out so late? Or stay out all night the night before the wake? He’s such an asshole. Clarissa drapes her hoody around Samuel, hoping he won’t throw it off of him. But she doesn’t need it anymore. She can’t feel anything even with it on. Snow has accumulated on their heads and shoulders. They are not going to make it through the night.

In the distance, something crashes through a group of snow-covered trees. Samuel lifts his head at the sound and nudges Clarissa.

“What is that?” he asks.

“Shit!” the shape yells. “Ow!”

“Who are you?” Samuel shouts.

“Go back to sleep, Samuel. It’s just a deer. No one or nothing is coming for us.” She feels like she may fall asleep, even in this chaotic excitement. She is frozen. She cannot feel her body. She cannot feel anything. She just watches. Without any emotion.

“Deers don’t talk,” Samuel says. “Deers don’t say shit.”

The shape draws nearer at a steady, stumbling pace.

“Fuck!” Clarissa shouts, coming out of her trance. “What is that?”

“Calm down,” Samuel says

“Samuel?” the shape asks. “Clarissa?”

“It knows our names!” Clarissa screams. She tries to run away, but Samuel’s got his arms around Clarissa’s waist. “It’s going to eat us!”

“What are you doing out here?” the shape asks.

“Johnny!” Samuel cries and jumps from Clarissa, grabbing onto Johnny.

“Jesus,” Johnny says. “You’re freezing. Why are you out here?”

“Frozen,” Clarissa says. “The witch locked us out.”

“Mom?”

“No, not Mom,” Clarissa says, trying to give Johnny a dirty look, unsure if she actually makes the face or not. “Beth Ann.”

“She’s the worst. What a freaking weirdo. Let’s get inside. What time is it? We probably have to get up soon.”

“What is that you’re carrying?” Clarissa asks. “A frame?”

“This? Oh, nothing.”

Samuel picks up Clarissa’s hoody from off the ground and drapes it over her shoulders as Johnny unlocks the front door. The three go inside, Samuel mostly dragging Clarissa along, as she can barely walk on her own. As they enter, Samuel grabs the afghan off of the couch.

“Here,” he says.

Clarissa wraps the afghan around herself and leans against the wall. She wants to go upstairs, but she can’t. She is too tired. She is too cold. She is too empty. At the moment, she has nothing left.

JOHNNY.

Clarissa looks like shit. What happened to them? He sets the framed picture upside down on the steps and says, “I think I’m just going to stay up. You guys want some coffee?”

“Mom says I can’t have coffee yet,” Samuel says. “It’s bad for you. Mom usually makes me tea.”

“Jesus Christ,” Johnny says. “Bad for you? Hardly. It’s great for metabolism. It even prevents cancer and Alzheimer’s.”

“Prevents cancer and Alzheimer’s?” Clarissa asks. “You’re making that shit up.”

“Hey, don’t say *shit* in front of Samuel,” Johnny says. “He’s like eight.”

“I’m twelve, you asshole,” Samuel says.

“Shit! See the mouth you’ve given this kid,” Johnny says. “Soon he’ll be smoking.”

“I don’t smoke. You do! And you reek!”

“Nah, not me,” Johnny says, giving her a look. “That stuff’s gross. But Janson must’ve smoked like three packs while I was there. One after another.”

“I’m sure that’s what it is,” Clarissa says. Her words no longer come out as she stutters. She seems back to her nasty, bitter self. “So that’s where you were this whole time?”

“Yeah. Mostly. Oh and hey, did you know that Beth Ann smokes?” That’ll divert the attention.

“She would,” Clarissa says. “I thought you were going to Laura’s.”

“We don’t talk anymore,” Johnny says. Why did she have to say her name? She could at least have said *that girl* or something.

“Why?” Clarissa asks.

“Because we don’t. Because...shut up.”

“‘Because shut up.’ Nice.”

“Yeah. And don’t tell Mom what I said about Beth Ann. Everybody fights enough in this house.”

“Everybody sure does,” Samuel says.

“Maybe I’ll tell her,” Clarissa says. “And maybe I won’t.”

“Just don’t tell her,” he says. He’s feeling aggressive. He’s sobering. Or maybe drunkening. If this conversation keeps up, he might shake Clarissa.

“Don’t tell *who* what?” Georgette says, walking into the living room in her faded yellow, furry slippers and matching robe. Loose strings hang from the edges, and there is a hole in the front of one of the slippers. Her hair hangs from her head in a spider web of waves and curls.

“Nothing,” Clarissa says. “Johnny was just asking how Samuel would like his tea.” She smirks and poses. Johnny is unsure if this look means *I won’t tell* or *you’re going to make Samuel his tea*.

“That’s so nice of you, Johnny. You’re such a good boy.”

“I don’t want tea,” Samuel says. “I want coffee.”

“Samuel, you know you’re not supposed to drink coffee,” his mother says. “You’re too young.”

“I’m not too young,” Samuel says. “I’m twelve!”

“Yeah, Mom,” Johnny says. “I was drinking coffee at twelve.”

“Well, I guess that’s true, Johnny. But it’s late and we need to be up early. And why are all of you still awake?”

“We couldn’t sleep,” Johnny says without a moment’s hesitation.

“It must be contagious,” Georgette says. “Make me some tea, too, please. And put some extra sugar in mine. Well, since we’re all up, maybe you’d all like to play a game? Maybe Sorry. Or Clue?”

“I was going to go try to get some sleep,” Clarissa says. “I’m actually starting to feel really tired.”

“I’m tired, too,” Samuel says.

“How about you, Johnny? Would you like to play Clue?”

“Actually, I was gonna go read some after I make that coffee.” Clue? It’s almost four o’clock in the morning. What has happened to Mom? What has happened to everyone? His mother’s cheery smile fades, and she just stares ahead, blinking at him. Like he’s speaking a language she doesn’t understand. Like there’s nothing going on in her brain.

“And Samuel’s and Mom’s tea,” Clarissa says. “And I want hot chocolate.”

God dammit, Johnny thinks, with the tea.

“I said I want coffee,” Samuel mutters.

“It’s too bad no one wants to play a game,” Georgette says.

“I’m sorry, Mom,” Johnny says. “I just really want to finish this book. I’m almost done. I’ll play a game tomorrow. I promise.”

“It’s okay. I guess I’ll just watch a movie instead. I’d really like to watch *My Fair Lady*. Or *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*. Something with Audrey Hepburn. She’s so elegant.”

“You always watch those movies,” Samuel says.

Johnny has tuned out. He walks to the kitchen and pops a Dark Roast K-Cup into the Keurig machine. Mom always *does* watch those movies, Johnny thinks. She thinks she is Audrey Hepburn. Or maybe she feels like she should be Audrey Hepburn but isn’t good enough. He

places a mug under the spout of the machine and selects the large option. I need to get my shit together tomorrow, he thinks. I shouldn't have tried to kiss Sidney. Of course she would turn her cheek on me after that hug. I shouldn't have tried. I need to get my shit together. I need to get Laura back.

The lights are fading. And so are the dreams. As if the room is collapsing. And yet it continues on as if in complete normality. Clarissa heads upstairs to bed and the warmth of her covers, hot chocolate in hand, as Johnny sets teabags into the mugs of hot water, and Samuel follows his mother into the family room. Johnny sets spoons in the mugs. Georgette fetches her copy of *My Fair Lady* from the tall, mahogany cabinet. Clarissa sets her alarm for seven a.m. Johnny squeezes the teabags with the spoons and stirs them. Georgette sits down on the tan, plush sofa and pushes play on the BluRay DVD remote. Samuel follows but sits in the recliner which is typically his father's seat. Clarissa thinks about the vodka in her purse. Johnny thinks about adding lemon juice to the tea and remembers that his mother likes light cream. Clarissa changes into her black pajama shorts and tank-top. Samuel closes his eyes. Georgette reclines in her seat. Clarissa takes the bottle from her purse. Johnny hands his mother the two mugs and kisses her good night. Samuel relaxes. Georgette stares at Samuel. Johnny ascends the stairs, picture in hand. Samuel drifts. Georgette cries. Clarissa takes a swig. Wordsworth meows at Johnny from his bed. Georgette sips her tea. Johnny forgot to add sugar.

Part Three:
Pantscapade and
preparing to wake.

JOHNNY.

It's nine a.m. The wake begins at ten. Johnny is wearing a black button-down shirt, a black tie, a black pin-striped sports coat, long black Nike socks that he took from his father's drawer about a year ago, and red polka-dotted boxer briefs. All of the items are Armani except for the underwear which are Calvin Klein. He calls Janson.

"Yo bro, I need to borrow your pants."

"You *what*?"

"I forgot my dress pants at school. Do you have black pants I can borrow? You must have some. Even khakis will do."

"Well, yeah, I do. But they're at home."

"You're at work already? Shit. How do you do it? Stay up all night drinking and then go to work so early?"

"I had one beer." Janson coughs into the phone. "Excuse me. Damn."

"Well maybe I can just get them from your house." Shit, he thinks. How was he even going to get there with his car at Jansons's house. Maybe that's good. He could ask his father to drop him off there, so he could get his car and then get Janson's pants. Dammit, that wouldn't work anyway. They were going to be late as it is.

"Not gonna work," Janson says. "House is locked."

"You don't keep a spare key around your house? Like in a fake rock or under the doormat?"

"We used to. But I lost it."

"Dammit. All right, I'll see you later."

Johnny runs downstairs, pushing up his freshly gelled hair into chunky black spikes. He carries his black, muddied Kenneth Cole slip-ons in his other hand.

“Dad, I forgot my pants. What should I do?”

“What do you mean?” his father says before the large mirror above their bureau. “Where are they?” He pulls the end of his tie through a perfect Windsor knot. “How could you forget your pants? Didn’t you use that list Mom sent you? And check off all the things when you pack them? I could see you forgetting a tie, but pants?”

A moment flashes in Johnny’s mind. After the homecoming dance. He went home with a girl. Tina? Trina? Melissa? He slept, sort of, at her house. He remembers that she had a big thing about nipples. She kept biting his. And he kind of liked it. Except that he was sure that she was going to bite them off, so he made her stop. She also had a tattoo on her left shoulder. A skull made out of butterflies. It really turned him on, and he thought he might want to get the same thing. Except different. Maybe butterflies would be floating out of its mouth. Maybe incorporate flames? No, that’d be stupid. Vines? But she woke him up very early saying he had to go. Her boyfriend could come over at any time. She said he had to go immediately. He couldn’t find his pants. She said she didn’t care if he couldn’t find his pants. He just had to go. “I must’ve missed them,” Johnny says to his father. “What should I do?”

“How could you have missed them?”

“Dad! I don’t know! They’re not in my suitcase. I thought I packed them, but they’re not there. And asking me how I could forget them is not helping. Tell me what to do.”

“You could probably wear a pair of my old pants. But my pants aren’t going to fit you. What size is your waist? Twenty-eight?”

“Thirty-two, Dad. I’m not twelve.”

His father snorts. “You’re still not going to fit in my pants. Forty-four ain’t no thirty-two.”

“I’ll look ridiculous.”

“You’ll look ridiculous without pants on.” His father keeps staring at his boxers.

Johnny wishes his father would stop looking at his boxers. Self-consciousness? Sort of. Lack of responsibility? Perhaps more so. “I could wear my jeans.”

“You’re not wearing jeans to the wake. Here, take these pants.” His father hands him a pair of black, pin-striped pants that don’t quite match his suit jacket but are close. “They might fit. They’re too small for me. But you will probably *still* look ridiculous. They’re going to be baggy.”

Johnny investigates the pants. The stripes are light blue while the stripes on his jacket are silver. “Fine.” He slides the pants over his tan legs and up to his thin hips and stares at himself in the mirror. “I’ll tie my belt really tight.”

“Oh, you have a belt?”

“Well. No. It must be with my pants.”

“Take this one,” his father says. “You gotta start being more responsible, kid.” He combs his short, salt and pepper hair with the part on the right. He flicks the front of his hair across the top of his brow.

Johnny fastens the braided belt in a hole that he has to make himself. The remainder of the belt wraps around half his body.

“You *do* look ridiculous,” his father says.

“I’ll just untuck my shirt a little bit, and that’ll cover it up,” Johnny says and slips on his shoes.”

“You can’t even see your feet! Don’t you have another pair of dress pants upstairs?”

“They’re too small. Plus, they’re navy.”

“Make sure you get yourself some new pants after the wake. I’ll just pretend I don’t know you until then.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

BETH ANN.

“You’ve got to come see this!” Beth Ann calls from Samuel’s room.

Seconds later, Clarissa bursts into the room. Johnny trips in soon after.

“Look at his pants!” Beth Ann cries.

“Oh no!” Clarissa cries. Poor Samuel.

Samuel stands beside Beth Ann in a full suit. He would look dashing, respectable for a twelve-year old, but his pants make him look more like Kramer from *Seinfeld*. His black pants taper and end above his ankles and reveal the tops of white socks above black shoes. “I haven’t had to wear dress pants in a long time!” he shouts.

Beth Ann’s eyes go wide. *Did Samuel just shout at me?* she asks herself. *He’s never screamed at me.*

“You’ve got like three inches between your pants and your shoes!” Johnny says. “And what’s with those socks?”

“Nice pants yourself,” Clarissa says. “You don’t have any feet.”

“They’re Dad’s,” he says.

Samuel smirks. Almost smiles.

“Where’s yours?” Beth Ann asks.

“Don’t worry about it,” Johnny snaps.

“Some things don’t change,” Beth Ann says. “You ever going to get your life together?”

“Fuck you,” Johnny says.

“Don’t say *fuck* in front of Samuel,” Beth Ann says.

“I don’t fucking care,” Samuel says.

“I can’t help it when you’re being a fucking bitch,” Johnny says. “And see, he doesn’t fucking care!”

“What did you just call me?” Beth Ann asks. Did he just call her a *bitch*? She could strangle him.

“Johnny, shut up!” Clarissa shouts.

“Take it back,” Beth Ann says. “Before I murder you.”

“Fine. I’m sorry.”

“You don’t sound sorry,” Beth Ann says.

“I am!” Johnny shouts.

Beth Ann’s nostrils flare, and she takes a step toward Johnny but is caught off-guard by Clarissa’s sudden burst of laughter. “What are *you* laughing at?”

“They both just look so silly,” Clarissa says. Her teeth shine through her deep red lips.

Samuel starts to giggle himself, and a smile appears on his face.

“Not as silly as *he* looks!” Johnny shouts, pointing at Samuel.

Samuel’s smile fades and a scowl forms.

“It’s all right,” Johnny says. “I have a pair of pants you can wear. They’re navy though. And they will be too long. Maybe you can roll them up at the bottom.”

“I think he looks better than you do as is,” Beth Ann says and starts to laugh herself.

“Don’t make him look like you.”

“Maybe...” Clarissa can’t stop laughing. “Maybe you can just pull them down a bit,” she says through her laugh.

“Three inches!” Johnny says. “No way! I’ll go get him mine.”

“Why don’t you get him a pair of Dad’s?” Beth Ann mocks.

“You’re not helping,” Clarissa says.

“I’ll just get him mine. We’ll match. We’ll tell everybody it’s the new style. The MC Hammer look is back.”

“Who?” Samuel asks.

“Our relatives don’t know anything anyway,” Johnny says. “Half of them are from Pennsylvania.”

“What does *that* mean?” Clarissa asks.

“They don’t know trends in Pennsylvania. They’re like thirty years behind. Actually, it’ll probably work. They’ll think we’re wearing bellbottoms.”

“They’re not thirty years behind,” Beth Ann says. “Aunt Darlene and Uncle Mark are from Philly. They’re definitely not thirty years behind in Philly. In fact, they’re probably more up to date than *we* are.”

“No one has better style than me,” Johnny says. “I’m going to make this look stick.”

“Style?” Beth Ann asks. “Your head looks like a porcupine. You look like a toolbox.”

“A toolbox?” Samuel asks.

“I think his hair looks nice,” Clarissa says.

“You would, you little Goth princess.”

“I am *not* a Goth princess,” Clarissa says.

“Then what’s with all the black?” Beth Ann asks. “Do you own any other colors?”

“I’m going to a wake,” Clarissa says.

“Not every day,” Beth Ann retorts.

“I like black,” Clarissa says.

“Me too,” Johnny says. “Would you say that I’m a Goth prince?”

“Prince?” Beth Ann laughs. “Hardly. You’re some confused Goth Guido mess. Like *The Twilight Situation*. Without the vampire charm and the meathead abs.”

“At least I don’t wear mom clothes,” Johnny says.

“These aren’t *mom* clothes,” Beth Ann says. “This is from JCPenney.”

“Right,” Johnny says, “mom clothes.”

“They sell what you’re wearing at JCPenney.”

“Not in the mom department.”

“You’re not even making sense anymore,” Clarissa says. “This argument is stupid.”

“You’re stupid,” Johnny says.

“Getting worse,” Clarissa says. “Just go get those pants for Samuel.”

“He’s going to look ridiculous,” Beth Ann says.

“It’s worth a try,” Johnny says.

SAMUEL.

In front of the mirror, wearing Johnny’s pants, Samuel can’t figure out which looks worse. He takes them off and puts his too-short pants on. Too short or too long. Which is better? At least with the long pants, the socks are covered. And he will look like Johnny. He’ll stand out less.

And he finds he sort of looks like some of the men in *The Twilight Zone* episodes. But these are usually the more evil characters. The ones with fedoras or top hats. Samuel puts Johnny's pants back on, and there is a knock at the door.

"Come in!" he calls.

"Oh, Samuel," Clarissa says as she enters the room. "You can't wear those."

"I don't know what to do," Samuel says. "The other ones are worse."

"Maybe I have a pair you can wear," Clarissa says.

"I'm not wearing girls' pants!" he shouts.

"Why not?"

"People will make fun of me."

"No one will even know."

"Johnny will know. And he'll make fun of me."

"Johnny's an asshole," Clarissa says. "Sorry."

"I don't mind when people curse," Samuel says. "It's weird when you curse, though," he says.

"It's *weird* when I curse?"

"Because you're a girl. I never hear girls curse. But my friends do. I didn't used to. But I do around them."

"Well if I can't curse, then you can't either."

"I can make that deal."

"It doesn't sound very nice anyway, huh? We'll make a game out of it."

"I'm sick of playing games. Except football."

Their conversation is interrupted as Johnny bursts in the room, nearly falling over his pants. “Looking good, dude!” he says.

“You’re just saying that because it makes you look better.”

“Shut up,” he says. “No I’m not. We look good.”

“I hope you’re joking.”

“Whatever. Listen, we have to go. We’re going to be late.”

“It might be better if we just don’t go,” Clarissa says.

“We have to go. For Mom.”

“She doesn’t even want to go,” Clarissa says.

“Well she should. And *we* should. Let’s grab the witch, and let’s go.”

The four siblings descend the steps. Beth Ann in a beautiful black dress, Clarissa in a tight-fitting black dress that Johnny finds a bit slutty for a wake, Johnny in pants that are way too big, and Samuel in pants that are a bit too big and that don’t match his suit jacket, until Samuel trips over Johnny’s pants which sends the four of them crashing down the stairs. Johnny slams his lip into banister, and Clarissa, reaching out for something to hold her, finds the strap of Beth Ann’s dress and tears it right off. As they hit the ground, Johnny lets out a laugh which ends as soon as he tastes blood. “Shit,” Johnny says. “You idiots!” Beth Ann cries.

After Beth Ann safety-pinned the strap of her dress, and after a ten-minute drive, mostly due to traffic, the Braco family arrives at Victor Shwankey’s Funeral Home. An elderly man with cataracts and a long crooked nose opens one of the tall double doors from them as they walk up the long stone stairway. Johnny and Samuel’s pants scrape against the concrete and begin to fray. The wind whips up and blows the bottom of Clarissa’s dress wild. She shivers and pulls the

hem of her dress down to her knees as they enter the funeral home. Johnny tosses the paper towel filled with ice that he'd been holding to his lip into the garbage can inside the door.

"Good morning everyone," the elderly man says. "Good morning, Joseph."

"Good morning, Declan," their father replies. "How are you holding up, old man?"

"Can't complain," he says with a cough. "Could *always* be worse. May I take your coats?"

"Thank you," Joseph says, removing his long, black pea coat. The rest of the Bracos remove theirs as well and hand them to the elderly man. There is a long spiral staircase made of clean white steps to the left of the room which leads both down and up. Beside the staircase stand a brass table with a glass top that holds a large bouquet of yellow roses, Peruvian lilies, and football mums as well as the guest book. Five open doors line the right side of the room.

"Mr. Seamon is in the third room," the old man says.

"Thank you, sir," their father says.

"I always forget your maiden name is Seamon, Ma," Johnny says.

Beth Ann chuckles.

Johnny, surprised that this statement made Beth Ann chuckle, gives her a look and then laughs.

Their mother does not say a word.

Samuel sneezes. "It smells like dead flowers in here."

"Nah," Johnny says. "That's just the smell of *living* flowers and *dead* people."

"Shut up, Johnny," Clarissa says.

"What? What'd I say?"

As they enter the third room, they join the line of mourners to pay their respects. Johnny looks around the room and nudges his father. "Who are all these people? I mean I only see like four people in here that I actually know."

"Well you know your cousins Steve and Alex and your Uncle Mark and Aunt Darlene."

"Right, but that's it."

"And that over there is your Aunt Rachelle and Uncle Butch," his father says, motioning to a short man with a long red beard and a woman with blond curls curved around a chubby face. The couple waves to them.

"I have an Uncle *Butch*?" Johnny asks. "I've never *ever* seen them before."

"Yes you did. They were at your grandmother's funeral."

"I don't remember."

A large woman in a purple, floral dress walks up to them, arms wide. "Why hello, Johnny!" she says. "You sure have grown up to be a handsome young man." She kisses all over his face.

Johnny thinks, Who is this woman kissing me?

"Hi, Aunt Jill," Beth Ann says.

Johnny thinks, She knows this person?

"Beth Ann, is that you? I hardly recognized you. Oh, and Clarissa. And who's this young man?"

"I'm Samuel."

"Why hello, Samuel. It's nice to meet you." She takes his hand and says, "You sure are a handsome young man."

The Bracos reach the front of the line. Georgette and Joseph kneel at the pew in front of Uncle Patrick's body. Johnny, Samuel, Clarissa, and Beth Ann stand behind them, hands folded and their heads lowered. Beth Ann says a Hail Mary to herself. Clarissa says an Our Father. Johnny recalls his CCD teacher telling him that souls get stuck in purgatory if they have sins on their conscience and the only way for them to get out is if someone prays for them. Johnny says, "Well, God, you know I don't believe in you anymore, but if you actually do exist, maybe you could let Uncle Patrick into heaven." Samuel says nothing. Their mother places her hand over Uncle Patrick's and kisses his cheek.

"He looks good, huh, Mom?" Johnny says.

His mother says nothing.

Part Four:

Time to wake.

After the family says their prayers—or doesn't say their prayers—for Uncle Patrick, Johnny follows the rest of the family to the front of the room where they take their seats beside an elderly couple whom Johnny doesn't recognize at all. To Johnny, even Uncle Patrick was unrecognizable. He looks like a mannequin with a painted on face. Johnny gazes around the room and doesn't seem to know anyone, but everyone looks sad. Johnny wonders how they all knew Uncle Patrick. He wonders if they're actually sad or more saddened by the setting. If they're just here out of obligation. Fuck it.

Johnny looks around the room for any hot girls. There's a girl sitting in front of him with auburn hair. She might be cute, but who knows without seeing her face. She could have pimples, or worse yet, she could be a burn victim or something. Johnny doesn't think he could deal with a girl with a messed up face, as the face is the most important part of the female body. His friends are always talking about seeing girls with a great rack or a nice ass, but if a girl doesn't have a nice face, then what's the point?

Clarissa sits to Johnny's left, punching buttons on her cell phone. Johnny wonders whom she's talking to, tapping the keys so frantically. It seems important, but he's too hungover to even ask. Shouldn't she have more tact in this situation, though? To Johnny's right, Samuel stares straight at Uncle Patrick in the coffin. Like he's in a trance. Johnny wonders what's going through his head. Would he remember Grampa's funeral? He probably remembers that it happened, but would he remember how it felt? Is this his first memorable experience with death?

Johnny's eyes wander around the room, past people who are probably aunts and uncles or Uncle Patrick's co-workers and even past some boy wearing eyeliner and sporting a red mohawk, and that's when he sees her. Beautiful girl. Brownish-reddish hair. Brown eyes

surrounded by whiteness as if she's just come from the beach or something. Johnny assumes she goes to one of those fake tanning places. She just looks like one of those girls. And hides the tan lines around her eyes with makeup. Johnny wonders if she sits in one of those cancer coffins or if it's just a spray-on tan. Do you have to wear eye cover for a spray-on tan? Johnny doesn't know. He's only used the cancer coffins a couple times. He prefers the beach. But once he used one of those stand-up machines, which was awkward. Just standing there naked, holding onto some straps to make sure that the underside of your arms gets tanned too. It's awkward and uncomfortable. But it gets the job done. Nameless, beautiful, fake-tan girl catches Johnny staring even though he doesn't realize that he's staring since he starts thinking about fake tanning, and she looks at him with her beautiful, sleek face. Her eyes, though, grab him the most. She has eyelashes to kill for, and her dark eyeliner is just his style. But she really doesn't need all that make up for her eyes to be breathtaking. They're huge and shimmering, and Johnny wonders what it would be like to stare into those eyes while kissing her, twirling his tongue around hers. Most of the girls Johnny's kissed liked to keep their eyes closed while kissing, but he always enjoys that moment when the girl opens her eyes for a second, in curiosity, just to see his staring back at hers. It seems so much more personal. Why would you want to keep your eyes in darkness when there's this beautiful person in front of you? Johnny used to play eye games with Marissa LaFatto when they'd make out. Every time one of them opened his or her eyes and the other's eyes were closed, the one with his or her eyes open would get a point. And if they opened their eyes at the same time, they both got five points. Johnny wishes he could remember the score, but he believes that he was winning before he broke up with her. He's not even sure why he broke up with her.

Johnny raises his eyebrows at fake-tan girl, which is the only time he believes his eyes look normal sized. They always look so squinty otherwise. But girls have told him that he has pretty eyes anyway. She crooks her neck at his gaze with a look that he believes is an invitation, but it's hard for him to tell. Then she lowers her head, pointing her chin to her cleavage. Which is nice, except Johnny's almost sure her bust is the product of a great push-up bra. Which is fine. Johnny doesn't care much about the size of a girl's breasts, as long as they're bigger than his pecs. Johnny's father nudges him, something about a phone call, but his eyes and attention can't leave her. She's like a goddess or something. She runs her hand through her beautiful, straight hair. She's just as bored as he is. Johnny wishes he could be meditating or praying or something, but he can't. When you're dead, you're dead. What is he supposed to do? Think about how some day that's going to be him lying in the coffin and that he should be living his life to the fullest and not taking anything for granted? He's got plenty of time to get it right. But who is this beauty before him? She wants me, he thinks. It's obvious. Johnny snakes over toward her, climbing past people that give him dirty looks, or maybe just sad looks. She's sitting next to a tall, dark-haired man with a greying goatee. He pays no attention to Johnny as Johnny sits down beside her.

"Hi, I'm Johnny," he says sheepishly.

"I'm Susan," she says in a crisp accent that sounds Southern but also like she's from Brooklyn or something, and she takes his hand. Her hand is so soft—long hours of moisturizing, Johnny thinks—and he tries to be masculine without squeezing too hard. He thinks that he should have taken it delicately and kissed the top of it, but that would be incredibly too cheesy, and depending upon the kind of girl Susan is, that could be totally detrimental. She flutters her eyelashes at Johnny and smiles anyway.

“Wanna go downstairs for a glass of water?” Johnny asks. “I’m pretty sure they have water downstairs,” he says, real cool.

“I could go for a glass of water,” she says. “I’m parched. Do you think we can smoke down there, too? You smoke, right?”

“Smoke? I do. I don’t know the rules around here though, but I don’t see why not.”

“What happened to your mouth?” she asks.

“Oh, I had to beat up this kid last night, who was messing with my boy. He got one good punch in though.”

“Charming,” she says.

She’s totally into me, Johnny thinks.

BETH ANN.

Beth Ann looks over to her mother, who seems to be handling the funeral very well—probably too well—and she can’t figure out why. She knows her mother wasn’t very close with Uncle Patrick, but shouldn’t she be more upset? Her brother is dead. Even if she didn’t get along with him, even if she didn’t like him, it’s still her brother, and shouldn’t she show some kind of sadness instead of that blank stare? Death isn’t an everyday thing. Beth Ann has even seen her smile a few times, which she doesn’t do much on a regular basis.

Beth Ann notices Johnny walk off with some girl who looks very familiar, but she can’t put her finger on how she would know her. Beth Ann’s father has left the room, an important business call, so it seems. Even at a wake that man can’t keep off his phone. Always money. Beth Ann glances back at her mother, and it looks like her eyes begin to water, but she rubs them and mutters something about the flowers in the room. Allergies. Beth Ann puts her arm around

Georgette and asks if she's okay. Her mother says she's fine but continues to rub her eyes. Uncle Butch and Aunt Rachelle come over and start talking to Beth Ann's mother. Uncle Mark says that Uncle Patrick's death came out of nowhere, and Aunt Rachelle, yes yes yes, agrees wholeheartedly. Aunt Rachelle asks Beth Ann's mother how she's handling it all, and she says she's fine. Aunt Rachelle tears up and bends down and puts her arms around Beth Ann's mother. Her mother seems to show no emotion at all, and Beth Ann feels sad for her. What has happened to her where she can now feel no emotion? Or at least show it? Clarissa is hammering away at the keyboard on her cellphone. She's so rude. Doesn't she know this is a wake? Beth Ann scolds her. Clarissa makes a face at her and continues on. Samuel seems lost. He just stares forward, emotionless. Like their mother. Beth Ann wishes she could slap him—and her mother—back into reality, but she holds back. She doesn't want to start a scene. And she doesn't want to upset her mother even though she wishes she would be upset. She's so somber. Beth Ann just wants the day to pass. She needs to get back to New York as soon as possible. Her family is so irritating, and she just can't handle it.

CLARISSA.

Clarissa texts Blair again, but Blair won't text her back. After five minutes and Blair still hasn't replied, Clarissa checks Blair's Facebook to see if she's posted anything. Anything about her. Anything about last night. *How could she not say something?* Clarissa thinks. *I just want to talk to her again. Make sure she's not mad at me. Make sure she still wants to be my friend. But mostly I just want to hold her close to me. This day is so sad. I know he can't feel anything, but even Uncle Patrick looks sad.*

Clarissa can't concentrate on anything except Blair. She said she'd be coming with her father at some point during the day, but she didn't say whether she'd be coming for the morning

portion or the night. Clarissa just wishes she knew. How was she so stupid to think that Blair would be okay with being kissed? But why wouldn't she be? They were so close. She just doesn't feel like you do, she tells herself. She just got scared. She just wasn't ready. She just. She felt so awkward. She should have talked to Blair about it first.

But there were so many nights staying over at her house, sleeping on the other side of her bed, where Clarissa just wanted to put her arms around Blair and kiss her neck. If she was able to hold it back then, why couldn't she last night? Why can't she anymore?

SAMUEL.

Samuel can't take his eyes off of his Uncle Patrick. Uncle Patrick looks so sad in his coffin. His lips are peeled into a frown. And they're too pink, like he's wearing lipstick. Like he's a clown. Couldn't the people working here at least pose his lips into a smile? Uncle Patrick should be happy. From the looks of things, Samuel doesn't think Uncle Patrick was ever happy. At least not since he knew him. Samuel wishes he could look away. That he could talk to Clarissa about the previous night. That he could ask her why she was really outside. There must be more to the story. But he can't look away. And he can't help but thinking what it would like to be in a coffin. Or better yet, to put someone in a coffin. Like Bobby Sheldon. He's never even punched a person, but he wonders what it would be like to beat on Bobby so bad that he ended up in a coffin. Would people hate him? Would they side with Bobby? Or would they say that Bobby got what was coming to him?

JOHNNY.

When Susan and Johnny get to the bottom of the white staircase and into the barely refurbished basement, they sit together on the black leather couch. Close together. The water cooler is to

Johnny's left, and he reaches for two clear, plastic cups and fills them. It's not Fiji or even Evian, but it'll do, Johnny thinks. AquaClear it's called. Sounds like chemicals to Johnny, but whatever. Sure enough, there is a glass ashtray on the wooden table in front of them, and that's Johnny's cue to light up a bogue. Even though Susan has already lit hers, a Marlboro Menthol Light. Kind of gross. Johnny has always compared Menthol cigarettes to smoking and chewing gum at the same time. But whatever. He gets closer to Susan and hands her the cup of water. He doesn't put his arm around her yet. Keep it cool, he thinks.

"So do you live around here?" Johnny asks. His words come out smoothly, like warm, melting butter. He keeps the cigarette close to the ashtray in case someone like his mother comes down the stairs. Or worse yet, Samuel. He doesn't need Samuel seeing that his cool brother smokes. He'll think it's cool to smoke too. Plus, he'll probably rat Johnny out.

"No, I'm from Louisiana. Metairie, but not like you've heard of that. Basically New Orleans." Her accent flutters in Johnny's ears like butterflies. Beautiful. But it's not like Johnny thinks it should sound. It's like she's from a Brooklyn of the South.

"You don't sound like you're from the South."

"Nobody does in that area. Unless they're originally from somewhere else in Louisiana. But you sound exactly like you're from New Jersey."

Johnny isn't sure if this is a compliment or not, but he thinks it probably is. "Thanks," he says. Keep it cool. "I like your hair." Compliment *her*. Girls like that. "And your eye makeup is beautiful. So artsy," he says, noticing the lime eye shadow that emblazons her brown eyes. The shade of green matches the swirls on her black dress. She also wears thick mascara under her eyes, which Johnny likes, and the dark line curves up at the outside corners of her eyes, nearly

touching her thin, maybe painted-on, eyebrows. Her long, probably fake, eyelashes flutter lightly at his compliment. The tips of them appear to be the same lime shade as her eye shadow.

“Yeah, well I’m going to beauty school at Los Angeles School of Fashion and the Arts,” she says, taking another drag. The smoking is making Johnny nervous, but he’s always been attracted to a girl that smokes—probably from cigarette ads in old magazines—and this place really makes him want to smoke.

“You go to school in LA? Rad. Me too.”

“Where? Don’t tell me. USC?”

“Yeah. How’d you know?” he asks, sipping the water. It tastes like chemicals. Gross.

“Just a hunch. Me and my friends call that place JewSC.”

Johnny chuckles. “I’ve heard that before.”

“Because the only people that can get in there are JAPs.”

“Huh? Japs?”

“Jewish American Princesses. You’ve never heard that before?”

“Oh God, that’s hilarious,” Johnny offers, but he doesn’t really laugh. It’s not that funny. Kind of messed up actually. He assumes she’s just joking. She must be. Though he could probably deal with her being a racist with that face. He guesses. It’s still pretty screwed up though. “Maybe we can hang some more when we go back to school,” he says and nudges closer to her. His elbow is snug in her ribcage, just below her breasts.

“*Maybe*,” she says. She says it like it’s two words. Cute. Sultry even. Johnny likes.

He thinks about making a move, but she makes one first and places her hand on his thigh as she puts out her cigarette with her other hand. Jesus, she smokes fast, Johnny thinks. His is barely half-smoked. Johnny leans in to kiss her and tilts his head perfectly to keep their chins

from crashing into each other. She parts her lips, which he enjoys except that it fucking hurts his busted lip, accepting his tongue, and she swirls her own around it. Then Johnny hears someone coming down the steps. He tries to pull away, but she won't let go of her clamp on his face. Johnny struggles to find the ashtray but can barely see anything in the room with one eye barely opened, and he drops the cigarette on the floor, stomps on it, and slides it under the loveseat with his shoe. He tries to pull back again, and she puts her hands on his face, locking it in place. She even slides her leg over his. *I need to get this girl off of me*, Johnny thinks, *although I don't want to*.

"Bravo!" someone says.

Susan slides off of Johnny, and they glare at whoever has entered the room. It's Beth Ann. Susan blushes but probably not as much as she should. Johnny's face is on fire.

"What are you doing down here?" Beth Ann asks. "We're at a wake, not a party."

"I just needed a glass of water," Johnny says, downing what's left of it. "So what are you doing down here?"

"Nothing," she says and lights one of her Kools and sits on a chair across from them.

"You shouldn't smoke down here," Johnny says. "What if Samuel sees? Or Mom?"

Susan nudges him and giggles a bit.

"Trust me, Samuel is not moving from his seat. His eyes are glued to Uncle Patrick. I don't think I saw him blink. If I didn't know better, and he wasn't twelve, I'd think he was high. On LSD or something."

Susan chuckles. "I wish I was on LSD right now."

"And who is this?" Beth Ann asks.

"Oh, this is Susan. She's from the South even though she doesn't sound like it."

“Beth Ann,” Beth Ann says and takes her extended hand. “Glad to *meet* you, Susan-from-the-South-even-though-you-don’t-sound-like-it. And I guess I mean ‘meet’ except you look very familiar.”

Susan shrugs.

“I don’t think so,” Johnny says. “She doesn’t look like anyone I’ve ever seen before. No one’s as pretty as she is.”

“Nice line,” Beth Ann says and coughs, taking another drag of her Kool.

Susan blushes although Johnny wishes she wouldn’t.

“I don’t know how you smoke those,” Johnny says.

“You should go see Mom,” Beth Ann says. “There’s something wrong with her.”

“What do you mean?” Johnny’s slightly concerned, thinking his mother’s been acting funny all day. Well, since he’s been home, really.

“Like she’s perfectly fine. She hasn’t shed a tear. She doesn’t look sad at all.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?”

“No, that is not a good thing. It’s not normal. Her brother is dead.”

“It’s not like he *just* died. She’s had time to grieve. Plus, she never liked Uncle Patrick.”

“It doesn’t matter if she liked him or not. He’s still her brother.”

Susan starts to squirm. She’s looking around the room like it’s shaking. Like there’s an earthquake or something. She gathers her cigarettes into her purse and stands up. “I have to go,” she says and scrambles up the stairs. Johnny watches her butt shake from side to side as she clambers.

“Come say hi later,” Johnny calls after her. “At least before you leave.” So that’s weird, Johnny thinks. “Why did she run off like that?” Johnny asks Beth Ann. “What was up with her?”

“Johnny, she looks very *familiar*.” She says the last word like she’s trying to tell him something, enunciating every syllable. Johnny doesn’t know what she’s getting at. But he decides he should really go see his mother. And keep his eyes on Susan.

CLARISSA.

The floor is all Clarissa can bear to look at. It’s nice carpeting at least. Somewhat mesmerizing. It’s a floral pattern. With swirls that make it look Victorian. Or maybe Roman. Clarissa isn’t sure. Maybe she should study architecture in the future, she thinks. She’s always liked structural art. She wishes the carpet wasn’t so tan, though. It’s not the most appealing. And it’s probably difficult to keep clean. In fact, she bets it’s not tan. That it’s supposed to be lighter. She imagines the maroon flowers much darker, faded after the decades of mourners stomping across them, dragging their feet to the coffin, not wanting to see what used to be their wife, husband, friend, lover. Clarissa wonders what it’d be like to lose someone very close to you. Someone you’ve spent forty years with. Or longer. Just knowing that that person who you’ve seen every day for how many, many years you will never see again. This is the last time, and even now, you cannot speak to this person. Just stare at her or him. Maybe touch her hand or her face. But never really see again. She wishes Blair was there. She wants to talk to her about this, and what she thinks about it, although she’s sure she’d only nod her head or say something like “I know, it must be so difficult,” something to reassure her without putting any real thought into it. Sometimes Clarissa hates Blair. But, more, she just wishes Blair would open up. It’s as if she’s hiding something. Especially recently. Even before she kissed Blair. She’s so cold. Like she’s lost in her head somewhere. Clarissa wishes she could climb into her head and drag her out. Right to the surface. Clarissa clutches her purse. She needs to drink more vodka.

BETH ANN.

Beth Ann quickly takes a seat next to her father in the third room and looks around for Susan. Samuel is still sitting there, staring straight forward at the casket and hardly showing any emotion except that his eyes are beginning to bug out of his damn head. His fists are clenched and appear to be sweating. Clarissa left the room as soon as Beth Ann sat down. She's such a bitch. It's one thing if she can't stand me, Beth Ann thinks, but can't we at least sit here like a family? For Mom's sake?

"Where've you been?" her father asks.

"Glass of water," she says. Is *he* really asking where *I* went? "I felt parched." What about his constant leaving of the room for phone calls? "The air feels so dry in here."

"Yeah, well."

Yeah, well? That's all he's got? Her father is such an intellectual. "Where's Johnny? I told him to meet me here. And to make sure that Mom was okay while I was gone."

"I'm fine," her mother says.

"I haven't seen him," her father says.

"Really," she mutters. Where the hell is that asshole? "Dad, who is that?" she asks, pointing toward Susan in her black and lime dress. The lime makes it look like somebody puked all over it. And who wears lime green to a wake? What's wrong with these people? Susan's got a look on her face like she might throw up. She's probably bulimic.

"Oh, that's your Uncle Michael's brother's daughter. Don't you remember, you used to play with her back when we were living in Louisiana for those few years?"

"So you're saying we're related to her?"

“Well, sort of. You’re not blood-related to her or her parents. She’s like a distant cousin.”

“A *distant* cousin?”

“Well, I still wouldn’t kiss her!” her father shouts, much too loud for wake volume, and then lets out a gross laugh. “Why do you ask?”

“No reason. Just wondering. It’s nice to know who these people are. Especially our relatives.”

But her father’s not listening anymore. He’s eying his cell phone. “Hold on. I have to take this.”

“I would like to leave,” Beth Ann’s mother says.

“Leave?” she asks. She grabs the tail of her father’s jacket before he climbs out of the row. I’m going to need back up. Her father turns to her and turns up his palms. Then he points at his phone.

“I’d like to leave now,” her mother says. “We’ve been here long enough. I don’t see why we should have to stay for the full service.”

“Because it’s polite,” Beth Ann says. “Dad?”

“Whatever your mother says,” her father says and walks toward the door.

“It’s polite that we came,” her mother says. “That’s enough.”

“Mom,” Beth Ann starts, and she looks for her father, but he’s already gone.

“Go find Johnny, and get Clarissa from downstairs,” her mother says. “It’s time for us to go.”

“Go?” Beth Ann asks aloud. Why were they leaving? What’s going on? Was she losing her mind? What’s wrong with this family?

SAMUEL.

If Mom wants to go, we should go, Samuel thinks. Beth Ann shouldn't give her such a hard time.

JOHNNY.

Johnny's perched on the front steps of the funeral home, talking to Janson on his cellphone about Susan when Beth Ann comes barging through the door, swinging her purse wild.

"I'll have to call you back," Johnny says.

"Mom wants to leave, so we're leaving," Beth Ann says.

"Leave? What do you mean leave?"

"We're leaving. You better go say goodbye to your new girlfriend."

"She's not my girlfriend. I just met her."

"I bet you've had enough time to shove your hand down her pants."

"Shut up, Beth Ann."

"Oh, so you have?"

"No, not yet. But I plan to. Not like it's any of your business." His sister is really starting to piss him off. He wishes she'd go back to New York. She's not doing anything good for anyone. "What do you care?"

"Oh, nothing. But I thought you might want to know something about her."

"Yeah? What's that?" Johnny asks, interested, all ears. Anything he can use to get closer to Susan would be great. Not that he really needs anything. She was already all over him. But before Beth Ann has a chance to say anything, their mother bursts through the door dragging Clarissa behind her, Samuel solemnly following them. Johnny's never seen his mother exert that much strength before.

“Blair didn’t even get here yet!” Clarissa keeps yelling. “She’s going to get here, and I’m not going to be here!”

Clarissa rips her arm from her mother’s grasp, and her mother gives her the angriest look Johnny’s ever seen her give. Johnny can’t tell if Beth Ann is about to cheer on the commotion, cry, scream, or run. She’s got a twisted look on her face. Johnny jumps to his feet, and his father comes up behind him, finally off the phone.

“What’s going on here?” his father asks.

“I told her it’s time to go,” Georgette says, but while she says this, Clarissa is already screaming a tirade: “Mom wants to go but I don’t want to go Blair didn’t get here yet, and she’s coming and she’s coming to see me, and she’s going to feel like an idiot when she gets here and I’m not here!” She catches her breath and shouts, “I’m not leaving! I’m staying!”

“Fine,” her mother says. “Stay here if you want.” And she walks off toward the car. Beth Ann follows her, and Johnny just stares at his father. His father gives Johnny the same look Johnny’s giving him. I dunno. Clarissa, in tears, turns and goes back into the funeral home. Samuel doesn’t look like he knows what to do. Johnny and his father follow Beth Ann toward the car, shaking their heads and glancing at each other but not having a single word to say.

Part Five:

Forgot to

Forget to

Remember

JOHNNY.

When the family, except for Clarissa, gets home, they all pile out of the car and head inside after their father unlocks the door, the rest of them patiently waiting behind him with their arms crossed or their eyes rolling or both. Johnny drops himself into the recliner in the living room across from the front door and turns on the TV. An episode of some soap opera is on, and he just lets it run and closes his eyes, ears more focused on the dialogue in the room than on the dialogue coming from the surround-sound speakers.

“I’m going upstairs to lie down,” his mother says.

Nobody says anything in response to her.

“I’m going upstairs to pack,” Beth Ann says.

“Are you leaving already?” his father asks her, shuffling into the dining room, already punching buttons on his cell phone. Not that Johnny can see him punching the buttons, but he hears that familiar sound.

“Soon,” Beth Ann says.

Wordsworth comes pouncing down the stairs and, after circling the house twice, jumps into Johnny’s lap and gets comfortable. He’s surprised that Wordsworth has come to see him because he hasn’t since Johnny’s been home. But, Johnny guesses, he must be the calmest person in the house right now. Johnny pets the top of Wordsworth’s head and tries to reimagine scenes of kissing Susan. He sinks his head deeper into the cushion of the recliner.

The problem is that Susan is no Laura. Which is too true. Why did it take being broken up with in order to recognize it was possible to lose her? Did he love her? Probably not, but they

had said those words to each other before. Hadn't they? He's sure of it. She was good to him then, even though he didn't realize it. Why did he believe that everything would just work out for him in the end? Why does he always think that? Like he's invincible or something.

And sure, there's other girls, other fish in the sea, but what if he's stuck to looking in a pond? And some of the most interesting fish are at the very bottom of the ocean, where it's even too dark to see. How is he going to catch those fish?

Sure, there's Susan. Not to mention Sidney. But Susan, was she someone that could be there for him when he needed her? Like when Laura was there for him when he was screaming drunk at Schramm's house? Laura basically carried him home that night. Could Susan be like that? Or is she more like a bicycle? A good ride for now. But just for now. And emotionless. And even if Susan could be like that, what happens when they both graduate? Will he be in California for the rest of his life? Would she move back to Louisiana? Why is he even thinking of this nonsense right now?

He needs to get his shit together, Johnny thinks. He has all his shit. He just needs to put it together.

He needs to call Laura, Johnny thinks. Maybe she'd come to the second wake with him. Maybe they could just skip the second wake and try to make each other dinner, failing every time like always. "Oh shit, I forgot the tofu." Which is fine. Because no one really likes the taste or the texture or tofu, do they? But without the tofu, Vietnamese Curry is just spicy rice. And not even that spicy because they forgot the chiles. Oh, and they burned the rice. How do you even burn rice? Fuck.

He needs to call Laura, Johnny thinks. He needs to go outside and call Laura.

CLARISSA.

It's like her mom doesn't understand, Clarissa thinks. But how could she, really, since she has no idea that Clarissa is in love with Blair. But what is her problem? Why does she want to leave so badly? Maybe Clarissa should just tell her mother. Maybe then she'd understand. It's not like Clarissa chose to be attracted to Blair. Except she keeps thinking of this movie she watched on Lifetime—she doesn't even remember what it was called—about this girl who came out to her mother, girlfriend's hand in her own, and her mother slapped her daughter right there. But, Clarissa thinks, that was because the family was highly religious, and so it was a sin. But Clarissa's family isn't religious. She thinks her mother used to go to church, but they've never gone as a family. Not even on Christmas. Clarissa wonders what it would be like to be religious, if life would seem to have more of a purpose. Right now it seems like she's diving headfirst into a hole, a giant hole without identifiable depth. And there's all these ghosts, lost souls just floating by, all of them lacking any emotion. And if they do show an emotion, it's anger. Hatred. And for no real identifiable reason.

The bottle of vodka is half empty.

BETH ANN.

She is going home today. She is done with this.

SAMUEL.

Samuel enters his room and jumps into bed, but he can't keep from fidgeting. He's restless. Angry. Mostly angry at Bobby Sheldon, but he's angry at Clarissa too. Why didn't she come home with the rest of the family? Doesn't she know that their mother needs her too?

Samuel watches Skittles run through the tubes in his cage, not going anywhere in particular. Just going. He wishes that he didn't have a hamster and that he hadn't named him Skittles. Owning a hamster named Skittles seems so juvenile. It would make more sense to own a dog. A big, vicious dog. Named Spike or something. Killer. If he had a dog named Killer, he'd be brave. Killer would teach him to be brave. To be a man. Instead of a boy that's too afraid to punch another boy in the face who deserves it. To punch a boy in the face that needs to be shut up.

Unable to sit still, Samuel gets out of bed and leaves his room. He heads towards the stairs. He thinks Johnny could help him through this. Johnny was his age once and would know what to do. But before he goes downstairs, he stops in front of his mother's bedroom. She lies on her bed facedown. Samuel thinks that she might be crying, but he can't tell. She's not shaking or tensing like people often do when they cry. She's breathing normally. Samuel wonders if he should go over to her. Tell her that everything is going to be fine and that she could tell him anything. Wouldn't that be brave? But before he can make any action, his father comes out of the bathroom.

"What's up kiddo?"

"Nothing," Samuel says.

"Do you need something?"

"No. I'm fine." And Samuel goes downstairs.

Johnny is gone. Figures. Samuel wonders where Johnny keeps going. Why Johnny isn't around when he needs him. Wordsworth is on the couch in the living room, so Samuel goes and sits with him. He's never liked Samuel very much. Wordsworth licks his paws, and Samuel pats Wordsworth's head. Wordsworth gives him a look and then goes back to licking his paws.

Samuel tries to rub Wordsworth's stomach and Wordsworth growls and swats at him with his claws. Samuel pulls his tail. And the cat runs away.

JOHNNY.

"Hey Laura. It's Johnny."

"Johnny? What do you want?"

"It's not what I want. It's what you want."

"That's very mature of you Johnny. But I already told you what I wanted. We're not together anymore, and it has to be that way."

"Why does it have to be that way?"

"Because that's the only way."

"I just want things to go back to the way they were."

"They can't go back."

"I can change. I'll be better."

"I don't think I can believe you."

"But—"

"And it's not just your fault. It's my fault too."

"It's not your fault. I'm ready to take full responsibility."

"There's nothing you can say. Nothing. Goodbye, Johnny."

CLARISSA.

Just about everyone has cleared out of the funeral home. Uncle Butch and Aunt Rachelle are still there and a couple other people Clarissa doesn't recognize but whom she's probably related to.

Aunt Darlene and Uncle Mark come over and ask her if she wants to go to Paulo's for dinner between the day and night wake. Clarissa says no. She's not hungry. And as Mr. Shwankey and Mr. Swelle open the doors for them as they exit, a miracle! With the setting sun at her back, making her shape appear like an angel, there's Blair! She looks incredible, wearing a dark blue dress that ends a couple of inches above her knees and her hair pulled back but with these wispy tendrils in the front that appear to be dyed darker, maybe maroon. But it might just be the light.

"I'm sorry I'm late," she says.

"It's okay. I'm just glad that you're here."

"I got in a fight with my father and—"

"Really, it's okay. Just come downstairs with me." Clarissa takes her hand and leads her away from the gawking eyes of Mr. Shwankey and Mr. Swelle. Don't look at her like that, Clarissa thinks. She's mine.

Part Six:

The time was always wrong.

They hate this town.

BETH ANN.

Beth Ann shoves the last of her clothes into her suitcase when her father walks into the room. She's already changed out of her dress.

"Hey hun, wanna grab some grub?" her father asks.

"I'll grab something on the way," she says.

"On the way?"

"I'm leaving. I'm going back to New York."

"You're not going to the funeral tomorrow?" He stares at her with this puzzled look on his face. Like he can't comprehend why she'd want to get the hell out of here.

"No, I'm going back now. I have things to do."

"That's pretty selfish, don't you think?" he asks. "Your mother needs you. Your siblings need you. Hell, I need you."

"Mom needed me yesterday, and what the hell did I get out of that? A damn thank you? No. Nothing."

"Your mom's having some problems."

"Mom can deal with them herself. That's what she seems to want anyway."

"I don't think you're understanding what I'm getting at. You're the oldest child. You need to be here for your family. You need to be responsible."

"Well I'm sick of the responsibility! I'm outright sick of it! I'm tired of making sure everyone's okay. I'm tired of keeping quiet when I'm getting bitched at. I'm tired of making sure everyone is comfortable! Does anyone care if *I'm* okay? Does anyone worry about what might be going on in *my* life? No. It's all Johnny. Or Mom. And that's it. And I'm done with this. I'll call you when I get back in New York." She tries to push past her father at the doorway, but she

trips over her suitcase, and she hadn't closed one of the zippers all the way. Her clothes go everywhere, and she drops to her knees.

JOHNNY.

Fuck it, Johnny thinks. He needs a drink. Laura doesn't give a shit about him, so he doesn't give a shit about her. Johnny pulls out his iPhone from his pocket and calls Schramm.

"Schramm, you got booze at your house?"

"Dude, we're at the bar. Flanagan's. Figured we'd get wrecked before going to the wake."

"You're at the bar? Wait, you're coming to the wake?"

"Of course, dude. You're our friend."

"What are you doing at the bar?"

"Drinking beer."

"I know, but... All right, I'll be there in five. Have a Bud Light and a Jäger Bomb waiting."

"Consider it done."

As Johnny heads out of his room, he shouts, "Going out. See yas at the wake. If you *do* plan on showing up!" When no one responds, Johnny goes outside and hops in the Porsche that is not black.

CLARISSA.

"Are you sure this is okay?" Blair asks Clarissa, holding the Dixie cup of vodka in her beautiful, delicate fingers.

“Of course. Why not?”

“Won’t we, like, smell like it?”

“I have gum. And perfume. It’s fine. It’ll be fun.”

Clarissa taps her Dixie cup against Blair’s and raises the cup to her lips. Blair hesitates, but she joins her in drinking the warm, burny liquid.

“Yuck!” she shouts and throws her cup down on the table in front of us. “How can you drink that?”

“I do it all the time,” Clarissa says. “It was kind of gross at first, but then you feel awesome. Like nothing matters. And everything is happier.”

“I think I might throw up,” she says.

“Here, take some water,” Clarissa says and fills a fresh Dixie cup from the water cooler. “Have you never had alcohol before? Don’t you ever have wine at dinner?”

“Dad’s an alcoholic, remember? We don’t keep alcohol in the house. I had champagne at my aunt’s wedding once, but it didn’t taste anything like this.” She downs the water and slaps her tongue against the insides of her mouth. “Ugh, I can’t get rid of this taste!”

“Maybe you just need a mixer,” Clarissa says.

BETH ANN.

Traffic is bumper-to-bumper on 287. Beth Ann reclines her seat and leans back. She thinks about punching the steering wheel but doesn’t have enough energy to perform the action.

Beth Ann checks her cell phone and sees she has four missed calls and four voicemails from her father. She refuses to listen to them. She has no regrets about leaving. Her family

doesn't care about how she feels. They only care about her mother. And some of them don't even care about *her*.

"Why won't these people move?" Beth Ann shouts. "What's the hold up?" And where does traffic even begin? she thinks. If people would just keep moving, then there wouldn't be traffic. And if it's this bad in New Jersey, she can't begin to imagine what the George Washington Bridge must be like about now. Just another reason why she should never leave New York. It's nearly impossible to get to or from New Jersey. One bridge and two tunnels and a million cars fighting to get in lanes. She never should have left New York.

JOHNNY.

The bar is crowded, which is unusual. On a normal night, there'd be five old men on the stools, five men in either mechanic overalls, a security guard uniform, maybe a smock, plenty of trucker hats and flannel and dirt and grease and stubbled cheeks. Men with either nowhere to go or with places they don't want to go. But tonight the bar is packed. Schramm waves from across the bar above a Bud Light and a Jäger Bomb. He points at the drinks with a questioning face, and Johnny nods as he pushes through the crowd. He knows almost all of these people. They went to high school with him. Johnny makes small talk, which he hates. Stop-and-chats:

"How's school?"

"Good. You?"

"Good."

OR

“Still working at Elephant Wireless?”

“Yeah.”

“Good money?”

“I do all right.”

OR

“How’s school?”

“I dropped out. I’m working at Elephant Wireless.”

“How’s that?”

“All right.”

OR

“How’s school?”

“Good. You?”

“I dropped out.”

“Working somewhere?”

“Nope.”

When Johnny makes it over to Schramm, they shake hands, which turns into a bro hug, and he greets Fresh and Camel and Bomb and Shwaz and his older brother, Shwazole, in a similar fashion.

“You really weren’t kidding about everyone being here,” Johnny says to Schramm.

Schramm taps Johnny’s shot glass with his own, and they down the Jäger Bombs and slam the glasses on the table. Schramm beats Johnny, but barely, and Johnny wants to tell him, “It’s a marathon, not a sprint,” except that he was chugging his drink as fast as he could.

“Why is this place so packed?” Johnny asks him.

Schramm just points to the bartender as he slugs some of his beer.

Johnny recognizes the bartender as Lance Jermaine, a kid he went to high school with who was big into skateboards and pulling fire alarms and whose schedule was mostly made up of shop classes until he dropped out his senior year.

“He doesn’t card anyone,” Schramm says, placing his empty bottle on the bar. “It’s awesome.”

When Lance comes over, Johnny hands him his credit card and orders seven Jäger Bombs and four Bud Lights.

“So what you need to get drunk for?” Schramm asks. “Not that you need a reason to get drunk. I mean, we’re in *this* shithole.”

“Girls, my man,” Johnny says. “Let’s get bombed.”

CLARISSA.

The vodka is all gone, and Blair won’t stop giggling. “I told you it makes everything better, right?”

Blair leans into Clarissa and snorts into her shoulder. “I feel like....” She can’t get the sentence out. She just keeps giggling and snorting. “I feel like....”

“You feel like *what*?” Clarissa asks, slightly annoyed, even though she finds it funny watching her. She kind of likes her like this.

“I feel like an airplane,” she says and bursts out laughing. She lifts her arms up so they’re perpendicular to her neck, nearly swatting Clarissa’s nose with her hand, and begins swaying back and forth and making whirring noises. “This is Blair Airlines. We’re at eighty hundred thousand feet, and we’re beginning our descent!”

She’s being too loud. “Shh!” Clarissa says.

But Blair just laughs louder and dive bombs into her lap. She turns around and drapes her legs over the armrest of the couch. And when she looks up at Clarissa with eyes that have grown smaller and yet brighter too, she says, “Your hair is really pretty today. I like what you did to it.”

Clarissa really likes her like this.

SAMUEL.

Samuel’s father comes into the room and turns on the TV. He starts watching some stupid war movie and then falls asleep. Samuel wishes his father would go be with his mother and cheer her up. Samuel thinks he’d do it himself, but he doesn’t know how. He wishes he knew how. But he doesn’t. He bets his father knows how though. He’s strong. And brave. A couple of months ago there was a giant bat stuck in their house. It kept squealing and yelling and flying into the walls and the bookshelves and the chandelier. Samuel’s mother didn’t know what to do. And Clarissa wasn’t home, and Johnny was at college. And so Samuel’s mother called his father, and he came home and got a net from the shed and caught it and brought it outside and let it go. The bat screeched a lot while his father was trying to catch him with the net, but then when his father released him, the bat stopped screeching and flew away and went home to his bat family. Then the bat was gone. Samuel needs to be brave like his father, he thinks. He needs to get a net. He needs to stand up for himself.

BETH ANN.

The traffic finally disperses, and Beth Ann is flying down the highway. Nearly pushing past the ninety marker. She has to make up for lost time. She probably could’ve been home an hour ago if it wasn’t for that god damned traffic. She’s got the windows down even though it’s freezing.

She doesn't care. It feels so freeing. Well, the heat's on, so it's not that cold. She's just ready to be back at NYU. The only thing she wants to do as soon as she gets there is to turn on some Etta James, light some candles, and immerse herself in her bathtub. The only thing she doesn't want to do when she gets home is talk to Joshua. But he keeps texting her, and her phone keeps vibrating in her lap. She flings her phone to the floor of the passenger side. She's done with fucking phones. She's done with fucking family. She's done with fucking Joshua!

JOHNNY.

Sidney shows up and walks right past Johnny without saying hi. She waves at Schramm though. So Johnny orders another Jäger Bomb. He has no idea what his tab looks like, but it must be so much money. But he doesn't care. He just keeps watching Sidney talk to Bomb about probably some stupid ass shit. And she keeps laughing. And she's touching Bomb's arm. That slut. Johnny came here to get girls off of his mind. Not to have them rubbed in his face. This could only be worse if Laura was there. Or Susan. Sure, he'd like to make out with Susan again, but she's pretty weird. Pretty awkward. Johnny doesn't need awkward right now. He needs more Bud Lights. Great, now Bomb's got his arm around Sidney. That dick. Johnny's probably going to punch him. All right, one more Jäger Bomb and then he'll punch him. Right in the face. Knock him out, drag him outside, and leave him there. Johnny wonders what Sidney could possibly see in him. He's not smart. He still watches cartoons. And not like *Family Guy*. Like *Sponge Bob Square Pants*. Maybe he's charming. And he does go to the gym. But Johnny goes to the gym. Well, he hasn't in a bit. He needs to go back. Maybe tomorrow. Tomorrow he'll go to the gym. Everything will be better tomorrow after he goes to the gym. He won't drink tomorrow. The wakes and the damn funeral will be over. He won't talk to any of these girls. He'll forget about

them. Especially Laura. And Sidney. He won't even hang out with Sidney. If she's at Janson's house, he won't even go there. He won't even have to hear her name. He'll just go to the gym instead. He won't see any of those girls again.

Fuck. Of course. Of course Laura comes into the bar. With that douchebag Montclair dick. God damn it.

CLARISSA.

Blair fell asleep. Clarissa should be happy—no, joyous—that she has Blair asleep in her lap with her arms around her. But she's more annoyed. Blair does look gorgeous though, her burgundy—Clarissa thought they were maroon, but no, they're burgundy—locks draped over Clarissa's thighs. And she doesn't even have that awkward sleeping face that most people have, mouth agape, tongue lolled, face smashed against a pillow or forearm. No, she has a face that looks perfectly content. Glowing. It even looks like she's smiling. Clarissa would love to wake her, but she doesn't want to disturb those features. Even with her legs falling asleep. Like Blair's contagious.

Clarissa wishes there was more vodka. She could probably call Johnny, but then she'd have to explain why she needed it. Or why she even wants it. He probably wouldn't even get it for her, that lazy ass. But it's worth a shot. So she carefully reaches over to her purse and pulls out her cellphone and texts Johnny:

Is there any way you can get me some vodka? Please don't ask why.

Clarissa reaches over and runs her hands through Blair's hair. It's so pretty like this. She rests her hand behind Blair's neck, leans back, and awaits Johnny's response.

SAMUEL.

Joseph is snoring, and Samuel can't hear the war movie on TV. Not that he wants to hear or watch it anyway. He hops off the couch and goes upstairs. He stops in front of his parents' bedroom where his mother is still lying face down, unmoving.

"Mom," Samuel calls.

But she doesn't move.

"Mom!" Samuel shouts louder.

"What, honey?" Samuel thinks he hears his mother say. It's hard to tell with her mouth pressed up against the pillow.

"Are we going to the night wake?" Samuel asks.

"No, honey. I'm tired."

"Well I'm gonna go," he says.

"Okay," she says. "Have your father drive you."

Samuel opens his mouth to say something else but doesn't. He walks down the stairs and peers at his father snoring on the couch. Snores that seem to rock the room.

"Dad," he says.

And when his father doesn't say anything, Samuel puts on his coat and walks out the front door.

BETH ANN.

Nearing a hundred miles an hour, making great progress, and no cops in sight. And no cops in *sound* either thanks to Beth Ann's radar detector: the only decent thing her father ever did for her. Her phone keeps vibrating, and it's jounced itself against the side door, and the vibrations

against the plastic are driving Beth Ann absolutely batshit to the point where she can't take it anymore. She reaches across the passenger seat, her other hand steady on the wheel. Seven missed calls from Joshua. And a text message. She pulls up the message:

Baby, please call me as soon as you get back into the city. I'm sorry for everything. Being without you this weekend is killing me. I will do whatever I can to make you happy...

God dammit, this jerk is pathetic.

...I will change. I will be a better person. I will be a better boyfriend. I will be a better lover. I will do anything to just have you back. I didn't realize how much I needed you until I lost you.

I'm nothing without you. Love, Joshua

And when Beth Ann looks up, she's less than a car's length from a tractor trailer with its hazards on. She slams on the breaks, but she's not stopping. And tires screech, but she's not stopping.

She blares on the horn and screams. And then...

JOHNNY.

Reality. Reality doesn't work for him anymore. And it's all their fault. Laura and the douche dick from Montclair are sitting at a table in the corner, his hand on hers on the table. She didn't even say hi when she came in. That bitch. Schramm keeps saying, "It's cool, man. It's cool." But it's not cool. Johnny wants to punch everyone. And someone keeps playing Pantera on the electronic juke box, and that's not helping. As long as "Walk" doesn't come on, he probably won't actually throw any punches. But he's not making any promises. His fists are clenched on the table and they keep shaking. He can't keep them still. And he barely notices it when someone taps him on the shoulder.

"Hey, I'm glad I ran into you again," she says. "I never got your number."

Johnny cocks his head over his shoulder, and standing there is Susan. Great. Sidney, Laura, and now Susan. “Hi,” Johnny says.

“Are you going to the night wake?” she asks.

“I don’t know.”

“My parents went home, but I thought I’d stick around.”

“Why?” Johnny asks.

“For you,” she says.

Lance comes over and asks Susan what she wants.

“Stoli Citron and cranberry,” she says.

A girly drink. A woo-woo. Is she one of them woo-woo girls? Two drinks in and the girls can’t stop shouting, “Woo!” Like they’re Ric Flair but less cool. “Put it on my tab,” Johnny says to Lance.

“That’s very sweet of you,” she says and nuzzles her way in between Schramm and Johnny and puts her hand on his thigh.

Lance comes back with the drink. “Let’s go outside,” Johnny says. “I need a cigarette.”

CLARISSA.

Nothing from Johnny. Clarissa nudges Blair, but she doesn’t stir. How long can Clarissa sit like this? Clarissa thinks. Her legs have no feelings left in them. She has to get up. Delicately, she lifts Blair’s shoulders off of her and tries to scootch out, but her legs won’t move, and Blair’s head lolls back onto her thigh. This is incredible and unbearable. She’ll roll. She’ll just roll out from under Blair. With her hands under her shoulders and her head cradled with the insides of

her elbows, Clarissa lifts her up and rolls in one motion. And she lands on the ground. Ow! She swats at her legs but still cannot feel them. “Wake up, stupids! Wake up! Oh, this is just great.”

SAMUEL.

Samuel takes the short cut through the park to the funeral home. It’s still snowing, and the concrete path through the park has not been plowed or shoveled yet, but Samuel doesn’t care. He just trudges along and kicks at snow banks, keeping his eyes on the ground in an attempt to keep the snow out of his face.

“Hey you little bitch!” someone calls from the thick trees that fill the outskirts of the park. The wind is howling, and Samuel can barely understand the words. But the words are loud, as if the wind is pushing them at him.

Samuel pays the voice no attention and keeps walking, his head still down.

“I said, hey you little bitch!” the voice calls again.

This time Samuel stops and turns toward the voice, but he can’t see anyone. “What do you want?” Samuel calls.

“Whattaya doin walking all by yourself?”

A figure emerges from the woods in a wrestling jacket. Bobby’s wrestling jacket.

“Shit,” Samuel mutters. “I’m going to my uncle’s wake!” he calls.

“Why don’t you come over here first?” Bobby calls. And then Nick Soltano comes out of the woods followed by Cherry.

“Why?” Samuel calls. “I have to go.”

“Just come over here. Come into the woods.”

Samuel wants to leave. But he doesn't want to be called a pussy either. So he walks over to Bobby. Bobby's eyes are bloodshot, and he's got this creepy grin on his face. Like he's angry but happy about it.

"Come in here with us," Bobby says.

"Okay," Samuel says and follows the three into the woods.

When they get a few feet in, Bobby stops and his cronies form a half-circle around him. Bobby reaches into his jacket pocket and pulls out a baggy. He takes what looks like a cigarette, except that it doesn't have a filter and it looks messy, not professional-looking like the cigarettes his aunt smokes. He pops it into his mouth, lights it, and takes two puffs. He exhales a massive cloud of smoke. It doesn't smell like the cigarettes Samuel's aunt smokes either. Bobby passes the cigarette to Nick who also takes two puffs and then tries to hand it to Cherry, but Cherry waves her hands in front of her. "I'm okay," she says. Nick holds the cigarette out to Samuel, and Bobby says, "Take it."

"I don't smoke," Samuel says.

"Just do it," Bobby says. "Unless you're a little bitch."

Samuel doesn't like being called a little bitch. He looks down at the snow. His feet are almost completely covered.

"You gonna do it, or what?" Nick shouts at him.

"I don't want to," Samuel says.

"You're such a fucking pussy," Bobby says. "This is why everyone makes fun of you."

"Fine," Samuel says. He takes the cigarette and inhales even though he's not sure what he's doing, but when he exhales a blast of smoke pours from his mouth and his lungs burn and he coughs uncontrollably. Bobby and Nick laugh at him.

JOHNNY.

Susan is still looking awesome. Her eyeliner is driving him completely batshit. And she keeps staring at him with those eyes, eyes that he could bathe in, waiting for him to say something. “Look, Susan,” he says. “I just got out of this relationship. I dated her in high school, and she was great. I mean really great. And when I came back to town, she was with some other guy. She ended it just like that. And he was there. While I came to see her. I mean, I could’ve handled it better if she would’ve set me down and we had a long conversation about it.” Susan kind of cocks her head at Johnny, like she’s surprised. Then she makes this sort of frown, like she’s confused. “I mean, I’m not some kind of pussy. I just wasn’t expecting it. And for him to be there. With *my* girlfriend.” Susan’s still giving him that weird look, and it’s starting to freak Johnny out. Luckily, his cell phone buzzes again, as it has been for hours. In an attempt to escape those eyes, he pulls his phone from his pocket. “Hold on just a second,” he says to Susan.

“Johnny—” she starts.

“Hold that thought,” he says. “Just a second.” The text is from Clarissa:

Can you please get me some vodka? Please? I’m dying over here.

Vodka? Why? he responds.

“Johnny, it’s okay,” Susan says.

“I’m almost done,” he says. “Just a second. Let me just get it out.”

“But Johnny—”

“I’m just kind of vulnerable, you know?” Johnny doesn’t know why he’s saying this, unsure if he’s actually that vulnerable or if he’s trying to scare her off. “I don’t think I can handle a serious relationship or anything like that.” Johnny’s phone buzzes again.

“But Johnny—”

“Sorry, one second,” he says.

I just need it. I'll explain another time.

I'm at Flanagan's. I'll buy you a bottle. Meet me outside.

“So, I don't know, you know?” he says. “I'm not ready. Okay, you go.”

“Johnny, I'm not looking for a serious relationship,” she says. “I'm happily single. I love California. I love all the boys.”

What the fuck is she saying?

“I find you very hot. I really just want to get in your pants. I want you. I want you now, and we can fool around when we get back to California. But, Johnny, I don't want a boyfriend. And honestly, you don't really seem like boyfriend material. I just totally want you on top of me.”

Johnny's speechless. What a slut. Right? She just wants me for sex? What kind of person is this?

“I'm sorry if that hurts you,” she says.

“Susan?” Johnny says.

“Yes?”

Johnny puts his hands on her face and pulls her close to him as he shoves his tongue in her mouth, wincing as his cracked lip makes contact with hers but not caring.

CLARISSA.

Clarissa walks over to Flanagan's after finally getting the word from Johnny. Blair will be fine on the couch, she thinks. Blair will probably be passed out for a while. She hopes not for too

long though. She wants to have fun with her when she gets back. And it's hard to talk to her while she's all unconscious. Nice to look at though.

The crowd outside of Flanagan's has grown larger, and almost everyone is smoking. How is she going to find Johnny? She shivers and realizes she should've gotten her jacket from Mr. Shwankey, but that guy kind of freaked her out. Even though he was very nice. Just creepy looking.

"What are you doing out here, babe?" comes a voice, and Clarissa turns and sees that it's Johnny's friend Dave, whom he calls Fresh. "You're looking gorgeous as always."

"Thanks, Dave. Hey, do you know where Johnny is?"

"Haven't seen him in a while. I think he left with some girl."

"He left!"

"I think so. I don't know. I'm bombed."

"Ugh." She texts Johnny: *Did you leave? WTF?*

"Sorry to hear about your uncle," Dave says.

"Thanks. It's cool."

"Do you need anything?"

Dave's got this stupid, smuggy, drunk look on his face. But this line intrigues Clarissa.

"Well, yes. Kind of. Do you think you could get me a bottle of vodka?"

"Sure. Anything for you, babe." Dave flicks his cigarette into the street, says, "Be right back, babe," and goes inside.

Clarissa considers the time she's spent with Dave, which was never very in depth but was frequent while Johnny was in high school. She's pretty sure Dave has always had a thing for her. He's, like, old, Clarissa thinks. Well, not that old. But he's a dude. And she doesn't think she

could date any of Johnny's friends. Even if they were girls. That would be gross. He does have a nice car though. Clarissa wonders what kind of car her father will get her next year when she starts driving. He bought Johnny a Porsche. Maybe she can get a Mustang. A black Mustang. Yes, that sounds nice.

Dave comes out of the bar holding a bottle of Bacardi Razz. Which is not vodka. Idiot. But whatever. It's alcohol.

"Here you go, babe," he says. "Need any help drinking it?"

"Nope, I have a date," Clarissa says with the biggest fake smile she can muster. She guesses she should be happier for the free bottle, but Dave totally got her the wrong thing, and she doesn't think she likes rum. "Thanks!"

"So I have tickets to this Dave Matthews show next week," Dave says. "Wanna go?"

"I'm real busy, Dave," Clarissa says. "But thanks. And thanks for the vod—erm—rum!"

Clarissa starts walking away—away from Dave's disappointed gaze—and that's when she sees Johnny, throat-deep on some girl at a table. Gross. She doesn't want to see that. But then she notices the bottle of Grey Goose on the table. She snatches it off the table, and neither Johnny, nor the girl, even notice. Score!

SAMUEL.

"I knew you weren't such a little bitch," Bobby says.

Samuel can't say anything. He feels funny. He feels kind of sick. Not like he'd throw up. But sick in his chest. He's uneasy. Nervous.

Bobby punches him in the shoulder and smiles. "You're all right."

But Samuel doesn't feel all right. Not at all. Even the snow looks different. But he's not cold anymore. And that worries him.

Bobby passes the cigarette to Nick who takes two puffs and hands it to Samuel. Samuel complies and exhales. It doesn't hurt as much as it did the first time, but it still feels weird. His lips burn. He can feel his hands, which he doesn't think he's ever been able to do before. His hands are shaking, but they're not cold.

"I have to go," Samuel says and hands the cigarette to Bobby.

"Go?" Bobby says. He's taken aback and appears to snarl at Samuel. "Why?"

"Because I have to go," Samuel says and starts walking away into the blowing snow.

"I knew you were a little bitch!" Bobby calls after him. "Are you going to go tell your mommy?"

"Stop it, Bobby," Samuel can hear Cherry say.

"No, screw that little bitch," Bobby says. "I'm glad I tore your sweatshirt!" he calls.

But Samuel is already yards away, lumbering through the park, the bright white snow stinging his eyes.

JOHNNY.

"You want some of this Grey Goose before I give it to my sister?" Johnny asks Susan as he pulls away from her. But when he looks to the table, he sees the bottle of vodka is gone. "Well, that's weird."

"It's gone?"

"I did buy a bottle of Grey Goose and put it right there, right?"

"Definitely."

"Oh well. Do you want something else to drink? I still have a tab running."

“Better yet,” she says, “why don’t you close your tab and then we can get in my car.”

Her hair is a wreck. Her makeup is all over her face. Johnny doesn’t mean to be shallow, but he can’t help but think she kind of needed that makeup. Or at least she needs to get rid of her smeared, fucked up makeup.

“In your car?”

“Well, it’s too cold out here for us to be naked.”

“Naked?”

“Johnny, I already told you. I want you. Now go pay your tab. I’m going to use the restroom. I need to freshen up.”

Good, Johnny thinks.

“Meet me here in five,” she says. “And don’t go talking to any other girls at the bar.”

Huh? “Okay. I’ll be here in five.”

CLARISSA.

People are starting to show up for the night wake, which Clarissa finds really awkward because the necks of her liquor bottles are clearly sticking out of her purse. She doesn’t think anyone will really notice, but she’s worried anyway. They all seem so occupied with themselves, talking and hugging, but she freaks out anyway and ducks around the side of the building. Now she really wishes she had her coat to cover the bottles. She doesn’t even care about being cold. She’s not cold.

Okay, plan. She needs a plan. She can’t just walk in there with bottles of liquor. Okay, she’ll leave them outside. And that’ll be good because she can put them in the snow—shit, she tripped over her feet—and they’ll get cold. And then maybe she can come outside with her coat

or with a water bottle. Okay, this will work. And no one will know. Well, except Johnny, she guesses. But he'll be fine. She bets he won't even show up to the wake. He'll just keep making out with that freaky girl.

Okay, here we go. Put these in the snow. Should she bury them? What if she can't find them later? She'll mark them with leaves. Yes. She'll bury them in the snow. Okay, here they go. Into the pile of snow. And okay, mark the spots with these two dead leaves. And then she can find them later easily. Like little flags. Perfect. Ugh, it's so cold. This snow is so cold.

Just one sip before she goes in.

SAMUEL.

I hate that jerk, Samuel thinks. Why did he smoke that stuff? Why didn't he just say "No?" Why didn't he stand up for himself? Why does he feel so funny? Only a few more blocks. He hates that Bobby Sheldon.

JOHNNY.

In Susan's car. Heat's cranked. It's too hot. Even though Johnny and Susan are already naked. She wasn't wearing any underwear. Where did that push-up bra go. Johnny must have imagined it. She just pulled her dress over her head and was ready. Johnny recalls hearing that girls don't wear underwear with dresses because it shows lines. But isn't that why they invented the thong? Johnny would prefer a little mystery. A little work. There's something about unclasping a bra that's always especially turned Johnny on.

Susan is on top of Johnny. Grinding. Moaning. Panting. Even though her tongue is almost all the way down his throat. He can't figure out how she's enjoying this. It's so cramped. He

can't feel his legs. And the music playing on Susan's stereo is terrible. Johnny thinks it's Katy Perry, but it might be Ke\$ha. He can barely tell the difference. He wants to change it to 89.5, the metal station run by Seton Hall. Or even WDHA, the classic rock station. Anything but this whiny, peppy garbage. He could even handle the Christian rock station over Katy Perry. If you don't listen to the lyrics, Johnny thinks, the songs are actually pretty good.

Johnny wishes he could enjoy this, but he keeps thinking about how he's not enjoying it. And he keeps thinking about Laura and that douche dick from Montclair, and he doesn't even know why he cares. He hadn't seen Laura in so long. But she had a sense of permanence to her. Like something he would always have. He's just shocked, he assumes. Shouldn't he be in denial or something?

"You like that?" Susan asks.

"Yeah," Johnny says. "It's...good." He doesn't understand talking during sex.

"Your body is so hot," she says.

"Thanks," he says. She keeps gyrating. Johnny can't feel anything.

"Maybe I was wrong," she says. "Maybe we can make this work. I don't think I want to fuck anyone else but you." She keeps panting while she talks. Johnny can barely understand what she's saying. Maybe she didn't even say that.

"Great," he says.

"You wanna get serious?" she asks.

"I think this *is* pretty serious." Johnny's never faked an orgasm before.

"I think I could for you."

Yeah, this is going well, Johnny thinks. Now he's got a clinger. She's hot, but whatever. She's completely bat shit, right?

“You feel so good inside me.”

Okay, I’m done, Johnny says to himself. Time to act. He hopes he can make an acceptable fake orgasm. Johnny grips her thighs, which makes her moan louder. Johnny thinks he hears Ke\$ha or Katy Perry moan too. Weird. Johnny fakes panting to the point where he’s almost whining. He sounds like a fucking cocker spaniel, he thinks. And he latches onto her face and gives her two good pumps and then grasps onto her thighs harder and keeps them from moving. He hopes she gets the point.

“That was so hot,” she says.

She gets the point, he thinks. Good. She pulls her hair back. It’s all damp. And as he stares at her he finds her neck to be really pretty. He’s never noticed her neck before. It’s a little too long, but it’s pretty. She falls off of him onto the passenger seat. She reclines the seat. Her body is so sweaty and glistening. Johnny thinks girls call this sparkling or something. The car reeks of sex. Sweet sweat and her hair and booze too. Johnny thinks he’s turned on now.

CLARISSA.

When Clarissa goes into the funeral home, she goes immediately downstairs to see Blair. Clarissa hopes she’s awake by now. And she hopes she’s not puking or anything. And she hopes she’s ready to drink more. Because Clarissa is. But really, she just wants to see her eyes open and stare into them.

When she gets downstairs, there’s some commotion. There are a bunch of people crowded around the couch. Clarissa thinks about running away. She doesn’t want to be this close in contact to adults while she’s drunk. But she’s curious. She stands in the back and tries to see what’s going on.

Someone is crying. Clarissa can't see anything but people's backs.

What is going on? Clarissa thinks. Is it Blair? Is something wrong with Blair?

Someone says something about a coma. Did I hear that right? A coma?

Someone says, "She's not breathing." Clarissa is positive she hears this.

Someone is crying. Clarissa can't see anything.

SAMUEL.

There is an ambulance in front of the funeral home as Samuel walks up to it. *That must be for me*, Samuel thinks. He hopes it's not for him. He doesn't want to go in there.

CLARISSA.

The EMTs take Blair away. Blair's dad keeps staring at Clarissa as they carry her away, Blair's mom at her side. Clarissa doesn't think she'll ever forget that face. It isn't anger. It isn't exactly sadness. It is just a dead, emotionless face that says, "How could you? How could you do that to my little girl?" Just staring. And Clarissa stares back, unable to say anything. She wants to say she's sorry. But she knows there isn't any point. He wouldn't accept her apology. And she doesn't deserve to be forgiven. But she didn't mean to. She didn't know. "I'm," she says to Blair's father. "I." But then she just looks down at the ground. She knows he's still staring at her with that same blank face, his eyes probably studying her now. His eyebrows twitching and his eyes blinking, blinking, blinking. Clarissa's dead. She's never going to be able to see Blair again. She's never going to be able to see anyone again. Hell, Blair might die. And it'll be all Clarissa's fault.

“I,” she says, but when she looks up, Blair’s dad is gone, and she’s all by herself. She better get used to this feeling.

JOHNNY.

Susan seems to be passed out on top of Johnny after going another round. Now she’s exhausted. She keeps grunting. And she’s still panting. “Look,” Johnny says. “Susan,” he says. “That was fun. It really was. But I have to get into this wake. My parents will be wondering where I am.” He kind of taps her lightly on the shoulder except that he more shoves her onto the passenger seat.

“Fuck!” she yells. “What did you do that for? I hit my head on the door, you asshole.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to push you that hard. I really didn’t. But I need to get to the wake.” Surely, if Johnny keeps repeating himself, she’ll get the point and Johnny can get away and go to the damned wake.

“You *did* mean to push me!” she shouts. “You pushed me so hard!”

“I only tapped you. You fell. I’m sorry. I really am. But I also really need to get to the wake.”

When she vomits into her leather seat, Johnny takes it as his cue to leave. She doesn’t want him to watch her vomit into her leather seat. It’s embarrassing. He’ll check on her later. She’ll be fine. He really means it.

SAMUEL.

After steering clear of the ambulance, which Samuel is still sure was meant for him, Samuel goes in the front door. Mr. Shwankey takes his coat, which is covered in snow and shakes it outside.

Samuel can't help but think that Mr. Shwankey is looking at him funny. Even weirder than before. And with those glazed-over eyes.

"I'm okay," Samuel says and walks away.

Samuel finds Clarissa in the room that Uncle Patrick is in and sits next to her. Clarissa stares ahead, as if she hadn't even noticed that Samuel has sat down. Samuel wants to say something but can't. He feels sad. He feels awkward. He feels like he's done something wrong.

Samuel stares forward at his Uncle Patrick, waiting for him to say something, but he just lies there, his hands still over his chest as if he's thinking about what a disappointment Samuel is. Samuel stares forward, unblinking, at Uncle Patrick. Clarissa walks away.

CLARISSA.

Outside, Clarissa swigs back and forth from the bottles of vodka and rum. She can't stop. It's so cold, and it's still snowing, but she doesn't care. "I've really screwed everything up this time," she says to the bottles. The rum tastes disgusting. She throws it against the fence behind her, and it breaks. She doesn't care. She wants everything to go away. It's cold, and she hopes the vodka cheers her up. She can feel it resting warm in her stomach. She sits down in the snow and instantly she's wet, but she doesn't care. Vodka will figure this out, she thinks. It always does. But she can't hit that point. She just feels low. And full of anxiety. What is she going to tell her parents if they ask her? What is she ever going to say to Blair's parents? She bets Blair even hates her.

Clarissa takes a long swig of vodka and, seeing someone coming around the corner of the building, lowers her head. She buries the bottle in the snow as fast as she can. She scurries in her purse for a piece of gum, but she can't find any. Where the fuck is her gum? Brush, compact, tampons, pens. Why the fuck does she have so many pens? The person is walking right toward

her. She can't find any gum. There's nothing. But wait. A lone tablet of tums at the bottom of her purse. There's hair on it. *Probably* hers. She picks it off and pops the chalky tablet in her mouth. Why is this person coming at her? What does he want? Or she? Maybe it's Blair's mom. She looks down at the snow pile where the bottle is buried and thinks, Screw it. She'll just drink it. Then this person will just go away. He or she will think she's a crazy person. Or a bum. And leave her alone. And as he or she gets closer, Clarissa sees that it's a boy. It's Samuel. Oh God, what does he want right now? He's just staring at her.

Clarissa stares down at the snow. Where the bottle is buried. She can't look at Samuel. She doesn't understand why Samuel keeps staring at her. Why he won't say anything.

Clarissa kicks at the clump of snow. Why won't he say anything? She looks up at him. He stares at her. Blank. "What do you want?" she shouts.

Samuel is crying. But the tears barely move from his eyes. As if they're freezing to his face. She feels bad about yelling at him. But she's still angry. So she shouts again. "What the hell do you want?"

"I did something bad," he says.

"What did you do?" she asks.

"I think I got high," he says. "I didn't mean to. Bobby made me. And I hate him. I hate that kid. I wanna beat the shit out of him."

"You got high? Why?"

"I didn't want to be called pussy. I'm tired of it."

"You don't have to take that kind of crap from people," Clarissa says. "It shows you're stronger if you don't give in to peer pressure."

"That's what I've heard," Samuel says.

Clarissa looks back to the bottle. She wants to tell him more about the things her parents have told her about drugs and the things that she's heard on TV, but she looks at Samuel's pants instead and cracks up laughing. They look ridiculous. They're so big! She starts to giggle.

"What the hell are you laughing at?" he asks. "I'm upset."

"I'm sorry!" she cries. "I'm so sorry. I was just looking at your pants. Why are you still wearing those? You look so silly!"

"Thanks," he says. "Thanks a lot." And he starts to walk away.

"Wait, Samuel," Clarissa says. "Wait. Sit down. It's fine. I'm sorry. I know that's not what you need right now." Clarissa glances at the bottle in the snow. "Samuel, sit down."

"Fine." Samuel plops into the snow beside Clarissa. "Are you going to make me feel better?"

"Yes," Clarissa says. "Yes, I am. But you have to promise not to tell Mom."

JOHNNY.

These pants suck, Johnny thinks as he trips over himself while walking up to the funeral home. He hopes he doesn't smell like pussy, although he's pretty sure he smells like pussy. He hopes he doesn't smell like booze *and* pussy. Dammit, he's sure he smells like both. Maybe they have some kind of cologne or spray in the bathroom.

It's a funeral home. Not a fancy club in LA.

Dammit.

Johnny reaches for the door of the funeral home and pushes it open except someone else opens it, and Johnny falls to the floor. Dammit, Shwankey. "Oh, hey," Johnny says from the

floor. "I'm good," he says. "I had the door the whole time, but thanks. I mean, I had it. You know."

"Are you okay, sir?" he asks.

"Yeah, man, I'm fine. I just had the door. And, you know, you grabbed it. I had it the whole time." Shwankey lifts Johnny to his feet, the old bastard, slow as fuck. Johnny doesn't need Mr. Shwankey's help to get to his feet. "I'm fine, man," Johnny says. "I just, you know, had the door on my own."

"I'm sorry, sir."

God damn, his eyes are scary. "It's cool," Johnny says. "I just gotta go to this wake." He brushes himself off. *Damn, that carpet is dirty.* And his suit is completely wrinkled. Dammit. It's fine. He's sure it's fine.

SAMUEL.

Samuel feels better. He's not sure why. But he feels better. Clarissa hugs him. He feels calm.

Samuel and Clarissa are ready to go back inside.

JOHNNY.

Johnny knows he should try to be there for his mother, but he's too drunk. And he feels like shit. She probably won't notice anyway since she's so loopy. But he can't go over there babbling and smelling like booze. Dammit, *and* pussy. He'll just hang here in the back. He's there. And Samuel's talking to her now. It's fine. He'll just stay here. If she needs him, she'll come talk to him. No, you know what? He should check the bathroom. Maybe there's something. If he can just cover this up, he could go talk to her. Make sure she's doing okay. No, you know what? First

he needs a cigarette. One cigarette downstairs and then he'll be fine and then he'll go to the bathroom and clean himself up. Johnny goes downstairs, and the room is empty. Thank God, he thinks. Although he was sort of hoping Beth Ann was down there. He knows she'd just tear him a new asshole, but at least she could tell him if Mom's okay and then he'd be Scott-free, whatever that means. Who's Scott? Dammit, he's losing focus. And his cigarette is burning too fast. And, shit, his phone starts ringing. Who the hell is calling him? It better not be Schramm wondering how banging that chick was. Or whoever. He doesn't recognize the number. It better not be Susan. How did she get his number?

"Hello?"

"Hi, is this Johnny?" a man says.

"Umm, yeah?"

"Hi. I was looking through this girl's recent phone calls, and you were the last person she called. I'm not sure how you know this girl, so this might be a bit of a shock to you, but she drove into the back of my truck. She was banged up real—"

"Who the fuck is this?"

"My name is George. I'm a truck driver, you see. And she drove into the back of my truck. She was driving pretty fast and—"

"*Who* was driving pretty fast?"

"I'm telling you, I don't know who it is."

"What kind of car?"

"Umm, let me check. It's hard to tell."

There's a pause. And Johnny's freaking out. Laura's dead, he thinks. Laura's dead. It keeps repeating in his head. And it's probably his fault. It *is* his fault. She was dealing with that

stupid rebound guy and got too drunk and crashed into this guy's truck. Dammit. Shit. Oh no.
God no.

"It's silver. I think it's a Honda Civic," the man says.

Fuck. Johnny knows who drives a Honda Civic. "You killed my sister?" he shouts.

"No, no, no," he says. "She drove into the back of my truck and—"

"And then you killed her?"

"No, sir, no. She's alive. But they took her to a hospital. I don't know where."

"Where are you?"

"Just outside of New Brunswick."

Saint Peters. "Thanks. Bye."

CLARISSA.

Clarissa's mother is reading her the riot act. Clarissa can't even look at her. She just keeps saying, "I don't know" and shaking her head. It seems like the best answer right now. Like

Where did Blair get the alcohol from?

I don't know.

Was it from you?

I don't know.

I know you're drunk.

I don't know.

I can smell it on you.

I don't know.

Don't you realize how much of a big deal this is?

I don't know.

Why, Clarissa, why?

I don't know.

You're sixteen-years old.

I don't know.

What are we going to do about this?

I don't know.

Clarissa, say something else other than 'I don't know.' Look at me.

I don't know.

She's sure she has to look at her mother. She's sure she has to say something other than "I don't know." She's sure she has to do something. But before she can, Johnny comes up out of nowhere and says, "We have to go to the hospital. Saint Peter's. Now." How does he know that Blair is in the hospital? And which one?

SAMUEL.

Samuel leans against Clarissa in the car. He still feels funny. Even funnier now after the vodka. He wonders why Clarissa gave him some. And why she had it in the first place. But he thinks about all the times he's talked to her and she's smelled funny. It smelled like this stuff. It's starting to make sense. Is this something Samuel should be doing? He doesn't think so. But if Clarissa is doing it, it must be all right. Clarissa hands him a water bottle.

"You'll feel better," she says.

He takes a swig. It tastes terrible. But he does feel a bit better. He hands the bottle back to Clarissa and leans against her again. She puts her arm around him. He feels safe.

CLARISSA.

Clarissa keeps texting Blair. She can't be that drunk that she can't be receiving texts, she thinks. She was just sleeping. That's what vodka does. It makes you go to sleep. At least that's how it works for Clarissa. Unless her parents have her phone. Then they'll be reading these texts and will be furious with her. She just wants to know that she's okay. Blair didn't drink that much. Not more than Clarissa does in a day. But she's not used to it. She shouldn't have let her drink so much. Or asked her to. This is all her fault. But she'll be okay. She just has to sleep it off. She'll be okay. She has to be okay. If she wasn't okay, and her parents had her phone, they would have let her know. They would have to. Clarissa just hopes Blair's at the same hospital they're going to. It makes sense. Unless they took her to the Plainfield hospital, but no one goes there unless they've been shot. No one. It's terrifying over there. She just hopes Blair texts her back. She will. She will.

Part Seven:

A wake.

Awake.

JOHNNY.

Johnny rushes into the hospital and reaches the front desk before anyone else. He looks back and doesn't understand how he's beaten everyone, especially with his giant pants and drunkenness. A nurse says that Beth Ann is in 202B, and he races to see her, the family catching up behind him. Johnny doesn't even feel drunk anymore. And from what he could smell in the car, it seems like Clarissa should be, but she doesn't seem to be either. She's right behind him. They burst into the

room as soon as they get to the door, and there she is. Hooked up to all kinds of machines. Her eyes are closed. Johnny freezes. His mother runs over to her first. The rest of the family is stuck right inside the doorway. Behind Johnny. Johnny puts his arm over his father's shoulders. His father turns away to face Beth Ann and Johnny's mother. Everyone seems to be just staring. Johnny's mother strokes Beth Ann's hair. Beth Ann doesn't move. Her face is badly bruised. From the airbags, Johnny suspects. Those Hondas are reliable. She's going to be fine. Her body is in shock. Her mind is in shock. She's going to be fine. Everyone is going to be fine.

CLARISSA.

Clarissa doesn't know what to do here. Her mother's already in action, but Clarissa can't go over to her even though she wants to. It doesn't seem right. She's afraid, but she also doesn't want to intrude. She wishes she never yelled at Beth Ann. She wishes she could take back the previous day. *And* today. She wishes it all away. She wishes it. If ever anything could go away, she wishes it was this. She wants to go back to the big family dinner. She wants everyone to just smile. No yelling. No fights. She wishes everything back to where it was. She wishes. But nothing remains as it was. Nothing remains still.

SAMUEL.

Samuel stares at his mother. Nothing seems right anymore. How did this all happen? Samuel looks to Clarissa, but she doesn't seem to know what to do either. Samuel looks to Johnny, who seems to have it together. But he's just staring too. Samuel wishes Johnny would do something heroic. Or even tell him how to be heroic. Samuel is lost. He wishes this day would go away.

JOHNNY.

The doctor comes in to check on Beth Ann. She tells Mom what happened. Car accident. Beth Ann's in a coma. But it's mostly due to shock. She should come out of it in the next twenty-four hours. *Should*. But what if she doesn't? What if she never comes out of it? What if she's there forever? What if she's hooked up to machines for the rest of her life? Or will the family have to pull the plug? How could they ever do that? How could anyone do that?

Johnny's mother is a complete mess. Which is probably good. At least she's not bottling it up and trying to believe this is not happening. Johnny goes over to her and puts his hand on her shoulder. She doesn't react. Just keeps petting Beth Ann's hair and saying, "My baby" and crying. Samuel comes over and puts his hand on her other shoulder. Johnny smiles at him. He looks over at his father. He just nods at him, so Johnny stays. His father has his arm around Clarissa. Samuel looks to Johnny. He doesn't look right. His eyes are bloodshot. And he's standing funny. What's wrong with him?

CLARISSA.

Clarissa's father tells her to go find a snack machine and get them some chips and hands her a bunch of crisp one-dollar bills. No one has eaten dinner, as far as Clarissa knows. Everybody must be starving.

Clarissa stumbles down the entire hallway, but there's no vending machine. She takes the elevator to the first floor. There must be a vending machine on the first floor. Or something. Or a nurse can tell her where she can get some food.

The elevator takes forever even though she only goes down one floor. She wishes it was one of those elevators that played muzak. But there's no sound. Complete silence. It's kind of terrifying how quiet it is.

When she gets to floor A, she looks all over the hallway and finds no vending machine. Nothing. Not even a water fountain. How is this possible?

She goes up to the nurse or secretary or whatever she is.

"Is there a vending machine?"

"Third floor," she says.

"Third floor," Clarissa repeats. "Okay." She starts to walk away but then she turns around. The secretary or whatever is already talking to some other scrubbed woman. They're talking very loud about some guy's wife who is apparently a complete bitch. He has cancer. The wife keeps bugging them about how he's doing. And they call her a bitch. It's sad. How would they feel if they were in her position? Not knowing whether your husband was going to live or not?

"Excuse me," Clarissa says. "Is there a Blair Crisman here?"

They don't acknowledge her. They just continue on with their banter about the bitch.

"Excuse me!" she says louder.

The nurse or secretary lady rolls her eyes as she turns to her and says, "What."

"Is there a Blair Crisman here?"

"You family?" she asks.

"No, I'm a friend. She was taken to a hospital and—"

"If you're not family, then I can't tell you where she is."

"But she is here?" Clarissa asks.

“What did I just say? If you’re not family, I can’t tell you that.”

She must be here. Clarissa thinks about saying, Thanks, but she doesn’t and heads to the third floor.

SAMUEL.

Samuel holds onto his mother’s shoulder. For dear life perhaps. Johnny looks over at him and mouths, “Are you okay?”

“No,” Samuel says.

“Come outside with me,” Johnny mouths.

Samuel watches Johnny nod to their father and motion for him to come over, and Johnny grasps Samuel by the shoulder and leads him outside the room.

“What’s wrong, bro?” Johnny says. “I mean, I know this is crazy. Are you all right?”

“I’m not all right,” Samuel says.

“Are you worried about Beth Ann?”

“Of course,” Samuel says. “But I had a weird day.”

“It’s been a weird day for all of us, I think,” Johnny says.

“I know, but I did some stupid things.”

“You’re fucked up, huh?” Johnny says.

“Fucked up?”

“What’d you do?”

“I’m sorry,” Samuel says. “I got high. And I drank vodka with Clarissa.”

“Clarissa drinks vodka? Jesus. And what?”

“I got high. I didn’t mean to. This guy made me.”

“He made you?”

“Kind of.”

“How do you feel now?”

“I feel okay. Kinda weird. But okay.”

“You’re fine. You’ll be okay. But don’t do that again. I’m not saying I haven’t. But don’t. It gets you all messed up. And who’s this kid? Want me to kick his ass?”

“No, I think I’ve got it under control.”

“Well, just lemme know if you want me to kick his ass. I’m ready.”

JOHNNY.

Johnny’s phone starts buzzing in his pocket and when he checks the caller ID, it’s Schramm.

Johnny doesn’t really want to talk to Schramm, but he can’t stand the continual buzzing.

“I’m sorry, Samuel,” he says. “I have to take this.”

“It’s fine. You think I’m okay?”

“Yeah! You’re fine. Just don’t smoke that shit anymore. And keep away from the booze.

You’re too young. I’ll talk to Clarissa later. Hold on.”

“Thanks, brother,” Samuel says.

“What’s up?” Johnny says, walking down the hallway.

“Dude! Dude!”

“What? Something wrong? Just spit it out.”

Schramm just keeps saying “Dude!” and Johnny waits for him to say something else. There’s some pretty nurse coming in Johnny’s direction. Well, she might be pretty. Her hair is up, and she’s got big ears, but if her hair was down and covering them, she’d probably be really attractive.

“Dude!”

“Stop saying ‘Dude,’” Johnny says.

When the nurse gets closer, she puts her arm on Johnny’s shoulder. Whoa, that was easy.

“Dude!”

“Excuse me, sir, but cell phone usage is not allowed within the hospital.”

Cell phone usage? Johnny thinks. She came to talk to me about cell phone usage? Yeah, okay. He waves her off. Like he’s too busy. Like he’s too important to be dealing with her. He’s sure he’ll see her later.

“Dude!”

Johnny pushes the down button on the elevator and shrugs at the nurse. He tries to give her a look like, Yeah, I get it, but this phone call is important.

“Sir!” she shouts at him from down the hall. “You may not use your cell phone in the hospital!”

“Hold on. It’ll be quick. Just hold tight.”

Johnny steps into the elevator when the door opens and says, “Okay, Schramm, what do you want? Speak sentences.”

But then the line goes dead. He guesses that damn nurse was right.

CLARISSA.

Clarissa finds the vending machine on the third floor, but she doesn't get anything right away. She figures if she gets the snacks and goes back to Beth Ann's room, she'll get stuck there for a while. She has something to do first. She has to find Blair.

SAMUEL.

Samuel stares at the blank space where Johnny used to be. He vanished so quickly. But Johnny almost made him feel better. Samuel walks back into Beth Ann's room. His mother is still at Beth Ann's bedside. Samuel crosses in front of his father and puts his arm around his mother's waist. "It's going to be okay, Mom," he says. "It's going to be okay."

JOHNNY.

Johnny makes it outside of the hospital and immediately gets another call from Schramm.

"Dude!" Schramm says. "Your girl is making out with some dude!"

"Laura?" he asks. "I know. She's dating some douche."

"No, not fucking Laura. That girl you went off with."

"Susan?"

"I don't know her name, dude. But she's in the bar making out with some dude. I don't even know who he is. He's, like, older. He probably graduated high school before we were freshmen."

Figures. "Honestly, Schramm, I'm not that worried about it. That girl is a mess. I really just want Laura back."

“But, dude, she’s with that douche.”

“Yeah, Schramm, I know. I know she’s with that douche. Thanks for the reminder.”

“It’s cool,” he says.

“Look, Schramm, I’m kind of busy here. I’m at the hospital. My sister was in a car accident.”

“Oh, damn, dude. Is she okay? Sorry to hear.”

“Yeah, I don’t know.”

“So you’re not going to the wake?”

“No, Schramm. I’m at the hospital.”

“Oh,” he says. “Then I guess I’ll just stay here at the bar.”

“Yeah, you do that,” Johnny says. “Do whatever you have to do.”

“Can I keep using your tab?” he asks.

“Whatever, Schramm. Just close it when you’re done. And don’t buy anything ridiculous.”

“Cool, dude,” he says. “It’s cool.”

CLARISSA.

After creeping up and down the hallways of the first four floors, Clarissa spies Blair’s parents hovering over a bed in a room next to the elevator on the fifth floor. Blair’s awake! But she’s having a very heated conversation with her parents. Actually, it’s mostly her parents speaking. Her mother keeps screaming at her. Her father isn’t yelling, but he’s not happy. His voice is very stern. Clarissa leans in the doorway, hoping Blair sees her and that her parents don’t, but her parents are blocking Blair’s view of her. Clarissa can mostly only see her legs and feet sticking

out of one of those light blue hospital gowns. Clarissa can barely make out what they're saying until she leans her head farther into the room, which, to Clarissa, seems dangerous.

Blair's father mumbles something, and then Clarissa hears Blair say in a clear voice, "It wasn't my fault! It was all Clarissa's fault. I didn't want to drink any of that stuff, but Clarissa told me to. She said everything would be fine and that it'd be fun. I didn't want to do it at all!"

And then her mother shouts, "Well, Blair, I hope you know that you won't be seeing that girl ever again. I don't even want you to talk to her at school. Just ignore her."

"Good," Blair says. "I don't want to talk to her anymore anyway."

She doesn't mean that, Clarissa thinks. She can't mean that.

JOHNNY.

It's not cool, Johnny thinks, as he walks back into Beth Ann's hospital room. His father is passed out in a chair in the room with bags of potato chips and pretzels at his feet. Clarissa sits in the corner with her head in her lap. Samuel and Johnny's mother are standing beside the bed. Samuel's eating a cookie and offers him one as he walks over to them. He shakes his head and turns back to Beth Ann.

"Heard anything?" Johnny asks.

"Nothing," his mother says.

"But they said this is definitely only temporary, right?" Johnny asks.

"They don't know," his mother says.

Samuel doesn't say anything.

Nor does Clarissa.

His father snores.

Johnny doesn't know how he can sleep at a time like this, but he really must be exhausted.

"Johnny?" his mother says. "Where was Beth Ann going?"

Johnny starts to say "Home," but he catches himself. New Jersey is their home. Middleboro is their home. Fifteen Goldman Street is their home. "To New York, I guess."

"Why would she be going to New York?" his mother asks.

"I don't know, Mom. It's been a tough time for her. It's been a tough time for all of us."

"I wish she would've stayed home. I wish she would've talked to us more."

"I know, Mom."

"If we just would've...just would've..."

But before his mother can finish her sentence, the nurse who told him he couldn't use his cell phone in the hospital walks in. She gives Johnny a dirty look, and he smirks at her. "I'm sorry," she says, "but visiting hours are over."

"Over!" Johnny shouts. "We can't just leave now!"

"You can come back at seven a.m. tomorrow," she says.

"But we have a funeral to go to tomorrow," Johnny says.

"I'm sorry to hear that," she says, "but what would you like me to do? Visiting hours are over."

"This is ridiculous!" Johnny shouts, which makes his father jostle awake.

"It's okay, Johnny," his mother says. "We'll come back tomorrow."

"It's not like she's going anywhere," Clarissa says from her lap, which Johnny doesn't think she means as a joke, but if she does, it's not funny.

"Fine," Johnny says. "Let's go."

CLARISSA.

When the family gets home, everyone goes to their rooms. No one really says anything. A couple “Good nights” and “See you in the mornings,” but that’s it. No one has anything to say, Clarissa assumes. What a day. What a shitty day all around.

Before Clarissa brushes her teeth and washes her face, she goes into her closet and grabs the bottle of vodka and takes it with her into her bathroom. She unscrews the cap and pours it into the toilet and flushes it all away. No more. Ever again.

JOHNNY.

Johnny turns off his phone and decides to use his old clock radio alarm instead of the app on his phone. He doesn’t need to be getting any more phone calls. Tomorrow is going to be a long day.

Johnny leaves his door propped open, hoping that Wordsworth will come in, but he’s too exhausted to go look for him.

SAMUEL.

Samuel gathers himself into his bed, alone, with Skittles running the treadmill. Is this day finally over? he asks the ceiling.

Part Eight:

Revelations

JOHNNY.

When Johnny wakes up, he goes downstairs to make coffee. Wordsworth never showed up.

Johnny guesses he didn't deserve it. Johnny feels like death. He doesn't even want to see what he looks like in the mirror. He almost falls down the stairs.

Johnny gets to the kitchen and fills a filter with coffee and the machine with water. He fills the tea kettle with water and turns on the stove. He knows his mother's going to want tea. As he stands there waiting for the water to boil, he realizes he's only wearing his boxer briefs. This

would be fine if he was at college. Everyone just walks around half naked. But is this okay to do in my house? Probably not, but he's not going all the way back upstairs. Screw it. The sun's just coming up, and so he goes to the sliding glass doors to watch, even though the trees block most of it. He rubs his eyes as the light strains them and opens them as wide as he can. This is going to be a long day, he thinks.

The tea kettle goes off, and he walks to the kitchen, and out of nowhere his mother is behind him, which almost startles him except he's too hungover to be startled.

"Hi, Mom," he says.

"Today is going to be a long day," she says, and he can't help but think that he's heard this before.

"I know," he says. "I know."

CLARISSA.

Nothing from Blair. Probably nothing from Blair ever. Clarissa bets Blair's parents made her delete Clarissa's number. But Clarissa keeps texting her regardless, so she should have it.

Good. I don't want to talk to her anyway. But there's no way she meant that. She couldn't have.

Clarissa throws on her black pajama pants and a black tank top. She slept in her underwear. She never sleeps in her underwear. But her mother left the thermostat at around ninety. Clarissa goes down the hall and knocks on Samuel's door.

"What," he shouts.

"It's Clarissa."

"Come in," he says.

Clarissa opens the door, and Samuel's standing there in his suit, tying his tie in front of his mirror. "Samuel, what are you doing?" she asks.

"I'm getting ready for Uncle Patrick's funeral," he says.

"Are we going to that?" Clarissa asks.

"Aren't we?" he asks.

"I don't even know. I thought we'd be going to the hospital. I guess we'll have to ask Mom. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"Did the vodka help?"

"The vodka? Really? No! Why did you give me that?"

"I don't know. It's always made me feel better. I'm sorry you had a rough day."

"A rough day?" he shouts. "I'm ready to kill Bobby."

"Who?" Clarissa says. "Samuel, calm down. We have to worry about Mom."

"Fine," Samuel says.

Samuel buttons his suit jacket and follows Clarissa downstairs. Samuel's still wearing Johnny's pants. Clarissa hopes he doesn't trip and fall and send them to the floor. Then they'd be in the hospital, too. Which, perhaps, wouldn't be a bad thing.

When they reach the kitchen, Johnny's standing there in his underwear making coffee. Clarissa wonders about if she hadn't worn clothes. Turned this place into a whore house.

She wants to say, Gross! Put something on! but just says "I'll have a cup" instead. She sits down at the dining room table and drops her head on top of it.

SAMUEL.

“I’ll have coffee, too,” Samuel says.

“You don’t want tea, like usual?” Johnny asks.

“No, I don’t want goddamned tea,” Samuel says.

And then his mother turns around.

“I’m sorry, Mom,” Samuel says.

“Where did you hear language like that, my little boy?” their mother asks.

Samuel almost points his finger at Johnny. But then, he contemplates. And becomes angry. “I’m not a little boy, Mom,” he says. “I can say bad words. I didn’t mean for you to hear them, but I can say bad words.”

“I guess you’re reaching that age,” his mother says.

JOHNNY.

After his mother makes the family breakfast and everyone is all showered and got ready, Johnny, still in those stupid Dad MC Hammer pants, calls the hospital to inquire about Beth Ann. According to the nurse, Beth Ann is still unconscious, so the family decides to go to Uncle Patrick’s funeral.

On the way over, Johnny asks his father, “What do you think about me transferring to Rutgers. Or trying to get into Princeton? Or TCNJ?”

“Why would you want to do that, son?” he asks. “You don’t like California anymore?”

“I thought it would be better to be closer to home.”

“Well that’s an interesting idea,” he says. “And then I’d be able to watch over you better. Make sure you’re staying on track.”

“Well, there’s that. I just thought it would be better to be closer. In case you all needed anything. And with Beth Ann and all.”

“That’s awfully mature of you,” he says.

Johnny smiles a real, genuine smile—nothing sarcastic or cynical about it—for the first time in a long time.

CLARISSA.

As the family pulls up to the funeral home, Clarissa’s phone vibrates in her purse. She knows it’s Blair. It has to be Blair. But she can’t bear to look at it. She’ll look at it later. Or never. Maybe she’ll just delete it. She knows it’s going to be bad news. If she just ignores it, she won’t have to deal with it.

SAMUEL.

Samuel climbs out of the car, and the rest of the family follows behind him. For the first time in his life, he feels like a leader. He looks back and leads his family along, beckoning them. But before they get to the front door, his mother’s cell phone rings, and they all stop.

“Hello,” his mother says. “Yes, this is Georgette Braco.”

Johnny starts walking ahead, almost strong and proud. He doesn’t see everyone stop until he hears his mother.

“She is!” their mother shouts. “My God! Thank you, thank you!” She hangs up the phone and shouts, “Johnny! Back in the car, Johnny! Beth Ann is awake!”

CLARISSA.

On the way to the hospital, Clarissa decides she has to look at the text. If the news of Beth Ann coming out of a coma is any sign, perhaps this day won't be so bad, and Blair won't have bad news for her either. Or at least not horrible news. But then she thinks about balance. It seems like there's a balance about the world. Whenever something good happens, something bad immediately happens afterward. It's just the nature of things. Nothing can stay in the same level. There's always ups and downs.

BETH ANN

What happened? Beth Ann asks herself. Is she dead? She assumes she's not dead because she's in too much pain to be dead. How did she get here? Elephants. Why does she keep seeing images of elephants? Her father and elephants.

JOHNNY.

As the family storms into the hospital, Johnny feels like he's having déjà vu. Except that they really did just do the same thing the day before. But with different emotions. First they ran in fear. Now in relief. Or even joy. And this time they skip the front desk and run straight upstairs.

CLARISSA.

It's killing Clarissa that she didn't look at the text message. But she can't look now. Dammit.

Dammit. Dammit.

BETH ANN.

Did I ride an elephant with my father when I was a little girl? This is the only thought reverberating inside Beth Ann's head. Why is she thinking about that? Were they at a circus? She thinks she was at a circus. She thinks she rode an elephant with her father.

SAMUEL.

When everyone gets to Beth Ann's room, she's sitting up in bed, and there's a doctor checking her machines. Samuel's glad she's better. He wishes he could feel better. But he thinks he can be within time. Maybe.

JOHNNY.

Beth Ann looks a million times better. She might even look happy. Johnny doesn't think he's ever seen her look happy at all. "Glad you're back with us, sis," he says.

"Yeah, it's good to be back. I'm still pretty fuzzy."

"That's very natural," the doctor says. "We're going to have to evaluate you for a while to see if there has been any damage. So far everything looks good, but we'll still have to run some tests."

His mother rushes over and hugs her as soon as Samuel backs away. She's sobbing.

"It's okay, Mom," Beth Ann says.

"Where were you going?" her mother keeps asking her. "Where were you going? Don't ever go again."

CLARISSA.

Clarissa's mother is grasping onto Beth Ann, so Clarissa goes over to the other side of the bed.

"I'm glad you're okay," Clarissa says. "And I'm sorry. I'm sorry for acting like a jerk."

“It’s okay,” she says. “I’m sorry, too.”

Her father comes over and that’s Clarissa’s cue to back off. Finally she can check her message. She pulls out her phone even though she knows this is the worst time and it’s inappropriate, but she has to read it. And it’s from Blair. Six words. *I can’t see you anymore. Sorry.* And that’s it.

SAMUEL.

There’s so much commotion over Beth Ann’s return that Samuel sneaks to the back. He’s hiding there even though he doesn’t want to. But then Johnny comes over.

“Samuel, I need to talk to you,” he says.

“About what?” Samuel asks.

“Just come outside,” Johnny says.

And even before they’re out the door, Johnny’s already talking. “Samuel, I know I’m not around much anymore, and I know I’ve never been around much for you. And I guess I’m not really much of a role model. But I’ve seen the world. My friends here are totally messed up, and the people at school are worse. Don’t get messed up in the wrong shit. I’ve seen the wrong shit, and it’s nothing to do. You know what I mean, right?”

BETH ANN.

“Dad?” she asks. It almost hurts her head to speak, but she does anyway. “Did I ever ride an elephant? Like at a circus?”

“An elephant? Yeah, we did ride an elephant when you were really young. Why do you ask?”

“I just have this image of it stuck in my head.”

“That was pretty fun, huh?”

“Yeah,” Beth Ann says. “It was.”

And then her mother’s phone rings, and she leaves the room.

CLARISSA.

Outside of the hospital, Clarissa sits on the curb and sulks. She feels like she should be crying, but she can’t. She takes her phone from her purse and reads the text message over and over again:

I can’t see you anymore. Sorry.

I can’t see you anymore. Sorry.

I can’t see you anymore. Sorry.

She hits the CALL button, and the phone begins to ring.

“I can’t talk to you,” Blair says.

“Blair!” Clarissa shouts. “Are you okay?”

“No, Clarissa. I’m not okay. I feel terrible. And I’m not allowed to talk to you.”

“Why?”

“Because my parents said I can’t.”

“But is that it? Do you still *want to* talk to me?”

“I don’t think so. This is all too much.”

“But you’re my best friend!”

“You’ll find a new best friend.”

“Do you really mean that?”

“I just can’t see you anymore. You’ve gotten me in so much trouble.”

“I’m not going to drink anymore.”

“Well, that’s great.”

“Can I talk to your parents? I made a mistake!”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. Look, Clarissa, I have to go. Goodbye.”

And the line goes dead.

JOHNNY.

Johnny and Samuel sit across from each other at a table in a common room. There’s this terrible muzak playing, and Johnny wishes he could turn it off. It’s supposed to be soothing, but it’s just annoying. And eerie.

“How long are you going to be home for?” Samuel asks him.

“Until after Christmas at least. Maybe until after New Year’s. We’ll see.”

“And then you’re going back to California?”

“For now,” Johnny says. “I might transfer to somewhere around here. Maybe Rutgers. Then I can be closer to you all. Maybe I’ll even stay at home and commute. It’s pretty close.”

“I’d like that,” Samuel says.

“Might be nice to be home,” Johnny says. “I could focus better.” Johnny leans back and attempts to cross his ankles, but his shoe gets caught in the cuff. “And maybe I wouldn’t lose my pants.”

Samuel laughs.

“So what do you do? Like, for fun?”

“I’ve been playing football after school.”

“Oh yeah? Maybe I could teach you some things. Some plays. Do you know what a screen is?”

“No.”

“We could work on stuff like that.”

BETH ANN.

“I’m sorry I…” Beth Ann begins to say to her father, but she cuts herself off as Joshua walks in the room behind her mother. “What are you doing here?” she asks.

Joshua keeps his distance, just moving inside the doorway. Her mother comes closer to her. “I called him, honey,” she says. “He drove all the way here to see you.”

“But…” Beth Ann doesn’t really want to see Joshua. It’s his fault that she ended up in the hospital in the first place. If he would’ve just left her alone… Her head is pounding.

“We’ll leave you two alone,” her mother says. “C’mon, Joseph.”

After her parents leave, Joshua walks closer to Beth Ann’s bed.

“Just. Stay there,” Beth Ann says. “What do you want?”

“I wanted to make sure you were okay,” Joshua says. His hands keep fidgeting like he doesn’t know where to put them.

“I’ll be fine,” Beth Ann says.

“Look, I don’t know why you’re pushing me away. I mean, I guess I know—”

“You *guess*?”

“No, I know why. But I didn’t mean to hurt you. I didn’t even really mean to sleep with that guy. It just sort of happened. I wasn’t thinking.”

“You must’ve been thinking something. And in *my* bed? Why?”

“It just happened. I don’t know. I’m never going to do that again.”

“Why should I believe that?”

“Because I don’t want to. It was stupid. I wasn’t even that into it. I want to be with you.”

“Well, I think it’s a bit too late for that,” Beth Ann says. “You can’t just undo it. You have to deal with the decisions—and the mistakes—you make. And this one was too much.”

“I just want to forget about it.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Well, maybe we can just be friends for a while? And see what happens. I already moved all my stuff out.”

“Why did you do that?” Beth Ann asks and then asks herself why she said that.

“Well, because you told me I had to.”

“Yeah, that makes sense.”

“So do you think we can just be friends for now?”

“I’ll think about it,” Beth Ann says.

“That’s understandable.”

“Well, that’s the best I can do.”

“No. I know.”

“So what now?”

“I guess I’m going to go back to New York. My parents are still out of the country. I’m staying at Chris’s house.”

“Why don’t you stay here for a bit? My parents would like that.”

“You mean it?”

“Yes.”

CLARISSA.

Clarissa takes the elevator upstairs, preparing to go back into Beth Ann’s room. She doesn’t know what else to do. She pretty much feels broken. Or lost. One of those. She’s not sure. When she gets out of the elevator, she hears Johnny’s voice: “Hey, you. Get over here.” She turns around and Johnny and Samuel are sitting at a table.

“What do you want?” she asks.

“Just come talk,” Johnny says.

“Johnny, I’ve had enough today. And yesterday.”

“I know,” he says. “Just come talk.”

“It’s okay, Clarissa,” Samuel says.

“Fine,” Clarissa says. She trudges over to the table and slumps into a chair.

“You okay?” Johnny asks.

“I’m fine,” she says.

“So what’s with you drinking all this vodka? And feeding some to Samuel?”

“Johnny, this is not what I need right now. I don’t need to be yelled at.”

“I’m not yelling. I’m just asking.”

“It’s a long story that I don’t want to talk about right now. But I’m not doing it anymore.”

“Well that’s a good thing.”

“You drink more than I do anyway,” Clarissa says. She’s getting angry. Especially because she’s already changed.

“Do I?”

“You drink every night,” she says.

“You don’t?”

“Not anymore.”

“Uh-huh. Well, just be careful, okay. And don’t involve *this* kid.”

“I wouldn’t ever hurt Samuel. You ought to know that.”

“I do.”

“We should go see how Beth Ann is doing,” Samuel says.

SAMUEL.

When they get back into Beth Ann’s room, someone Samuel doesn’t recognize is seated next to Beth Ann and holding her hand. His parents are on opposite sides of the bed, his mother beside the guy.

“Who’s that?” Samuel whispers to Clarissa.

“I don’t know,” she whispers back.

And as if Beth Ann can hear them, she says, “Johnny, Clarissa, Samuel, this is my boyfriend, Joshua.”

“Hi, Joshua,” Samuel says.

Johnny grunts. “How come everyone around here has such formal names? Can I just call you ‘Josh’?”

“That would be fine,” Joshua says and laughs.

“How are you feeling, Beth Ann?” Samuel asks.

“I’m feeling better,” she says. “I think I’m ready to go home.”

“It’d be nice to have you home,” Clarissa says.

“Will Joshua be coming with us?” Samuel asks, thinking it’d be fun to someone else around the house.

Before Joshua can answer, Beth Ann says, “Yes. Yes, I think he is. As soon as I can get out of here.”

“I hope it’s soon,” Joseph says. “I’m starving.”

CLARISSA.

It’s been less than an hour since Clarissa has talked to Blair, but she’s already feeling better.

Maybe it’s because she’s been able to talk to Johnny and Beth Ann and Samuel and her parents without anyone screaming. Maybe it’s because she thinks Blair will talk to her in time. Or maybe it’s because she’ll find someone else. A girl who wants to kiss her and wants to kiss her back.

Clarissa takes her phone from her purse, turns it off, and drops it back into her purse, among the comb and the compact and the lipstick and the water bottle that’s not full of vodka. Everything must continue. Everything must go on.

Vita.

Thomas Kiczula, Jr. grew up in the suburbs of New Jersey, which drastically affected his writing style and content as well as hairstyle. After graduating from South Plainfield High School, he went on to pursue a Bachelor's degree in Creative Writing at Susquehanna University, where he learned to write realistically and to leave out the tricks. After four years of workshop classes, he was prepared for graduate school and was accepted into the MFA program at the University of New Orleans. His degree nearly complete, Thomas works at Drago's in the Hilton as a server, slinging charbroiled oysters, and plans on pursuing a job in teaching or publishing.