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Ghosts That We Knew

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Ghosts That We Knew

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, Fiction

by

Cara Cotter

B.A. Canisius College, 2010

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Made Mythic

Once, a springtime girl, beloved daughter to gods, believed herself untouchable.

—Arianna Miller, *Creative Response for CLA204*

Inch by inch she's turning into gold. Ari's Intro to Classical Myths class finished their Transformations unit last week, all about mortals turned into stone or stars or crawling things, with the overarching message they got what they deserved. Change as punishment, change as reward, meted out accordingly— except every once in a while. Sometimes someone like Midas' daughter took the crossfire for another's foolishness, for being in the wrong place with the wrong people, for just not being swift or smart or strong enough to get herself out of a stupid situation.

“Arianna? Still there?” her dad asks, for the fifth time this phone call. “Did I lose you?”

Her foot's asleep. She shifts from her cross-legged seat on her dorm floor to peel off her sock. She flexes the foot with her hands. Maybe it's the way her nail polish catches the fluorescent light, but Ari would swear her toes glint of yellow metal.

She doesn't care. There are worse feelings than numbness, worse endings than statuary,

worse fathers than Midas. Professor Walsh said the other day that society collectively remembers the Midas story as being about greed, when the focus is really foolishness. Ari can't remember when she started thinking of her father as short-sighted instead of as a god. It hurts.

"I'm here, Daddy... I don't know what you want me to say about it. He's from Pennsylvania, his family doesn't read the *Plain Dealer*, so it won't... shame him like you think."

"It'll be online, and it's read in University Heights— that's our target group."

Dad keeps talking. Ari's trying to think of the kindest way to tell him most college students she knows don't bother reading the campus paper, let alone the Cleveland newspaper. She still doesn't know the name of the Toronto paper, and it's been the better part of two months since her restart here. But her roommate Gina breezes in, waving absently as she starts to lay out clothes on her bed, and Ari's throat turns to silent gold, too.

Ari wriggles and curls her toes, trying to get feeling back. "Okay," she says. If she just keeps agreeing with everything, he'll let her go.

"This is the right thing, you know," Dad says. He has a carrying voice, and Gina's bed is only a few feet from Ari's. She hears the other end of Gina's calls all the time. "It's what you said you wanted."

She doesn't reply. She doesn't know how to turn down her phone volume during a call. Walking out with the phone to the back stairwell nobody uses, like she usually does to take a call when Gina's around, could look weird. She prays, to any god that'll come through, that Dad won't say anything that'll make her fairly nosy roommate ask any questions.

"You want to talk to Austin?" Dad says at last.

"Not tonight." She hasn't spoken to her brother in a week, but even without her roommate in the mix, she's done so much listening tonight she no longer has any energy to talk.

And Austin always stays silent now, waiting for Ari's words the one time she wishes he'd shoot off his lightning mouth. Making her own brother treat her the way he would a house of cards or a Jenga tower, like it'll stay up only if he hardly touches and barely breathes near it, is perhaps the worst part of what Eric did to her. "I've got homework. Night, Dad. Love you."

"Love you too, my baby," he says. "Try not to—"

Ari hangs up. He'll think she just didn't hear him continue.

Gina turns around from her pile of jeans and glittering tank tops. "You've got a lot of homework again? Wow, remind me never to take a Classics course."

Nineteen's the legal drinking age in Ontario, and Gina seems to be out at least four nights a week in The Annex or on King Street. Luckily, she seems to have given up inviting Ari along.

Ari fakes a rueful smile before swooping up her keys, ID and a few coins. "Be back."

"Heading anywhere good?"

"Just getting a snack."

Ari breathes easier out in the hall. She pads right past the vending machine on her floor, down the stairs to the one in the first floor lobby.

Ontario might be another country, but it's only a few letters and Lake Erie away from Ohio, and Ari only really gets that foreign, not-in-Kansas-anymore feeling when using the money or looking at the candy bars that home doesn't have. She pulls the coin dollars out of her sweatpants pocket and buys a bag of Lays' with labels subtitled in French.

She takes her *Sel et Vinaigre* chips outside to eat them under the stars, which is better than eating them in front of Gina the health nut. Disappointingly, Ari's not under a new sky here at University of Toronto. Less than two hundred miles from home the constellations seem aligned exactly the same. What she can see of them, anyway. U of T's a downtown campus, and

so the stars are barely visible pinpricks, overpowered by the city lights, especially the CN Tower and the changing colors blinking their way up its floors.

When Mom was alive, she'd sit with Ari and Austin on their deck and point out the constellations she knew, only the basics—Orion's Belt, the great W of Cassiopeia, the Big Dipper and its Mini-Me, and the Seven Sisters. Ari remembers them looking so bright and clear it was like they were Etch-a-Sketched on the sky.

Since then Ari's forgotten how to find the Seven Sisters, and she never can seem to trace the Big Dipper to the Little, even at home in the suburbs where the stars shine stronger. Even there they look dimmer than when she was young, but she can't trust her memory.

She doesn't stay out long, sitting on a bench alone at night, even so close to the dorms. She's overly aware now that should something ever happen, her dad would find out in the worst way she wasn't where he thought, safely in for the night.

When she stands up, she realizes that her one foot's bare. The one sock she took off must still be in her dorm. It's worrying, how long it took her to notice.

* * *

Ari oversleeps her Celtic Mythology class the next morning. She wakes up in time to look at her failed alarm and realize she could make it only a quarter hour into the lecture, but she turns her face back into her pillow.

If she's not careful, she's going to end up failing Celtic Mythology on absences alone. It's too bad, since if the professor wasn't so bloodless, if his voice wasn't so monotonous, she might even prefer the fierce women and creative revenge of Celtic myth to the Greek.

Arianna's only taking four courses—the two mythologies and two drama. She's never studied mythology before now, though her mom always read to her from the beautifully

illustrated *D'Aulaires' Book of Greek Myths*, and Ari successfully used monologues from *Medea* and *Antigone* as original choices for last year's auditions. Back when she wanted to be a star.

She has to start going to bed early if she ever expects to make her morning class. But it's too hard to just lie down trying to sleep, imagining waking again to a weight and panting breath rank with beer and vomit. Ari spends as much of her nights as possible plowing through episode after episode of whatever mindless TV show she can find on her computer. Lately she's into *Young Hercules*, which aired Saturday mornings on Fox Kids in the nineties and starred a young Ryan Gosling. One guy in her Intro to Classical Myths class actually looks a lot like Ryan Gosling did on the show. He's got the floppy, straw-colored hair and dark eyebrows, though a broader nose than Young Hercules. He makes goofy faces a lot and seems somewhat perpetually perplexed. He's also got a French Canadian accent the real Ryan Gosling lacks. Ari likes listening to him in class, though she's never actually spoken to him.

Ari hasn't missed one Greek myth class yet, and she's perfectly punctual again today. She sits next to a girl named Suzy, who speaks up so often Ari hopes the professor will fail to notice the girl next to Suzy never says a word. Young Hercules rushes in late, lifts his hand in apology to the professor, and spreads papers all across his desk.

Professor Walsh acknowledges him with a nod but doesn't pause her lecture. "These stories are fundamental archetypes: the story of Icarus may be read as representative of a father's greatest fear for his son, that youthful recklessness and hubris will result in his death. The story of Persephone reflects a mother's primal fear for her daughter..."

Ari wonders about a father's fear for his daughter but stays silent, drawing five-point stars all over her notebook paper.

Professor Walsh trails off, clearly waiting for a response. The professor's a dainty

woman, but the way her eyes shift behind her cat's eye glasses as she scrutinizes her students reminds Ari of a big predator, picking out the weak ones of the herd.

"Getting carted away by some hottie?" Suzy suggests without raising her hand. "It's like the ancient equivalent of getting on some guy's motorcycle. Mothers are afraid we'll get ourselves killed hanging out with the dangerous guy."

Except Persephone didn't choose to get on anything; she was grabbed. Ari would like to comment on this, but she doesn't want to make it seem too personal. Her first essay for the course, which used up the creative response option offered for one of the classes' five papers, has worried her from the moment it left her hand.

"That or it could be that it's *rape*," a guy in the back says.

Ari keeps statue-like.

"If that's supposed to be every mother's worst fear, I have issues with that," a dark-haired girl near the front of class says. She's an actual Classics major, unlike the majority of the thirty-some members of the class taking it as an elective, and she speaks with ardent certainty that painfully reminds Arianna of how she used to be in Theater classes. "Icarus dies, Persephone lives. Even if Hades truly raped her, as opposed to forcibly wedding her, by equating those two stories, you're suggesting the rape of a daughter is as bad as the death of a son, and even within an ancient Greek worldview that's not right. If she killed herself out of shame or something, or was murdered, then maybe I could see why it'd be the archetype of a mother's worst fears, but most mothers, at least, in any era, are more concerned with their daughter's lives than virtue."

"But doesn't she die?" Young Hercules asks.

Ari really has to learn his name.

"Metaphorically, whatever, point is, she's taken to the Underworld. She gets to come

back, but she's a living dead girl for a while there."

"No, she's a *goddess*. She can't die. And come on, rape in this context is used more as a word for abduction than actual, y'know, rape," another student says. "Isn't it?"

Ari hasn't heard Professor Walsh tell anyone they're right, but she also never outright says they're wrong, either. "While used more loosely, its present day meaning may still be applicable. I look forward to your individual interpretations after you read the Homeric Hymn to Demeter for this Thursday."

Ari puts her books back in her messenger bag, her heartbeat in her ears like something in her head is ricocheting around, ready to burst free. All the words she's clamped down might be forming another, ideal her, one who's bold again and says the right thing and knows how to get out of nasty situations at the proper time. She thinks this other self might split her scalp and bound out of her skull at any second, like Athena springing out of the head of Zeus.

"Miss Miller? Could I speak with you for a moment?"

Shit. Young Hercules, walking ahead, overhears the professor and shoots Ari a sympathetic grin, mouthing 'Good luck' before strolling out the door. Her shell of gold melts in the sunlight of that smile.

She can't catch her breath. Not in a good way. She's suddenly almost overbalanced by the weight of her questions and suspicions. She wants to know if he's straight, if he's single, if she could trust him, if he would judge her, if he'll never be anything to her, if he could be her everything, if he's as nice a guy as he looks, if he's ever made mistakes that hurt others. Eric looked like a nice guy, too, and Eric's eyes were desperately sorry the last time she saw him, but one of the few bits Ari remembers was how dead and glazed Eric's eyes looked That Night, and it's all she'll ever see when she thinks of him. She can't help superimposing those dead eyes onto

the face of her Young Hercules, and wonder if he's ever looked so chilling, if he, too, has the potential to be dangerous in that way, what circumstances could get him there.

"Miss Miller?"

"Here," Ari murmurs, breathing heavily and feeling boneless, like one of the Water Baby dolls she had as a little girl.

She's half a foot taller than Professor Walsh, but she still feels like prey as the dainty woman tilts her head to the side. "I'm worried about your participation grade. This isn't primary school, where I'm going to call on you and force you to speak, but discussion is an essential element of this course. I had you written off as one of my sleepwalkers—there's a few in every class—but your creative response was above and beyond. You've clearly been reading ahead."

"Oh," Ari says, swallowing. Her throat churns like her stomach, and she fights off the shakes with effort. "What is it you want me to do?"

"You'll need to speak up in the future, but to go some way towards making it up, would you be willing to share your creative piece with the class on Thursday?"

The actress in Ari puffs with delight. Some new, yet unidentified, part shrivels. "What, read it?"

"Preferably, I would hand out photocopies of a section or two. You would be welcome to introduce it, though." Professor Walsh wets the tips of her fingers against her tongue and reaches for the corner of the paper.

Ari pulls her words back to her, trying to guess what part Walsh's eyes are flicking over.

"Likely from your Persephone's decision to seek revenge right up to her escape from the Underworld into modern times to bring on the advent of global warming. A day more of spring each year as her heart thaws." Professor Walsh looks up from Ari's response. "Clever concept."

The flowers in the hair of the springtime girl were swapped for precious metals and gems of the Rich One's underground realm, and collar necklaces placed on her throat, bangles on her white arms and delicate ankles. Her once light step was weighed down. If she stepped into the Rivers Styx or Lethe, she would sink and learn if a divinity can drown in Death—perhaps she'd go to a place in the stars. No, not Lethe, the River of Oblivion, the memory-killer. She needs to remember Hades' sulfuric breath and roaming hands as she grows colder, becomes accustomed to her lot here as one may become accustomed to anything, knowing each day it will get harder to keep revenge in her still-beating heart. Better any memory, however despicable, to a white blank page in her mind.

Ari may have gotten a bit melodramatic. “You liked it?” she says, hand at her throat.

“It's a new perspective. Your name would be kept anonymous, of course, if you wished.”

Like the article her dad had gotten in the paper slamming her old school for inaction. She wonders if her response would be as false an anonymity as the article, or if she would truly be able to remain mysterious in this class of thirty-odd students, where no one really knows her yet.

Professor Walsh hesitates, adjusting the glasses that seem aimed for the ‘sexy librarian’ look but decidedly miss. “Unless the nature of the subject is too personal...?”

Ari's mind whirs and chops. “Yes,” she says, suddenly. “My cousin...this bad situation happened to her, and I couldn't be sicker about it.” It's true, because her nausea's back full force, and she would be just as outraged if it happened to a sister, cousin, a friend, so why not recast her role while she can? She'd rather play any other part in this story. “That's where it all,” she gestures at the paper, “comes from. So I—I can't.” She's not ready, not willing to sit there and listen to the class critique, perhaps even tear her paper apart.

Professor Walsh meets Ari's eyes, and Ari feels she's being seen through. “My dear,” she

says quietly. "I am very sorry."

"So I'd rather you... not share it," Ari says, struggling to keep from squirming. "I'll try to say something, on Thursday, though."

"Please do."

"Can I go?"

As soon as Professor Walsh nods, Ari runs away to the nearest empty ladies' bathroom where she sits on the radiator and tries to steady her breaths. She wonders if this is a panic attack and if so, resents it. It was half a year ago now and in another country, even if the douchebag isn't dead, and it seems more and more like a story that happened to someone else. Especially when she tells it that way, especially since she basically doesn't even remember it. Basically.

She supposes no one remembers it, since Eric swore he'd blacked out, didn't remember a thing, broke down in tears at the school hearing. She felt like a Fury at the time, when he got off with only a suspension, was all too happy to let her dad push civil prosecution. She didn't see, then, that the justice and privacy she wanted would be mutually exclusive.

She wants to let it go now. She wants to cry and be done with it, but since her mom died she's been short on tears for any lesser grief, even this one. Ari can make herself cry, but they'd be as phony as the rainwater "tears" that run through the porous Weeping Rock, off on some mountain near Greece, a rock that myths said had once been a mourning mother.

Ari scrolls through the contacts on her phone, searching for someone to call. She's deleted so many numbers, everyone who said *At least it was Eric and not someone gross*. (He wasn't a frat boy or a geek, not a centaur or bull or swan, only an ass on the soccer team who thought she was playing hard to get when she said she wasn't interested). Or *Well, were you drunk?* in the same matter-of-fact manner as the nurses at the campus clinic.

Ari's heard so many versions of the story now she can hardly remember her own. Even when first telling it, the event slid away from her, mercury too quick and molten to seem substantial. She'd done her best not to embellish the hazy facts, but she couldn't say the same for all the would-be Homers on her campus who took her story and made it theirs. Made *her* theirs, too. They talked about her as a self-righteous bitch who'd been asking for it, a wounded rag doll, an overdramatic attention-whore, dozens of roles that had no more in common with her actual self than any part she'd donned in acting class or on stage.

Her mother's long-dormant cell phone number remains on Ari's new phone because Ari couldn't bear to delete it from the SIM card. Impulsively, she calls it but only gets an error message since she hadn't dialed the area code. She doesn't bother trying again.

She's debating trying her theater friends, although they're all crazy with play practice and will berate her again for not auditioning at U of T, when a text from her brother pops up.

She can't call him to cry to, not when she so misses him looking up to her. And then, secretly, she has a tiny seed of distrust. Her brother's still only in high school, but he's got a cocky side; he's been blackout drunk before. She refuses to think her brother could ever be an Eric to some girl. But. For all that Austin offered to kill Eric for her, a little too seriously, Ari kept wondering how much lurking empathy he might have for the guys' side of things.

Eventually she opens Austin's text. *How's the true North strong and free?*

Same as home this time of year, she types. *The trees are changing. I'm wearing sweaters. I'm comparing myself to Greek goddesses like a crazy person.* On second look, she deletes it without sending and leaves Austin without a reply.

* * *

On Thursday Ari's class discusses Persephone—daughter of the earth goddess, bride of the ruler of the dead. The descriptions of her in later stories, when she's Queen of the Underworld, make her out to be frigid, remote, turned from a flower girl to a woman of cold metal. She thaws enough to grant heroes like Orpheus one chance and no more. Arianna prefers her own idea of a patient Persephone, waiting for opportunity to fully escape and revenge herself on her captor, to a Persephone who has simply succumbed to her time in the dark.

Suzy, next to Ari, has her own image of Persephone. "I think she must have fallen in love with him," she says earnestly. "Why else eat the pomegranate seeds? She knows that to eat the food means to stay in the Underworld. And she has it pretty good in the end: she can be queen *and* go visit her mom and enjoy sunshine. She *brings* sunshine to the dark, misunderstood king of the Underworld. It's practically an ancient Greek romance novel."

Oh God, not romance novels. Ari can't bear them anymore, since the girl in question always seems to be saying no and actually meaning yes. Whatever anyone else might think of her, whatever she can't remember, no part of her ever meant yes to Eric.

"There actually is some scholarship theorizing to that effect," Professor Walsh says, "And certainly there is evidence of an ancient chthonic cult which perceived Persephone as making a willful choice to stay, however unhappy most stories make her seem."

"Hades wasn't happy about being put in charge of the Underworld either," the dark-haired Classics major says. "Persephone does seem to make his life more bearable."

Ari swallows hard. She lifts her hand, although everyone else seems to just call out. "Clearly he wants her," she says, voice scraping. "Nothing in the text indicates she wants him. The hymn says she's suffering, that she rejoices when she thinks she gets to go for good."

"The hymn's only one version of the story," Suzy says, sharply, swiveling to face her.

“There’s room for interpretation, you know, and my way could be just as valid. Ultimately, it’s Persephone’s choice to give in. She’s a—”

If Suzy says ‘asking for it’, Ari will hit her.

“—ccepting it.”

“Our text discusses other versions,” Ari says. “In some, Hades tricks her into eating the seeds, in some she’s pressured, in some she makes a naïve mistake. I didn’t see anything—”

“Look,” Suzy says, rolling her eyes. “He’s a god, and there’s no indication he’s one of the ugly ones, so tell me, what’s really so bad about it?”

“Clearly, you’ve never been raped.” It takes Ari a moment to recognize her own voice.

Suzy flushes crimson. Her mouth parts, likely prepared to shoot back, ‘Oh, and you have?’ Ari doesn’t know what Suzy might see in her face, but she sees the exact second when Suzy freezes. Her mouth closes.

Ari turns back towards the front of the room, zoning out everything but the blackboard, folding her hands to hide their tremble. She wants to walk right out of class, but she holds onto her cool. It’s been a while since she’s been on stage, but she remembers the art of playing a part.

Professor Walsh changes the topic to other chthonic deities. Ari stays out of focus, but she manages to offer up one comment on Hecate, pretending the professor’s her only audience. She doesn’t notice class is ending until those around her get to their feet. Gracefully, she grabs her messenger bag and rises. She nods goodbye to Professor Walsh, whose face tells Ari plainly she doesn’t buy the story she gave her about a cousin for a rabbit’s heartbeat.

She passes Young Hercules on the way out. He’s holding the door. “Hey,” she says.

“Hey,” he says back, looking even more perplexed than usual.

She keeps walking, using the sweeping stride she would use if playing a queen. She

doesn't look back at him, even though she'd like to see if he's looking after her, if she can read in his face any reaction to what she's voiced in class. Not words she intended to let slip before someone she likes. But Ari figures if he scares off that easily, she wouldn't want him anyways. Why settle for less than the sort of guy who'd follow you into the Underworld and back?

The second Ari walks out of the building, she breaks away into a sprint. Her breathing's steady, but she feels the burn of tears. Maybe they'll tell stories about her now, the girl who hinted right in class of an intense past. Yet she feels somehow free, let loose back into spring, even though Toronto is in its autumn beauty. This campus, after all, is awfully big. She stops at an open grassy spot to reach for her phone, her brother's number ready on her rosy fingertips. While it rings, she stares up at the blue sky and its thinly stretched clouds, wonders what she would wish if she spotted the evening's first star.

Wake

The same ghost followed all of them, straight through eighth grade at St. Melania's and on to their scattering amongst local high schools. Bobby Berenson didn't seem to know he was supposed to be dead and thirteen forever or simply didn't care. They didn't remember him as much of a rule-breaker in life, only ever in trouble for talking through class, not like smart-aleck Evan or Jimmy, who monthly got the whole class assigned five-hundred-word essays on the importance of being polite. Yet Bobby daily defied the universe to show up in chemistry or trig class in the corners of their eyes.

When they let their heads follow their eyes for a proper look, the chair to the left or right was empty or filled by someone else, Richard, Mike maybe, even Jill, who wore her hair cut close. The class tried to dismiss those sightings, but then, in high school hallways, they'd spot the back of his head, as familiar as family's after eight years in classes with him. He'd dash away like he was late if they tried to catch up, or Bobby would turn around and be some other seventeen-year-old entirely, with a thick neck that should have made him impossible to mistake for a dead boy. The C last names, Cartwright and Coniglio, Connelly and Cellino, who'd sat

behind Bobby longer and more frequently than anyone else, would be unshakably sure for that moment that it was Bobby's head, hair still spiraling to the far right of his crown and trickling from the nape of his neck to his collar like a fine railroad track.

Sometimes he was in the locker room, or on the other local high school's baseball team, an outfielder whom the ball never went near. They'd look out their windows some mornings and see him passing one of their houses on a run. Sometimes he'd even wave up at them.

They tried to think it was only a look-a-like, but the sunrise jogger even ran like Bobby Berenson, elbows out and head tilted back, staring at the sky instead of his toes.

None of them mentioned seeing Bobby to each other, much less to anyone else. Nobody wanted to be marked as the crazy kid in high school, spending the next few years with the counselors patting their hands and blinking sympathetically or worrying about whether "Who ya gonna call?" jokes would follow them to college. And, really, they didn't mind. Bobby wasn't something eerie. The guy who might have been his twin, delusion or not, was just the same sturdy kid Bobby had been, five inches taller, still with sleepy eyes too slitty to tell their color. He didn't look like he was allergic to anything.

Their year, Bobby's year, had been a large class for St. Melania's, a full twenty-five in the grade. Twenty-three for eighth grade after Bobby died and Chelsea transferred out. They'd passed colds to each other, especially in first and kindergarten when they planted smooches indiscriminately and shared their grubby glue-sticks. They'd talked through school masses and rolled their eyes at each other through Phonics and Spelling, later Social Studies and Literature. They had birthday parties, for years divided by gender, and with at least two of the boys for laser tag and three of the girls for sleepovers always uninvited. The cliques stemmed from nearness, mostly, shared neighborhoods or bus lines, cemented by family friendships, parents who

barbequed or even vacationed together, little siblings who had play-dates.

Bobby was invited to all the boys' birthday parties, and the girls' too, when their moms allowed mixed celebrations. None of them lived in his neighborhood, though he invited a group of the boys over frequently to play street hockey or Super Smash Bros. on the Nintendo Gamecube along with his backyard buddies.

In the summer he'd call up a few lucky boys from his class and lead them on expeditions into the woods behind his house, filled with enough greenery to make it an adventure but still within hearing of the highway, making it impossible to get lost. There was a sledding hill up there, too, that they'd hike up to in winter. Years later, on windy August nights and January days of perfect powder, the boys still dreamed about those woods and Bobby's backyard.

There were a lot of things that could have gone wrong there and then. A neck or leg could've snapped sledding; one of them might've gotten Lyme disease from the ticks their mothers warned about. But danger never touched them out there. And it wasn't as if listening to his mother could have saved Bobby.

After all, he hadn't done anything wrong, only asked a girl over. With permission, even. It wasn't his fault he died.

They supposed it wasn't Chelsea's fault, either, that she'd killed him.

Relatives from Ohio or Pennsylvania called when they read the little blurb that made the national news. None of the kids answered the phone for weeks, waiting for a parent or sister or the machine to take it. They only had to hang up on calls for a little over a week, before it was forgotten outside of town.

It was big news in the local *Bee*.

Boy, 13, died of a severe allergic reaction after kissing his girlfriend, who had consumed

peanut-based products earlier that day.

The girls thought it might have easily been one of them, instead of Chelsea. They'd gone to the movies in groups; it was chance it was Chelsea who ended up sitting next to Bobby in the dark to talk through the whole show. None of the girls remembered, either, if they had known Bobby was allergic. Maybe they recalled that in first grade he didn't participate in snack time, but from then on he'd never seemed to hesitate at taking anyone's homemade birthday treat.

Most of the boys knew, vaguely, since Mrs. Berenson made jelly sandwiches for his lunch, crusts cut off, and got nervous about the woods and other possible allergies. Most of them hadn't been kissed yet, and some delayed dating a while, hesitated before dipping their heads to some girl's. They no longer tuned out their mothers' warnings about pollen, ticks, poison oak.

Not one of the girls or the boys spoke to Chelsea that August, after everything happened. After some weeks had gone by, their parents had tried to push them into get-togethers with her, like play-dates from years before. Chelsea had even called a few of the girls she was closer with, but they'd mouthed 'no's' at the family member who'd answered the phone or said to say they weren't there. Loud enough, sometimes, that Chelsea perhaps heard them on the other end. She usually hung up before hearing the parents' excuses.

It wasn't like any one of them had spent much time with Chelsea earlier that summer. She'd been burning her days with Bobby. The ones who worked as junior lifeguards then had spotted the two constantly together at the pool, toes tracing eddies into the water and nudging shoulders. *You stop it. No, you. You.* They'd pushed each other in and gone racing out of the community pool grounds, wet, bare feet coating with the dull, brown dust of the baseball diamonds he chased her over, out into the glen surrounding the park.

They made up the rest. Maybe Bobby caught her, then, and the two found themselves

skin to skin, almost fourteen and feeling so much more than kids. Maybe that was the start of feeling more than friends.

No one that age was supposed to die in summer.

They could all practically feel the choked gasp, him pulling back—at once or after a while?— and the confusion, as his cheeks swelled from a usual roundness he didn't need to shave yet to lumpy red spots. Maybe he managed to mutter "I can't breathe," she at first not getting it. A scream for help would've had to come from her throat because it couldn't come from his closed one. Still they could only imagine. Chelsea had lived it. She'd grazed death, brought it even. By chance, of course, but so luckless a chance she seemed cursed.

And so she scared them much more than ghost-Bobby ever could.

They didn't say as much to her, though, or each other. After what happened with Bobby and Chelsea, the rest of them clung closer than any other St. Mel's class— but silently. They got together to watch numbing old favorites, marathons of *Are You Afraid of the Dark?* or *Legends of the Hidden Temple*, Disney cartoons and *Power Rangers: The Movie*. They hugged readily, even the boys, and dedicated the track championship and inspirational graduation speeches to the classmate only there in their peripheral vision. But they didn't talk about it or her or Bobby. His name stayed tucked in their back pockets, always an impulse away.

When they split to seven high schools, a pack of eight to the local public school and a handful to the one in the next district, the rest in ones and threes to Catholic and private academies in the city, it was with a sudden shattering. High school meant erasing the blackboard. Some of the chalky dust of before lingered, but less and less as they wrote over the traces. It started by sitting with new people at lunch and not making after-school plans with each other anymore. Kids they used to share cubbies and secrets with became just somebodies they said hi

to in hallways. Until, at least, Confirmation rolled around, and the class, along with all the Catholic kids in town, had to attend weekly meetings Wednesday nights throughout junior year, back in the St. Melania's cafeteria.

Some of them still fit the chairs. Some found them lower to the ground than they remembered, just as the water fountains now fell more at knee-height than at waist. Even the girls who hadn't grown taller since graduation found the tables, too, lower than in their memories. The ones who had grown found themselves staring down at the tops of their old friends' heads where they'd once been eye to eye.

The confident girls drew together first, throwing their arms around each other like they had at graduation parties, scanning for the boys who had been cutest back when. Shyer classmates drifted over slowly, with close-mouthed smiles and a back-and-forth wave as they neared the circle the girls had formed. A few boys put out their hands to shake, even to the girls, greeting everyone as their fathers would.

Mother volunteers checked in students entering through the main doors. The information sheet had said parents were welcome, and like untethered shadows, a few moms followed their kids in and grouped themselves. Mrs. Berenson, who used to help the class count out their change for milk in kindergarten, wasn't one of them. The moms, many of them friends from the years working lunch or library together as St. Melania's mandatory volunteers, talked about her sometimes. The kids didn't. The disappearance of Bobby's mother from their lives was a painless paper-punch beside the gash of Bobby's absence.

The moms were the lifeline to St. Melania's. A couple taught or administrated; some had younger kids still there. They ran into each other at their kids' sporting events or shared brunches and book clubs with the St. Mel's crowd. And there were always the local grocery stores, where

the moms would chit-chat. The class, too, might run into each other in aisles of cereal or soups, some shopping while others priced and stacked. Their town wasn't large. In three years they'd nearly all at least caught a glimpse of each other, a wave or honk when one recognized the face shadowed by the windshield of another car. Or they'd catch up for a minute after attending Sunday Masses with their families or while altar-serving together, those of them who stuck with the white robes.

They'd all heard a word or two even about the classmates they hadn't spotted, not the details but a sketch outline. Big happenings like Alan coming out of the closet, little stories like who Ashley had hooked up with last week, or injury-prone Josh Patterson from the year above theirs breaking his right leg this time.

Every Catholic kid in town their age, whatever their grammar school, came for Confirmation class, so there were a half-dozen other tables. Still, the class clustered. The private school kids, a bit removed from the heart of the town, knew the St. Mel's crowd best. The kids with moms along were stuck. But the cluster was well short of the full twenty-three. Mari, always one of the forgotten girls for birthday invites, sat at another table. Evan, who was too cool to even say 'hey' to former classmates on the bus, was with the Rosin High hockey guys.

Absences at least cleared space for conversation. A few someones asked after Andy. It took the classmates who'd moved up to Holy Cross High with him three minutes to realize they meant Drew, whose family had moved to Syracuse the past summer anyhow.

Mike still seemed to be running late, nothing new. Jill, who used to always be early and whose mom was into all the church stuff, seemed to be late too, but the classmates who worked at the coffee shop with her reported she refused to come. She was apparently Wiccan or agnostic or Buddhist now. Sam, the boy, not Samantha-Sam, had always been Episcopalian.

Ashley hadn't shown, either. She'd tried to bum a smoke off of Gabrielle outside Mighty Taco on Friday night, and both Katies had heard she was flunking everything but 'Anatomy'. But before anyone shared anything actually incriminating, Chelsea's mother checked herself in.

Chelsea wasn't with her, so it took a few sharp elbows and whispers before everyone remembered who Mrs. Piper was, and that they shouldn't stare, which meant of course they all did. Some of them barely remembered Mrs. Piper, although she looked much the same, a touch trimmer, shorter hair, more lines in her neck.

Last time they'd all seen her was at the wake and funeral. Mrs. Piper had organized the buffet out of the St. Mel's kitchen for the Berenson family to come to and eat between four and seven on the second day of the wake. A lot of the girls had helped their moms make spinach salads or oatmeal raisin cookies to take over. Mrs. Piper had been the one to set up a schedule with class moms to bring meals for Mr. and Mrs. Berenson. She'd arranged for some graduated eighth graders like Josh Patterson to serve altar for the funeral since none of the class could bring themselves to do it. As if she needed to make up for what happened. As if she could.

Now Mrs. Piper carried a notebook and pen in hand and talked easily with the check-in moms. When she glanced around, the St. Mel's class all looked away. Making eye contact was as good as issuing an invitation, so they kicked the few who were still staring in the shins, but they couldn't control the moms. One of them waved. To the class's throat-clenching discomfort, Mrs. Piper headed towards their table, their moms. The click of her shoes as she moved towards them seemed louder than the swelling jumble of cafeteria conversation.

Mrs. Piper was decidedly not one of *them*. They weren't sure if Chelsea was, anymore. But Mrs. Piper stopped in her tracks before reaching the interspersed moms and said hi to the young people, asking after other mothers and some fathers by their first names.

Most could only recognize their own parents' name. They loosely knew old grade school parents as Mrs. Holland or Mrs. Giovanni or Mr. O'Day, not as Barb or Mary Jean or Bill.

Mrs. Piper remarked on how tall they'd all gotten. They nodded, even though it wasn't true for all of them, and prayed she'd go away, but she carried on, warmly, about how she remembered them all as little kindergarteners holding their nap mats in the bus line, which they'd heard already from three other mothers. She seemed to be waiting for something. Finally, kind Monica, who'd outgrown her lazy eye, asked where Chelsea was. Sick or something?

Fine, they were assured, simply in the musical at her high school, which held night practices. Mrs. Piper gestured to her pen and notebook as she explained they'd worked it out with Father McKenzie that she would take notes for Chelsea on the meetings for the time being.

Convenient, they thought, while also wishing they'd managed to get away with the same thing, sending their mothers to waste an hour in their places, so they could spend it getting their homework done, or just online or watching Wednesday night shows or out with real friends.

Aluminum scraped on linoleum as Mrs. Piper dragged over a chair from the nearby table. When the sound drew their glances, they also noticed the guy settling into a seat at the very end of the table. Maybe Mrs. Piper had pushed his chair over, too. It hadn't been there a minute ago.

He was a guy, not a boy, likely seventeen too but passable as older, what with his broad shoulders and scratchy-looking hairs on his chin. He seemed to be having trouble fitting his legs under the low table. They could hear the squeal of metal across the floor as he shifted.

When they looked directly at him, he sort of blurred into the glazed, tan surface of the wall behind him. He was at the end, though, and many of them were wearing contacts of differing degrees of lens strength. They rubbed at their eyes until they watered and looked again.

His face was shadowy under a baseball cap, but his nose looked like a Berenson nose,

straight, narrow-bridged, broadening to big at the base. His name tag read 'Rob'.

It was silly because he couldn't have Bobby Berenson's nose. Bobby didn't have brothers. His only in-state cousins were little girls who'd run around at the wake and cried through church. Bobby's nose was with him, buried, and they knew it. Buried in a tie he couldn't have knotted and a brand-new blue suit he'd have outgrown by graduation, not looking himself.

None of them had looked themselves at the wake. The boys were mostly in overlarge suit coats they shouldn't have needed to borrow till graduation, some in golf shirts or dress shirts with the sleeves pushed up their forearms because it was hot or they had no suits yet. The girls came in black tights or bare-legged, in short black dresses that they'd worn to grown-up parties.

All were sure they were wearing the wrong thing, but nothing was as wrong as Bobby. They clung to their parents' sides like dizzy ducklings or collected in corners as far away from him as they could get. They chatted only about family vacations, summer sports, the new teacher for the fall. They didn't mention Bobby. It might have been any school event, except for the shock in their eyes, the whites wobbly as pudding and the pupils flat and lusterless as they focused on each other, the ceiling, anywhere but Bobby.

The body had to be someone else's, because it looked about twelve.

There was a touch of puff still to his cheeks and something funny about his neck, lines like the stretch marks and folds some forty years of life could bring. His hair had a straight part and looked shiny. He didn't look like he was sleeping, like their parents kept saying. Bobby would be asleep sprawled on his stomach or with his head buried in his elbows at his desk, not posed like a movie vampire, flat on his back with folded hands. It was too unjust, too absurd.

Maybe if he'd been laid out in his khaki shorts and school shirt, if they could have seen the summer tan on his neck and below his grass-stained knees, it would have felt real then and

they wouldn't be seeing things now.

It didn't seem too impossible it all could have been a big mix-up, for Bobby to be sitting hale and whole at their Confirmation class table. The guy raised a hand, acknowledging he'd been noticed, and let it flop. Mrs. Piper and the moms didn't seem to see him.

Those nearest the guy who could almost be Bobby, or who Bobby could almost have been, could smell the bright, almost sugary scent of Crest Kids toothpaste, the blue junk they'd all outgrown, on his breath.

No one spoke, which gave the crowded table a hollow feel.

Their ghost drummed his fingers on the table, a rat-a-tat that ate at their nerves.

They were relieved when the volunteers, the same ones who ran the church lector program and CCD, started the class; they paid such rigid attention they figured their pastor had to be thrilled at the example 'his kids' were setting. They fled the second it was over, to their own cars or the rides that couldn't show up fast enough. The ones with moms along tugged at their moms' purses or hissed in their ears to urge them out. No one saw 'Rob' leave, though Sam, in her haste, knocked into their ghost's suddenly empty chair with a very solid bang.

Once home, the boys mostly talked themselves down, convinced 'Rob' was really some shy, private school guy. More of the girls went the other way, consulting paranormal novels and episodes of *Ghost Whisperer*. Years of a dismissible, corner-of-the-eye ghost had not prepared them for a sitting-at-their-table ghost. They all contemplated faking sick next Wednesday.

But come the following week they were all back, mostly without the moms who'd come to the introductory hour. Mrs. Piper, after lingering alone with her notebook near an empty table, finally came to the far end of the group's and asked them at large if they minded her joining.

They were trying to figure out how to say no, when the class ghost took off his baseball

cap and sat at the opposite corner of the table. Katie M. rapidly told Mrs. Piper she was welcome.

They tried not to look at their ghost. He never made eye contact or said a word. But during the Confirmation lectures he laughed, and they caught each other turning to look at the sound. He propped his elbows on the table so that the girls nearest him actually flinched back. They could hear him shifting in his seat, even though he looked like he wasn't quite there. He started whistling softly, and they caught each other leaning over, trying to make out his tunes. When the hour finished, they fled to the safety of the parking lot.

Even then they saw him, standing in the shadow of the school, hands in his pockets, waiting for a ride that never seemed to come.

Between Wednesdays, he was everywhere, more than ever before. He'd wave at them as he walked by them in the dairy or frozen section, gone when they did a double-take and turned. The young guy who waved them ahead with a big grin at a four-way intersection looked just like him. They could swear, looking at the write-up of the lacrosse team in the school paper, that Bobby's face was in the accompanying picture, though he was gone when they gave it a closer look. And come Confirmation class, they could never be sure when he'd be with them.

On the third week he turned up halfway through the night, looking half-asleep in a chair they hadn't seen, so suddenly that when Jimmy glanced over and spotted him next to him, Jimmy's tilted chair went too far backwards. It clattered to the floor with a clang of metal and thud of Jimmy. His legs had gotten too long to hold the balance anymore, Jimmy explained, though no one had asked, and no one questioned him further once they noticed he was bleeding. Mrs. Piper, luckily, had Neosporin and a bandage for his elbow in her purse.

Chelsea, no one had seen. It was that third Wednesday they realized they were searchingly looking around for her every time Mrs. Piper walked in, eavesdropping on the tidbits

she dropped about Chelsea to the volunteering moms. It sounded like she had a boyfriend, although they found the idea outrageous, and cast nervous glances at ‘Rob’, as if he might be exorcised by the mere mention of his replacement. How *could* she be seeing anyone? How did she deal with it all? Therapy, they supposed. But no one knew.

A whisper finally went around among the class, though no one could say who started it, asking about Chelsea. She still lived in town, after all, and wasn’t the only one to bus to private school an hour away. A few of the boys went there for its football team, though they left her in the corner of their eyes with Bobby. She seemed cool, they said, but they had seen her freak out a little, once. The magazine fundraiser guy, who came in annually to encourage selling subscriptions for the promised reward of prizes, pizza parties and school funds, threw candy bars out to crowd members who answered his questions. With M&Ms, NutRageous, and FastBreaks whizzing overhead in yellow and orange streaks, Chelsea fled the auditorium.

The girls who worked at the town’s drug stores spotted her poking around the nail polish stands. Katie K saw her pick up a Mounds bar and stare at the label for a solid minute, as if checking the calorie count or ingredients. Chelsea smoothed the wrapper and put it back like something precious. She never, apparently, recognized any of the girls.

Of course, they hadn’t said hi.

Those who worked at Blockbuster occasionally saw her trailing her mother and brother through the Comedy racks. Her hair, they reported, was black now and made her look Goth. Most conversations stopped there and turned hurriedly to college talk, because Goth to them evoked vampires and black widow costumes, and that was too close to killing a boy with a kiss.

The priest shushed them, and they simmered down, realizing their whispers had gotten so loud, kids at other tables had turned to look. For the remainder of class they only muttered about

the lectures, mostly the same lessons they'd learned together in eight years of religion class.

When they walked to their table the next week, the boy with Bobby's nose was already there, sitting alone on the far side, looking so solid they almost wanted to tap him to see if he was real but didn't dare. He was subtly stealing looks at a girl with vermillion hair, orange-red erring on the cherry side, at the other end of the table. She was doodling in a notebook.

The first arrivals dropped into their seats, choosing the side with the unknown girl and only then looking closer. Her face was squarer at the sides, narrower at the chin. Without her baby-blond hair, it was her uncomfortable expression that made them realize she was Chelsea.

She was tinier than they remembered, the same height as seventh grade and swallowed by the Boston College hoodie she wore. The ones who had been in the 'smart math' lifted their brows, since Chelsea had never made first honors. They wondered if she could get into BC or was just sporting the gear, maybe had a friend who went there. Maybe that boyfriend.

She gave a wan smile, said hi in a voice a cat couldn't have caught, and went back to thoughtfully drawing. She had long-fingered hands, perfectly manicured nails. The girls remembered Chelsea painting her nails with white-out or coloring them with marker in class.

They tried to look away from her, at each other, the ceiling, scratches on the tabletop. The guy who looked like Bobby started drumming a pen in his habitual rat-a-tat against the tabletop. It seemed louder than ever, the noise of other tables comparatively soft and far away.

When they'd all arrived, even Mike, a mutter ran down the table like a game of telephone. Monica, at last, asked if Chelsea's musical was over. It was a teetering moment before Chelsea looked up, eyes furrowed, and mmm-hmmed. She didn't glance away or stop frowning.

Monica fumbled under that stare, asking lamely after Mrs. Piper. Chelsea gestured to the purse on the seat beside her, pointed in the direction of the bathroom. She went back to drawing.

One of the Katies asked how Chelsea's senior year was coming along. Like all of the girls, she'd once been to Chelsea's sleepovers, where they'd watch movies and eat packs of cookie dough and plot to all stay friends forever.

Chelsea said fine, this time without bothering to look up.

The ghost at the end of the table started coughing, the kind that covered a chuckle.

For once it was a relief for them to see Mrs. Piper coming to join them. Like the Wednesdays before, she spoke for Chelsea, dropping tidbits about her musical and college, much more uncomfortable when Chelsea herself was sitting right there, ignoring them all.

It was a distressing week, after that. At all their schools, the vending machines, even the healthy-snack one that didn't have candy bars, suddenly would only spit out Reese's Cups, no matter what was pressed. Every one of them saw the sunrise jogger out their window. The boys who used to go into the woods with Bobby tried to find ways to explain how leafy twigs turned up in their backpacks and on their shirtsleeves. The smell of popcorn seemed to be following the girls who'd been at the movies the night Bobby sat next to Chelsea. And each and every one of them had that stomach-jerking moment of spotting Bobby for a second, before they saw it was actually someone else. Even Jill, working with a few others at the coffee shop, looked up at a customer and startled so much she spilled the order.

Around the weekend, some of the girls resurrected their old phone tree and started swapping stories, trying to giggle at first to show how silly they thought themselves. By Monday it'd spread to Alan and then the rest of the boys, till all of them knew, by Wednesday, that they weren't alone. Somebody even called up Andy/Drew to ask if he saw things up in Syracuse.

Neither group could decide if they should let their ghost be or if they were supposed to communicate, but next week, before they'd forged any plan, he didn't show up— not until

Chelsea did, later even than Mike, without her mother. She sat alone at a table near the door, exactly as far away from her old classmates as she could get.

When they stole glances over, they found that, though no one had seen him sit down with her, a guy in a green baseball cap had joined her. From his posture and breadth of his back, he might've been 'Rob' from their table, but it was only a squint and a guess, not the usual sighting.

When class ended, and the ones without cars were left standing around until rides came, Chelsea waited against the building's corner. No one was sure if she was alone or not. It was a wet spring night, the air damp and foggy out in the parking lot. She definitely was smiling, tilting her head back in mouth-open silent laughs, but they weren't sure if she was on the phone or if there was a shadowy boy on the side of the building. They kept spotting a cap brim in the fog.

The next Wednesday would be the last one, before actual Confirmation a month later. There were no strange joggers on school day mornings, this week. None of the C last names saw Bobby in their hallways. When the baseball team played, there was no extra in the outfield.

Somehow about half the class ended up at the coffee shop Tuesday night. Evan had asked Monica, maybe not expecting she'd bring along the Katies and that they'd spread the word it was a pow-wow. Nobody, it turned out, really wanted the ghost to go away.

No one was really sure where the idea to call Chelsea and see if she'd sit with them for the last class, maybe all come back to the coffee shop after, came from. The trouble with it was that no one had her cell number. Many of the girls used to have her house number memorized, but that'd long gone down the drain, replaced by math formulas and locker combinations. They weren't used to using phone books anymore, but Jill had one behind the front counter. They looked up the Pipers' number and put Monica on the line.

Mrs. Piper was all too happy to give Chelsea the phone.

Chelsea, Monica reported, told them between laughs they were years too late.

They'd been kids, they said back.

They could've tried, Chelsea said. And did they know what, Bobby Berenson would've been the first one, the very first, to tell them all off. And then she hung up.

His name from Chelsea's lips, even secondhand, was like an invocation. She was right, they realized, becoming the quietest, saddest-faced table in the coffee shop. Bobby had been bold, in an easygoing way, which was why he was the first boy in their class to have a sort-of-girlfriend in the first place. If it'd been someone else killed with a kiss, he wouldn't have steered clear like she was contagious but been as casual and friendly as if their sky hadn't fallen in.

They were still the quietest, saddest-faced table at the Confirmation meeting the next night. For every chair that scraped up, their heads turned in unison, disappointed each time.

Chelsea sat down, again, at the only empty table, which this time happened to be only one away from theirs. This time no one, not even a ghost, joined her.

The priest cleared his throat and tapped the microphone, the noise vibrating through the room. As he did every week, he asked, this last time, if everyone was there.

They looked around, reading the thought of Bobby on each other's minds. Their glances refracted from table to table, recognizing faces from high schools, scout troops, sports, and counting up their holes: Andy, Ashley, Jill, boy-Sam, maybe somebody they were all forgetting.

They eyed, hopefully, a guy of the right build over by the private school guys. His name tag could read "Bob," "Robert," even "Bear," whoever Bobby Berenson might have become. With a pang, they thought, if he'd lived, their Bobby might've been as much of a ghost anyways.

Once upon a time they'd known what books everyone was reading and who had a weird dream the night before and who liked who and who wanted to do what when they grew up. It

was almost inevitable, when they saw each other five days a week for eight years. There were no electives then and switching to a class like Spanish meant the whole grade filed across the hall to another teacher, a small preparation for future schedules. But they took different languages now.

A chair scraped again, but it was only Mike-who-was-always-late, asking if he'd missed anything good. It was heartening somehow, that he was still Mike and still late, though he couldn't blame it on his mom now that he drove himself. Mike, with a look at the vacant chair at the end, pulled a bag of Fritos out from his jacket and threw it down like a gauntlet. To throw at the girls like old times, he said. Wasn't it Bobby who started that?

From Mike, the name was more stray thought than invocation, and suddenly they felt like their own echoes, laughing around the lunch table, not people who couldn't remember which high school their old classmates went to or the original color of some of the girls' hair.

Evan confirmed that was Bobby. When, they wondered, had Evan started sitting at their table anyway? Maybe he'd floated over for a better look at their ghost, or because Monica had grown so pretty, but his presence was so natural they'd never noticed him settling in. He smiled like his cheeky kid-self, not the guy wearing too much Axe who'd acted like he'd forgotten all their names, and asked who remembered how many French fries Bobby could fit in his mouth?

Some of the girls said that'd been so gross, but Chelsea must've heard from the other table, because she turned right around.

No, she said. That was funny. He was funny.

Like a wave, agreement passed down the line. He'd been funny, Bobby. And back from the end of the table came a question: Did they think he'd have still been funny?

Yeah, they decided. We do.

The funny thing was, when they closed their eyes, when they looked through just the

corners, it wasn't only Bobby who came back. All the familiar strangers turned into younger faces, the ones from the yearbooks. Smiles glinted with long-gone braces. They pictured glasses on girls and guys who'd long ago swapped them for contacts. They'd shed those selves on the surface years before, but that common past still lurked just under the skin, the same ghosts and secrets buried under only a few fine levels of silt. Airing their hauntings among old acquaintance tasted like waking with clear lungs after a week down sick. Even Chelsea wasn't so far away. Eyes closed, they were all there, blurry or not.

They ought to have been paying attention, but thinking of Bobby, the St. Mel's crowd talked through class. There was so much to say, so much still unspoken between them, not a single one of them heard one last chair scrape up to their table, for this one last time.

The Driver

Ellen can't get the car to move. She would like to romanticize it, as if the dratted thing had a soul that had winked out of the world with her Lewis. But her son and granddaughter have both driven it in the past six months, and so it is unquestionably her fault it won't budge.

"Excuse me, excuse me," she calls from the driveway. One of the Thompson boys is mowing the lawn, and while her voice can't carry over the motor, she catches his eye with her waving arm when he makes a turn.

"Something wrong?" he shouts back, not shutting the motor off yet.

Ellen misses the old politeness. Her sons' friends used to tag "Mrs. Winkler" onto every phrase they spoke to her, still do if she should happen to see them now. She's gratified when she gets even a nameless "hi" and a wave from the kids in her neighborhood today. The kids do all seem to be so active, perhaps losing a certain awareness amongst all that busyness.

Ellen gestures helplessly at the car, and after a moment he comes jogging over for a look.

“It’s starting, but I’m afraid it’s stuck,” she tells him. “It’s only a few years old...”

The Thompson boy scratches his head. “Let me see, and then I can take a look under the hood,” he says and slings into the driver’s seat with enviable ease. The car starts at once, but instead of making the horrible grinding noise it gave when Ellen hit the gas, it lets out its proper smooth rumble.

The Thompson boy gets out of the car, hand in his hair again, expression odd and face flushed. “Um,” he says. “Was it still in ‘park’?”

“Oh, my,” Ellen says, making herself laugh. She’s embarrassed, and it’s painfully clear the boy’s embarrassed for her, thinking she’s a silly old lady who shouldn’t be driving.

It isn’t that she’s old, although she is. But she’s rarely been behind the wheel. The last time must have been ten years back, when Lewis had his eye surgery, and even then she went only to the store and Mass, and Lewis was with her, giving her advice. She got her license some fifty years gone, when their boys were young and trouble. That was long before most families had a second car, and by the time they could afford one, Gary and Pat were old enough to want cars for themselves. But Lewis had been relentless, dragging her to practice in parish school parking lots, arguing for it like the state lottery catch line: “You never know.”

Nothing, though, had ever happened. Oh, Pat lost a few teeth in a bad spill from a bicycle, and Gary cracked his head open sneaking back up to his bedroom window one high school night, but Lewis was there and those were the worst of their small emergencies. Ellen was happy in her little home with her books and her kitchen, and if she couldn’t wait for a ride till Lewis was home for work, well, Lewis’ brother Art and his wife lived only a block over back then and never minded helping her out. And then from Lewis’ retirement she can’t think of a day

where they were apart for more than an hour, until six months ago.

She would like to explain this to the Thompson boy, that she isn't so dim and doddering, only nervous and new at this. But instead she thanks him and makes entirely sure, this time, to put the car in reverse before backing out of the driveway.

As subtly as she can, Ellen tests the turn of the wheel in reverse, so she doesn't pull the car out left when she wants it to go right. At least not where the Thompson boy can see.

If only a car was more like a bicycle, she'd tell Lewis. Handlebars were so logical; the dratted wheel was such a pain.

Her only granddaughter, Melanie, drives a motorcycle, and poor Pat has been all in a tither about his little girl on a death machine. A motorcycle is of course risky, even when purple-detailed, and not-so-terribly large, and used mainly over short distances, and handled by a very capable young lady. Anyone should know a motorcycle for a foolhardy thing. But secretly, as Ellen maneuvers the car out of the drive, trying to remember Lewis' instructions to let the wheel thread *through* her hands, she can't help but think Melanie has the right idea.

* * *

About halfway to Art's retirement home, Ellen thinks maybe she ought to bring lunch to Art, rather than take him out as planned. If Art ever fell, she could never get him up. Lewis did so much of getting Art in and out of the car and maneuvering the walker into the backseat, even though Lewis really oughtn't to have been lifting anything. Going without Lewis at all seems not only strange but absurd, pointless, yet Art had asked to resume the weekly luncheons.

If not very politely. His message on the answering machine boomed, "Woman, are you still my sister or not? And pick up your phone!"

She was home, of course, but she liked letting it go to message. It was too disappointing,

otherwise, to answer and find a telemarketer or a recording on the other end. Gary called without fail every week from New York City, and between Pat, his wife, and, best and rarest, Melanie, someone called or stopped by nearly every day. Not every day, though. Ellen was very aware of the days they didn't manage, since those days she usually didn't speak to another living soul.

She sees the sign for Boston Market, the one Pat usually stops at to bring her dinner, and thinks, *oh, they make up a nice platter.*

She has to cross two lanes of traffic to get there, though, and so she looks very carefully in the side mirror, twists her neck around to look through the window so quickly her back hurts, and then shoves the wheel the right way to send her over. Her teeth jam tight against each other. One lane at a time.

With power steering now, it is admittedly much less work than when she was first learning. This car feels safe and a lot less like a boat. It is, in fact, a nice little car. She went with Lewis to pick it out, of course, though the only thing she gave an opinion on was the color, a robin's egg blue. *Like your eyes*, Lewis said and bought it, for once, instead of taking it on lease. Ellen wonders now if he anticipated this car outlasting them.

A long, brutal honk sounds from somewhere behind as she turns, and her stomach jerks unpleasantly. She can't see where the honk came from, cannot imagine what she's done wrong since she signaled and looked and waited so carefully, but she still feels certain the blasting sound was aimed at her. Even as she completes the turn into the parking lot, without actual incident, her insides still feel hot and jiggly, like cake not quite done in the oven.

The lot is fairly deserted so mercifully she does not have to try to park between, or anywhere near, other cars. She gets between the yellow lines, if slightly askew, recollects her breathing and her handbag, and heads in to the counter.

When the kids at the counter ask if they can help her, she says yes and asks for a little of both white meats, the potatoes, the carrots and green beans, and what is the soup of the day, please? She gets applesauce and two brownies, too. Art is too stubborn for any particular diet; he tried ordering chicken wings the last time they were all together, and Lewis wouldn't let him.

Lewis and she were so careful with what they ate in recent years, yet he still snuck a small old-fashioned donut every Saturday when he went to get his coffee at Tim Hortons. He pretended he didn't, and Ellen let him think she didn't know, since he came home whistling after. Except the Saturday he didn't, when he'd slumped over in his regular booth. She wonders sometimes if it was before or after he had his donut. Not knowing bothered her. It was easier, actually, to accept that he wasn't with her now, than to accept that she hadn't been with him.

She pays for the Boston Market food with her card, as she hasn't been to the bank for cash in so long, and finds herself surprisingly buoyed. The platter is warm in her hand, the applesauce smell from the side dish overpowering the meat, and the food, accompanied by the jingling keys, makes her think of Christmas, even though it's August.

She goes automatically to the passenger door and remembers only when her hand's on the handle where she belongs now.

* * *

Art does not eat his vegetables, but after shouting a little about looking forward to fresh air, he seems happy with the meat and brownie.

"Dreamed about Pat last night," he says between bites.

"My Pat?" Ellen says and repeats herself, a little louder, when Art says, "Eh?"

"Nah, nope! Proper Pat." He means the second-oldest Winkler brother, the one who went down over the Pacific, the one Ellen only knew as the tallest of the five older boys down the

street from her girlhood home.

“And what was he doing?” Ellen says. Ellen’s dreams are usually tangled memories, little more, when she remembers them at all.

“Coming to that. Pat was climbing the Pyramids, playing baseball.”

Ellen isn’t sure if Art means separately or at once and can’t help envisioning a diamond laid out on one triangular side of the Pyramid. “But it was my Lewis who played baseball, never Pat.” Like all his brothers, Lewis joined the Air Corps, but instead of Europe or the Pacific, he was stationed in Algiers. He spent most of the war playing ball for unit teams. He never minded Ellen being a homebody, saying he got enough of seeing the world back when.

Art smiles, revealing the gold teeth in the back. The rest, though, are whiter than her own, or Lewis’, free of any stain of coffee or tea. “Yup, yup, that was Lucky Lewis for you. That’s why I’m telling you, see.”

Ellen does not see at all, but she nods. “He hated you calling him that,” she adds, feeling obligated.

“He was! Lucky! Born with it!” Art slaps the table. “Should’ve seen him at ten, tossing balls in the backyard. We all thought he was the next DiMaggio!”

Ellen thinks of Lewis’ whip-lean arm, hurling balls into the sky for Pat and Gary to scramble after, the closest she ever came to seeing him play, and yes, she thinks, maybe in another life, if he’d headed to college instead of straight to war when he stepped out of high school, he could’ve been a true athlete instead of an accountant. She wonders where she would’ve been without him and can come up with nothing, except married, maybe, to a different man, with different children, living in a house at most a few blocks over from her own.

“That was talent, not luck,” Ellen says.

Art doesn't miss a beat, so she's not even sure he heard her. "Time he met up with me and James on leave—brass-bold! Thinking he could catch a flight back—and in the end he'd do it, too. Day later and he'da been AWOL! Fiddle-fit till the day he died, and look at me," Art says, sweeping his hands from his gaunt face to his useless knees. "And him my big brother. Nothing ever happened to Lewis. Lucky, *indeed*."

Nothing, save Lewis, ever really happened to Ellen. And she's grateful, truly so, for what feels like a protective bubble around her life, that only has popped with Lewis gone and at that, so late in their life she can only thank God. But it does occur to her that no one's ever called her lucky. The only near miss she can think of is the time Lewis swerved around a deer, and even then, the fear, the relief, does not seem, in memory, to properly belong to her.

* * *

Pat usually comes and gets her for Mass, but she rings him on Saturday night to tell him no, she thinks she'll go herself. She'd like to go into the city, to St. Mike's.

"That's a little far, Mom," Pat says dubiously. "What if I sent Melanie with you? She's not working tomorrow."

Melanie is a good girl, who in the past few months has shown up as needed to drive her grandmother's car and help with yard work, sometimes without Pat even telling her. But Ellen knows she, like her father before her, spends every Sunday trying to sleep in to get out of church.

"Don't be silly," Ellen tells Pat. "You can't rearrange your life around me forever."

There's a moment of awkward silence, where Ellen remembers that of course, she won't be around forever.

"It's still a terrible idea, Mom," Pat says. "You don't drive."

"Maybe I do now," Ellen says. And she plans to leave for nine o'clock Mass, in case Pat

decides to come by before eleven as usual.

* * *

The fastest way from Ellen's house in the town of West Seneca to the grand old churches of downtown Buffalo is the highway. She lasts the stretch of exactly one exit, cars whipping by her even though she's precisely at the sixty-five speed limit and dizzied out of her wits by that.

Trembling, she pulls off and over. She kisses her fingertips, which she still expects to tighten again from their crumpled folds, like they used to after her baths, and brushes them over the beads of her rosary on the dash. When her heartbeat steadies, she gets on the back roads, crawling through South Buffalo into the city.

When she nears her girlhood neighborhood, she gives up on Mass with one guilty left turn.

The houses look so small and close together, after coming from the suburbs, but still nice houses, all with porches, many made of brown brick. They look shoddier than they used to, and it's not her memory playing tricks; it's disrepair. It is no longer a nice neighborhood. A woman sitting smoking on her stoop stares hard and challenging at Ellen's car creeping by, and a group of baby-faced thirteen-year-olds smoke on a corner. Two older teenage boys swaggering down the road make her throat clench nervously, and it's not their ethnicity, something Middle Eastern Lewis could identify but Ellen is hopeless at, that leaves her feeling out of her element, but their baggy pants and the threatening way they goose their heads and shoulders forward.

Still, she doesn't turn around. She passes the old Winkler house and remembers passing it with her brother when they'd take the dog for a walk, seeing the five blue stars in the window. And then one day only four blue, and one gold. She only knew of them loosely then, as a set, the Winkler boys, a name that always set them in her mind as winking and charming, figures of

romance before she knew them at all.

The window is only broken glass now, and it hurts to see. It makes her decide to turn back before her own home. She wants to picture it lived in and warm still, not deserted and damnable. She's afraid of turning around in a stranger's driveway, though, and attempting a three-point turn on this narrow street unnerves her, so she keeps going as far as the corner.

A plain white house with plaster siding sits on the end, its door a garish red that is at least a splash of color. There was a yellow house there once, but it burned down after the war, and all the neighbors walked down to watch. Ellen can still smell the burning grass.

She was almost seventeen then, and she can remember bell-clear, brighter than the day in front of her, her friend from across the street spinning her around by the shoulders to face a tall man with skin burnt to a nut-brown. Ellen knew Lewis Winkler, didn't she? Oh, she didn't?

The grass now is brown and matted, but only by the summer heat. Some green pops through, and a plastic bat and some broken wiffle balls lay scattered around the lawn.

And Ellen, suddenly, is glad she came.

* * *

Melanie comes by unexpectedly that night, and Ellen's sure Pat asked his daughter to check up on her, because Melanie does not unexpectedly come by.

"I was in the neighborhood," Melanie says, meaning she was at her parents' house. She used her college money to buy a motorcycle and is taking some time to figure out her life while working at a mini-mart and doing community theater. She's driving her father out of his gourd.

She is a week from twenty. Ellen was married at the same age.

Melanie is like a ghost of her past self, a ghost with longer, near-black hair and a series of hoops piercing the top of her left ear. Her eyes are lake-blue, and every time Ellen sees her she

looks in the mirror after and thinks all the water-color has drained out of her own.

Ellen scrambles for snacks and drinks to offer Melanie, but she has nothing stocked in her cupboards to appeal to young people, only Saltines and Earl Grey. She pushes the tea on Melanie anyway, coaxes her into sitting down so she'll stay longer.

They talk about records. Ellen still mostly plays her records and cassettes; Melanie likes buying her new music on "vinyl" whenever available.

But when Melanie starts playing with her empty tea cup, re-crossing her legs and commenting on the heat, clear signals she'll bolt, Ellen blurts, "What are you going to do?"

"Not you, too, Gran," Melanie says, in despair.

"No, no, it's only that there's so much," Ellen says, trying to make her understand, trying to understand herself. "Have you ever thought of going abroad? Your cousins in college are doing that—not to say it has to be through college," she adds hastily. "Couldn't you see yourself, Melanie, in Rome? You could ride one of those scooters around like Audrey Hepburn has in the movies. Or Egypt."

"Oh, I plan to go everywhere and do everything, eventually," Melanie says breezily, dangling the teacup from her fingers.

Ellen sips her own tea, barely touched. "Don't put your plans off for too long, though."

Melanie frowns and looks up, surprised. "Put them off with what, school?"

"With settling down."

Melanie laughs at that, and then her eyes widen when she realizes Ellen's serious. "No, oh no," she says, "not for a long, long time. Marrying any of the guys I know now? No," and she draws out the word, dramatically.

"Good," Ellen says.

Melanie looks troubled, at that. “Gran, you don’t—regret marrying Grandpa, do you?”

“Certainly not,” Ellen says. “But—.” And Melanie startles at the qualification. “I don’t believe I ever took time to figure out myself.”

* * *

All week Ellen goes shopping. They’re small adventures, but they’re hers. On Monday she spends two hours wandering Wegmans grocery, buying Gatorade for the Thompson boy for the times when he troubles to mow her lawn, and international cookies, from Cadbury Ladyfingers to Jaffa Cakes to madeleines and macaroons, for if Melanie comes back, and chicken and rice for herself. On Tuesday, she goes to Bon-Ton, mostly walking around and running her hands over the texture of different fabrics in ladies’ that she has no plans to buy, until she becomes distracted at the jewelry counter. There’s a bracelet made of ropy bangles of black seed pearls, fake but still pricey enough, and she thinks Melanie might like it. The saleswoman concurs, though of course that is her job, but the woman is nice and friendly and tells Ellen about her own seventeen-year-old daughter, who’s already plotting for prom.

When Melanie was little, Ellen used to love picking out dresses for her and outfits from the L.L. Bean catalog, but in recent years she and Lewis had opted to give their grandchildren cash for their birthdays, instead. She doesn’t know if this is truly Melanie’s taste, since she rarely sees Melanie in jewelry beyond her earrings, but she decides to dare, anyways. She gets a gift receipt, just in case.

She gets a little better at parking, though in order to park near as few other cars as possible, she ends up at a bit of a hike from each store. She supposes she’s at least getting her exercise in.

It rains on Wednesday, and Gary calls, and she rereads *Trees and Other Poems* and tries

to find something on TV, later, to no avail. She tries on the bracelet she bought for Melanie but takes it off, quickly; it looks silly on an old woman's wrist.

On Thursday, she goes to the mall. She spends a half-hour looking for parking and is tired when she gets inside. She buys a pretzel and lemonade, even though she shouldn't, but she hasn't so much as touched the cookies she bought, and it reminds her of her first dates, to movies and the fairgrounds at Crystal Beach. Her back is stiff from driving, and her knee is sore, so she stays seated for about twenty minutes, left alone by the bustle, and amuses herself trying to pick out the Canadian shoppers among the crowd. She doesn't buy anything, though she samples free tea at a tea shop and a charming young man very nearly talks her into spending a fortune. But she was born in the Depression, and a two hundred dollar tea pot, in her book, is a sin.

On Friday morning, Pat calls her to see if Melanie can borrow her car for the night. Melanie had let her parents know about an hour before she was heading to a concert up in Toronto that night, and not to worry as she'd drive right back, after. With a storm forecast, this was not reassuring, and Ellen is quick to say of course, of course. Melanie's driving two hours there and two hours back on her motorcycle, on a slippery night, sounds more disastrous than adventurous. It's telling, too, that Melanie accepts the idea of Ellen's car, without objection.

Ellen isn't sure what hour Melanie will collect the car. When she does come, it is past seven, and she's running late, the motorcycle humming down Ellen's street a little louder than it should. Melanie's made up for the night, her eyelids shockingly sparkly when she blinks. Her presence is blink-quick, too. Before Ellen knows it, her car is zooming off, a motorcycle is stowed in her garage, and she's left to wash a magenta kiss mark and secondhand sparkles off her cheek. The driveway, she thinks, looks very sad when empty.

* * *

Ellen is up early on Saturday and anxious early, too. Her car is not yet back, and there are hours still before a reasonable time to call Pat about it. Nothing tolerable is on television, and she doesn't have the patience to read. She contemplates weeding and decides that a look at her gardening tools is a good reason to go out to the garage.

She ends up walking in a little circle around Melanie's parked motorcycle, staying a healthy distance back. She's seen Melanie hop astride as one might mount a horse—one leg up, the other thrown over. Even to sit on it would take a small jump, and Ellen, sorrily enough, does not jump at all these days. Her absent car seems very practical, indeed. She lets out a laugh at herself, a very small sound, but it echoes in the closed garage.

A while on, still waiting, she rings up Art. He can't hear her well on the phone, but she listens for an hour to stories of the Winkler boys growing up, though she'd heard them all before.

Melanie finally brings the car in late afternoon. "Sorry," she says, yawning a smile as she comes in, "I just woke up." She shows off a vinyl she'd bought the night before and gotten signed and even sets it up and spinning on Ellen's player. "You might like this; it's acoustic."

"You and your friends liked the show, then?"

"Oh, no, just me, the only ones who wanted to go, couldn't," Melanie says. She munches on a macaroon Ellen offers. "Best, really. Alone I can get right to the front."

Melanie seems content simply to stay while the record plays through in the background, and Ellen sees her to the garage when she goes, so she can lower the door after her. Right before Melanie wheels her motorcycle out, Ellen takes out of her cardigan pocket a wrapped box with her find, the black seed bracelet, and its gift receipt. She presses it on her granddaughter.

"What's this for?" Melanie says, already pulling at the paper.

"Oh, no, no, don't unwrap it now," Ellen says, a little distressed at the prospect. Melanie

will call to thank her later, and if her pleasure's not genuine Ellen would rather not know.

As soon as Melanie's out of sight, Ellen takes her returned keys and trundles off to the grocery, not that she needs anything. She buys milk and more macaroons and brings them home, satisfied.

* * *

Ellen lets Pat take her to church this Sunday, since he'd seemed a tad slighted the week before. They stop by Lewis' grave, after, and Pat pulls out flowers. He always gets the nicest flowers, exotic ones, just manly enough in their bright oranges and rich reds that Lewis wouldn't mind them. It's the flowers that make her teary, as much as the lack of any sense of Lewis there. The headstone's still not up, though deer-nibbled grass has filled in the oblong oval, still marked by its newer shade of green. As gray as she and Lewis had grown, they'd been lucky in health, lucky enough to not really prepare for death, pick out their plot and the like. She's paid a deposit on the headstone but hasn't let Pat take her to choose the font and all the business.

As they return to Pat's car, he offers again to take her, to leave work early any day for it.

"We'll see, dear," she says. She thinks that maybe she's been waiting to go by herself.

When Pat sees her to her door, she stays there, waving, while he honks and turns the corner. Then she gets in her own car, after, to go back alone, since she wants to do something, and Pat would think it strange.

She goes through the Tim Hortons' drive-through on her way. "Coffee," she says, "double-double. And an old-fashioned donut, please."

The girl who waits on her is about Melanie's age and has pink hair. Her coloring suggests she was a natural blonde, and the pink is light, and Ellen thinks it looks pretty. "I like your hair, honey," she tells the girl, as she leans quite far out the window to hand over the coffee and donut

bag. Ellen will need to learn to park closer.

“Thank you!” the girl says, very shocked. Ellen supposes she looks too old to like strange things, and maybe that should bother her, but the girl follows her shock with a very sincere smile. And Ellen’s glad she took the time.

She gets a little lost trying to find Lewis’ grave, but eventually she finds the cemetery path Pat usually takes and parks parallel, neatly and evenly. She’s much better at that than the between-the-lines business, she decides. Why can’t all parking be like this?

The sun’s come unclouded since her visit with Pat, sparkling on nearby stones so they look almost blue. She notes the color on her way to Lewis’ spot, for picking out his stone, soon.

She would like to say something to Lewis there, but it’s not quite right, when he can’t answer back, and even worse, there are strangers within hearing distance, mostly men of her age, milling about with watering cans. So she holds the coffee cup, which is warm and smells like Lewis in the mornings, and she takes a sip though she’s never liked the taste. And then, gently, she sprinkles most of it over the grass, and she stands there and eats his old-fashioned donut. She does miss Lewis, God, she does, but there is, too, a terrible beauty to her freedom now.

She brushes the crumbs off her hands, drinks the last sip of coffee, and then folds the donut bag to place it very carefully, in the cup. She holds onto the trash to throw away later, bends to pat the grass, and thinks, *see you soon, but not too soon, I hope*. And then, eyes dry, she gets back into her car and drives on.

The Absent Sister

Fayne Girls Story #1 of 3

Heroines

Becky Fayne did not want her boyfriend at her youngest sister's funeral. She ought to have been grateful Chris came with her, without needing to be asked, without a thought to the money he couldn't really afford to burn on the flight from London Heathrow to Orlando International. Without anything like a ring binding them, though she knew Chris had one hidden in his spare harmonica case.

Instead, without quite knowing why, she was wishing him *out out out* of her girlhood bed, too small for his long legs anyway. Normally, Mom would have insisted he stay on one of the basement couches, the longtime rule for boyfriends brought home. But normal was gone along with Emily.

Chris slept on his stomach, his head burrowed into the shoulder of his outstretched arm like a bird tucked against its wing. She studied the rise and fall of his shoulder blades, the

troubled crease of his brow under his flop of hair, wondering if she loved him yet. Pondering if she ever would.

Becky had first noticed Chris in a crowded bar because his coloring was a touch like Nick Coleman's, her one-time best friend and first boyfriend, the only boy she'd ever before had in this particular bed. She went up to Chris and liked his comments on the band, the piratic r-fullness of his West Country accent. She'd gone after him the same determined way she'd gone after finding a job in London, the same way she'd chosen Boston for her college town: a full-on sprint off a first impression that, yeah, this was worth a few years. She'd never imagined she'd sign up for forever in London or with Chris. But lately, she'd started thinking maybe she might.

But when the first bad-news call came, she'd wished anyone, except her other sisters, dead instead of eighteen-year-old Emily, even Mom or Dad. Even Chris, a thought she still didn't know what to do with. The second call, impossibly worse, that Emily's one-car-crash had been no accident, left Becky's sorrow and rage a pale second and third to disappointment so sweeping it took her tears away. She'd tried to make herself cry since but ended up just damping her face and rubbing her eyes red in the airport bathroom to fool Mom, Dad, Anne, even Jo, everyone but Chris, who'd been beside her nonstop. Chris, who so liked fixing things and who so could not make Emily killing herself one little bit better.

"Over a boy," Becky said to the ceiling now, in the barest of breaths.

Still, Chris yawned into his shoulder. "Awake, then?"

Becky slid one bare foot out of the covers, gliding it out into the chill air, back under the smooth fabric. She wondered what it was to be dead, all physical sensation surrendered to mere spirit. If that. Emily left no explanation but a wretched little email, one that read *I just want everything to stop*. That sounded to Becky like oblivion. Nothing seemed more frightening to

Becky than ceasing to be. “I’m fine.”

“I didn’t ask that,” Chris said. He pushed himself up on his forearms till he was sitting up, head tipped back against her headboard. “And right there’s what worries me. You keep saying that, when we both know you’re gutted and that “fine” is a crock of shit.”

“I only meant I don’t need you awake, too,” she said. Chris didn’t reach for her, but she shied as far away as the small bed could get her anyway.

“Becks,” he said, “forget need. Do you want me awake?”

Becky found it hard to imagine wanting anything right then, except to rewind to the days when she read to Emily, propped against the same headboard. No, further back than even that, before Jo was too busy with school to bother reading to all three of her littles, when all four girls could fit easily in one single bed.

“Well,” he said, to her silence. “Some hours till dawn yet.”

“Okay, you’re awake,” she said, reaching to squeeze his forearm once. Trying to convey the gratitude she knew she should be feeling. “I’m going to go brush my teeth.” She’d brushed them twice before bed, but a funny taste remained in her mouth, reminding her of when she’d plucked grass and tried eating it as a little girl.

She inched her way out of bed, shivering out of her bedroom. Without any windows to let in the glow of the streetlights and sky, the darkness in the hall seemed meaner, unforgiving, and, for all her years walking it nightly, unfamiliar. Maybe she’d been gone too long, too often.

She hit the bathroom light and felt her way to the sink, blinking at the brightness. Her reflection looked normal, except for the circles under her eyes. She felt grief should be stamped on her, showing that she’d been hit by a wrecking ball. But the woman in the mirror, hair held neat in a side ponytail and wearing her nicest sleep shirt, her chin tilted angrily up, just looked

scornful, or maybe scorned. Becky couldn't read her own eyes.

The shower curtain behind her reflection moved suddenly. Becky jerked away from the sink, stumbling backwards to her left and hitting her heel against the toilet.

Anne leaned out of the tub, still in yesterday's jeans and hoodie with the University of San Diego logo. Her glasses sat askew on her tear-swollen face, so puffy she looked bee-stung. "Glad it's you, I was afraid it was going to be your boyfriend coming to piss."

Becky's heart raced so quickly she could feel its beat thrumming through her palms. "Why?" she said dizzily, waving her hand vaguely at the bathtub.

Anne moved the curtain all the way aside to step out of the tub and sit down on its side. "Jo still kicks. And you know she can't sleep without total darkness—"

So different from Emily, whose nightlight was still switched on in her room, like Becky, who liked a light on in the closet or hall...

"—so I just brought my laptop in here."

"I'd have gone in to share with Mom," Becky said, but Anne shook her head fervently.

"I don't even want to know what Mom's doing right now," Anne said.

Mom had been locked in the master bedroom, "handling everything," except for a few minutes to clasp Becky when she and Chris arrived. En route to her bed Becky had heard the rustling of papers from behind Mom's door, but that was all. It was like after the divorce again.

"You think she's still awake?"

Anne's eyes refilled. "I don't want to think about it. She was on the phone with the..." Her voice slipped down several octaves. "...organ donation people earlier..."

"Don't," Becky said tightly, shunting those thoughts behind the wall she'd started building upon hearing an open casket would not be a possibility. "What were you watching?"

Anne reacted muzzily, turning with surprise to the laptop sitting in the tub as if she'd forgotten it was there and needed to check to answer. "Buffy," she said. "Season two."

Seven years, the sisters spent watching *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* on Tuesday nights. It'd been Jo's high school show. Becky and Anne, as a newly-minted teen and preteen, coming off a Pink and Yellow Power Rangers phase, ate it up. Mom used to flip out over Emily watching with them—too much violence, too much sex. Between her sisters' shows and their gossip, Emily had a more worldly education at ten than Becky had by fifteen. A trickle-down maturity effect.

Becky pictured Emily, age five, fawn-colored hair sticking out the back of her hand-me-down Halloween Power Rangers helmet, white gloves doubled over to fit her and still too long for her little hands to fill the fingers. Age nine, when Emily fell to her knees in tears at Mom's feet to beg for permission to watch too-old-for-her TV with the big girls and Mom got annoyed and lectured that Fayne girls shouldn't kneel to anyone. Emily propped up on her elbows on the air mattress in the family room for their movie marathon last time Becky was home, arguing that Princess Leia topped Sarah Connor even if Sarah could probably take Leia in a fight.

Becky herself, at seventeen, had responded to getting dumped by throwing a *punch*.

The kickass girls they'd grown up wanting to be dealt with breakups by saving the world, not falling apart. When their parents' marriage ended, Mom started a book club and began taking art classes at a local college, while still making more money than Dad at her job.

How had Emily so utterly missed the *point*?

"Becky?" Anne prompted.

"I don't know," Becky said resignedly, though she hadn't heard Anne's question.

"I know we both won't fit in the tub," Anne said, trying a watery smile, "but we can just sit here." She slid down to the floor to indicate, leaning her back against the tub. Reaching

behind for her laptop, she moved it to her knees, waiting.

Becky had tried to watch some of the in-flight movie options on her way home, but about five minutes in she kept having to switch to another, before giving up and staring out the window for the remaining six hours. Television seemed too empty to even find numbing. Still, Anne looked almost hopeful. Hope was a hard thing to come by at the moment. “Yeah, I’ll just tell Chris where I am, if he’s still up. And that he should maybe use the downstairs bathroom.”

“He seems really great,” Anne said suddenly and then ran her hand down her face to cup her mouth. “God, of all things...I’m just...glad you have someone like him right now. It must be nice—no! I mean...You know what I mean.”

The word ‘nice’ slapped. Nothing was going to be nice or good or better or much of anything for a long while. The thought of introducing Chris to all her family and friends in these circumstances troubled her. It seemed like a distraction, a topic of conversation for everyone to cling to, one that somehow took away from what was going on, took her away, even in slices of minutes, from where she should be and who she should be grieving with.

“I’ll be right back,” Becky said. She crept to her bedroom. Each floorboard creak reminded her she’d taught Emily the quietest way to sneak up their stairs, as Jo had shown her. Anne never needed to know, since she was never home late enough to need to sneak in. Becky wondered if teaching Emily that had been a mistake.

Chris was still sitting up, but asleep, his head nodded back against the headboard. She watched him from the hall with the door pushed just enough open, from where Dad would stand to check on his princesses, long, long before Mom caught him cheating and sent him packing, no counseling, no reconciliation, no trial separation. She could be tough, Mom. Sealed in her room, she was probably tallying all that needed to be done, deciding on her own whether there would

be a wake, what was to be done about a service. They didn't have a family cemetery, but Grams had been buried in Sacred Heart. Becky wondered how it worked, if Emily would be allowed there, if they needed to lie or make it sound gray when it all looked disturbingly black-and-white, except that her sister wasn't supposed to be that kind of girl. No warning signs, no history of mental illness or doing herself harm. Sure, Emily had called crying about Tommy Wales when their breakup loomed a handful of times throughout the fall. But that was high school, that was an eighteen-year-old-girl dating a seventeen-year-old boy, and it wasn't like Becky had to talk her down from a ledge, just distract her from short-lived hysterics.

She went and got her pillow from her bed, easing Chris back to lying down when he stirred. She murmured she'd be camping out in the bathroom with Anne.

"Idiocy," he said, eyes closed. "Take the floor in here instead, not as if I mind."

He was sound asleep again by the time she coaxed Anne into the bedroom, promising the noise of the show wouldn't keep Chris up and who cared if it did, anyway. Anne seemed almost to want to be uncomfortable, as if in penance, but leaning against Becky's bed instead of the bathtub, on carpet instead of linoleum, ultimately made too much sense for Anne to refute.

They watched the episode in silence, Anne's head on Becky's shoulder. When it was over, Becky remembered it from years before but not from the past hour, as if she'd just checked out of the world for a while.

"Becky," Anne asked, as the credits rolled. "Did we do something wrong?"

Becky couldn't find an answer, so she just breathed in the deep rhythm of sound sleep, in time with Chris on the bed. She stayed still, as Anne curled against her and fell into the same rhythm. She was glad for Anne's breath against her neck, glad even of the discomfort of her sister's weight. Her now-only younger sister. 'Worse' seemed as impossible as 'better,' but how

unimaginable it would be, to have no other sisters and lose the one. Just two sisters, were they closer? More able to see something like this coming? Becky thought of their changing allegiances over the years. There were periods when she and Jo were closest as the oldest and the stretches when Jo was ahead, the first one on to middle school, junior high, high school, college, the real world, while she and Anne were united as the left-behind. And more than ever, at those times, Emily would be Jo's pet, and Jo Em's god. At least, until Becky caught up to Jo, and it'd be them sharing everything again, thinking of Anne and Emily together as the little ones.

Her eyes shut tight, Becky tried to think of a time it had been her and Emily on a side of their own. She couldn't come up with one.

* * *

She woke up back in her own bed, somehow, to Jo's firm hand and firmer voice.

"I need you," Jo said. And then, very un-Jo-like: "Please."

"Where's—"

"Chris? Downstairs. Anne? Same. Dad, scouting cemetery plots, Mom, priest, Aunt Sandy, florist. You, with me, move."

Grief apparently blunted Jo more than usual. She was dressed as if for business, in her gray, pinstriped pants and fitted blazer, with a ruffled black blouse underneath, probably usually meant as a nod to femininity but now a flag of mourning. She'd pulled her hair into a smooth upsweep and looked disturbingly put-together, though she lacked her usual eye makeup. With Jo bent so close to her Becky could see the suspicious amount of concealer she'd plastered on.

"I let you sleep as long as I could," Jo said, biting her lip hard as she busied herself with something at the end of the bed. "It's one. And people, friends I suppose, keep on coming. With food, but I thought I had to ask them in, and, well. I don't— well, I've laid out your clothes."

Becky cast the cover aside and, after checking to see the door was shut, stripped off her sleep shirt. “Do we wear black now?” she said, blinking blearily at the pencil skirt and black top laid out. “Beside this I only have the one black dress, and I need three at least, don’t I, for—just, for.” She couldn’t say *wake* or *funeral* and mean them about Emily, whose body she hadn’t seen, would never see again. She’d last spoken to her a week ago and heard about the breakup, presuming it another temporary one. She’d thought, oh, high school, how cute.

“You used to have a closet’s worth of black dresses.”

“They’re going-out dresses—”

“Too slutty, you mean,” Jo said, handing Becky her bra. “We might have to shop then. I don’t know about a wake yet, if there will even be one. It’s all, all beyond. Simply beyond. Arms up,” she said, as Becky obediently lifted them for her to drop the top over. What had she been, seven, nine, when Jo had last helped her dress? No, senior prom. And she was stung, suddenly, her eyes too finally stinging, because Emily would never make it to senior prom; they’d never have a silly argument over which one of the sisters’ dresses she would wear and all get ridiculously offended when Emily of course opted to buy a brand new one instead.

“Oh please not right now,” Jo said desperately. “Don’t cry right now. Put on your skirt, because you’ll make me cry, and so I’ve left Chris handling the Colemans, since, well, Anne’s useless at it. Chris seems— capable enough, but I didn’t think you’d like it.”

Becky’s mouth set in surprise, as much at Jo trusting a man to handle anything as at the Colemans. She wiped at her eyes, shoveling the jagged feelings behind her wall. “Mr. and Mrs.?”

“Mr. and Nick. Sorry.”

She should have wanted to curse, but oddly enough, it didn’t matter at all that her high school boyfriend was under her roof. For what had to be the first time since they were seventeen

and sleeping together. “Oh, him.”

“You must love your British boy quite a lot, to finally be dismissing your Nick Coleman,” Jo said, to which Becky thought absurdly, *my* Nick Coleman, is there another? and debated saying it, if anything mood-lightening was appropriate.

Jo suddenly punched the air, and Becky jumped. “Stupid,” Jo said, too loudly, her features dissolving impressionistically as sudden tears muddled her makeup. “Stupid, stupid, stupid little bitch, I know I shouldn’t say that, I could throttle her, doing this to Mom, to us—”

Becky caught one of Jo’s still-flailing fists. “Honey,” she said, feeling disturbed to suddenly be the one taking care of Jo when it was always the other way around. “Not that I care, but I know most times you would— they can probably hear you downstairs.”

Jo stilled and let Becky pull her into a hug, sagging against her. “Okay,” Jo said, with a shuddering breath. “I’m okay. Much— more okay. Just need more makeup. Yeah. I’m okay.”

Becky could suddenly hear how very non-okay she must sound to Chris. She wanted to go back to bed and stay there for the next decade or so. She zipped up her skirt instead. “You take your time or even just stay up here; I’ll do my people-person thing. It’s why I get paid the big bucks.” Getting to work in London was the perk in itself, not the pay, so she got a gurgling laugh out of Jo. That felt good, even though laughing without Emily seemed like betrayal.

She nodded at Jo and strode towards the door determinedly.

Jo gurgled again. “Hair,” she said, beckoning her back.

Becky turned to her dresser mirror, pulling her straggly ponytail out and combing at the slight snarls with her fingers. A fine frizz haloed her otherwise straight hair. “Doesn’t matter,” she said, waving Jo off. She didn’t need to impress anyone.

* * *

Halfway down the stairs she could see Anne hovering to the side of a circle of three men, Nick and Mr. Coleman and Chris. Startlingly, Chris looked as if he could be related to them. All dark-haired, green-eyed. Maybe it wasn't so vague a resemblance.

Chris's back was to her, so Nick saw her first. His expression was instantly a study in pity, his feet at once taking him toward her. Her on the stairs, him below, echoed her fondest memory of him, Nick's bright, intense stare at the sight of her dressed for junior prom. She called that love, then, but the time since made it a half-lost, half-nonsense dream. First he'd spoiled senior prom by breaking up with her, and then came college, real life. Thoughts of him had been small ones for so long now.

"Hey there, Rebecca Shirley," Nick said softly, when he was only a stride away. She still remembered his middle name, too, an old joke, from their mothers resorting to their full names when they got one another home late. She couldn't have said who opened their arms first, but they hugged, for the first time in years. "I'm so, so sorry."

She expected to hear that a lot. "Me too," she said, thinking there was nothing else anyone could say, that at times like this clichés became necessities. She let Nick go easily. "Mr. Coleman," she said, hugging him too.

She avoided Chris' eyes, afraid of catching his reaction to the inescapable resemblance between him and Nick. "Thanks for coming. Please, please sit down."

"No, we didn't mean to stay, just dropping off some food for your family," Mr. Coleman said. "And if there's anything we can do..."

"Really, visit for a while," Becky said, meaning it. She didn't know what there was to be done, and handling visitors meant no Limbo feeling of purposelessness, with all the details seemingly being managed elsewhere and nowhere for her thoughts to go. "Would you like

coffee? We can make coffee.”

“I can do that,” Anne said, leaping at the opportunity to scurry away.

“The woman from a few doors down brought you coffee cake, as well,” Chris said.

“I’ll get that, too,” Anne called behind her.

“Mrs. Martin,” Nick said to Becky. “She brought the cake.”

“That was it,” Chris said. “Lovely older lady.”

Nick raised a brow, aimed only at Becky. Mrs. Martin had constantly called her mom and his parents to complain about their driving and their loud music as teenagers. She was probably the least likely person to be described as lovely, but Becky did not want to smile right now, and besides there’d been a slight dryness in Chris’ tone that Nick wouldn’t catch, that told her he’d probably gotten Mrs. Martin’s measure just fine but would leave his commentary there.

“Sit down,” Becky pressed again, and Nick sat. His father followed.

Less hesitantly, the Colemans accepted the coffee and coffee cake Anne returned with. Becky didn’t take a piece, but Chris handed her one anyways. She hadn’t eaten in hours, days now, technically, and was unnerved to find her appetite returned. She didn’t touch it, though.

Becky noticed that Anne had a saucer with milk, sugar packets, coasters for the coffee cups, a stack of napkins. The coffee cake pieces, though cut quickly, were quartered precisely and symmetrically arranged. Was it just hardwired into Anne to be more thoughtful than the rest of them? Was there a gene Emily alone received that drove her to her death?

Mr. Coleman, who often played in a foursome with their dad, started trying to ask, indirectly, how her parents were coping.

Chris filled in when both girls simply stared. “Stalwartly, I’d say, considering.”

This was true in Mom’s case, blatantly false in Dad’s.

“So,” Nick said, with energy, actually leaning forward and in front of his father to block further question from his direction, “you’re English.”

For an absurd moment Becky thought Nick was directing that at her again, and she wanted to explain she hadn’t gone native, she certainly wasn’t putting on the accent.

“British, yes, but Cornish, actually,” Chris said. “I’ll say English, too, sure, though my dad goes a bit mad over the distinction.”

“Cornish?” Nick said, lost.

“Cornwall,” Becky said hastily, “but he works in London.”

“And what do you do, Chris?” Mr. Coleman asked, politely.

“I’m an accountant,” Chris said. “And yourself?”

“Becky said you worked for a record label,” Jo said, from the stairs. Her makeup was perfect again, her face almost eerily collected as she sat down with them.

“As an accountant,” Chris said. “It’s not a major label.”

“I’ll bet you do all right for yourself, though,” Nick said, also seeming to aim for polite, but Becky still winced. Jo shot Nick a censoring glare, which luckily he missed.

Anne was studying her coffee very seriously. Possibly, having the Colemans sit down had not been such a good idea. Becky thought she might suffocate on small talk.

“All right, yeah,” Chris agreed. “I like doing it, that’s the important part.”

“Exactly,” Mr. Coleman said. “Second most important thing in life.”

“Second?” Jo said, edgily.

Becky remembered Mr. Coleman as being very devoted to his wife. She didn’t want him to say love or romance. It wasn’t supposed to be the be-all, end-all. She’d thought Mom taught them all that, but Emily didn’t seem to have listened.

“Who you spend it with,” Mr. Coleman said, artlessly.

Jo pursed her lips. “Phrased that way, I’ll give it to you.”

“This is real good coffee,” Nick said, hoisting his cup.

“That it is,” Chris said, with some animation. He didn’t drink coffee.

“It’s Brazilian, fair trade,” Anne said, looking up from her mug.

Becky stood up. “Excuse me a minute,” she said. She strode off into the kitchen. Only when she was decidedly out of sight did she lean against the fridge, thudding her head back hard.

“I know, I’m not fine,” she said, when Chris followed. “But I don’t need you in here.”

He put his hands up, innocently. “I’m only escaping, myself. En route to the gents.”

“No, you’re either telling me I’m not fine or you want to know what’s up with Nick.”

“Bull, to both. Especially the latter. You think I’d badger you about that? *Now?*”

“More likely later,” Becky allowed.

“I couldn’t care less,” Chris said. “He’s obviously an ex, but you weren’t unhappy to see him. I don’t see the problem.”

He was saying too many right things. “I don’t need you here,” Becky repeated defiantly.

Chris rolled his eyes. “No, tough as nails, you are. Thing is, I’m here, anyway.”

“You can’t make anything better.”

He held up his hands, backing away. “I can’t make it worse, either, can I, though?”

She didn’t suppose he could. Yes, the presence of her boyfriend and her ex, really spoiling her sister’s death for her. She hit her head against the fridge again and stared at the ceiling. Chris really had headed in the direction of the bathroom.

She’d had a series of boyfriends, between Nick and Chris. There were always some guys interested, and sooner or later one mutually interesting. She never felt panicked into latching on

forever upon finding someone. She'd broken up with guys nothing was wrong with because there was more out there for her, still. She could pick out, or go back to, an interested-interesting guy to settle down with when she wanted that. So maybe she'd played along too much when she'd listened to Emily rave about Tommy Wales. So Tommy played guitar. So he had a nice smile. So he was hilarious. So Chris kept a harmonica in his back pocket that he'd once pulled out shamelessly on the Tube. Becky could find lovable quirks in anyone, anywhere, even if she would miss that one. So he defused bar fights instead of getting into them, since when had she liked that, anyway? So he was sure of her, maybe he shouldn't be. So he was sure of himself. That she couldn't dismiss.

"Hey," Nick said from the kitchen threshold. She was a little disappointed it wasn't Chris looping back through. "We, uh, brought a fruit basket."

"I didn't notice," Becky said. She peeled herself off the fridge. "You want something?"

Nick shrugged, looking rueful. "I feel bad for Anne and Jo too, but I came to see you."

When she looked away, he headed to the fruit basket, grabbed an apple and pear and held both out to her. He leaned against the counter as if intending to stay there a while.

Becky frowned. "I don't want really want to catch up or make small talk." She took the extended apple. "I would like to know how you're doing," she admitted. "But— not today."

Nick nodded. Then quietly he said, "Tommy Wales works at our store." She noticed he didn't call Coleman Hardware his dad's store anymore, wondered how long before it was just his. "Emily was in all the time."

Becky flinched. "Where are you going with this?"

"Just— I saw her at least once a week most of this year. And I felt I ought to tell you, even if you'd been home, I don't think you could have seen it coming—"

She felt cold. “Yeah, Nick, I’m sure you saw everything I could have.”

Nick fumbled the pear between his hands. “I didn’t mean to say I— I know I’m not...”

“She was my sister,” Becky said, half-apologetically, half-annoyed. She recognized Nick’s wounded face. He’d always been sensitive to perceived slights on his intelligence, especially from her, never believed she thought him as keen in his own way as anyone anywhere. “I’m supposed to see things other people don’t.” She bit her apple and chewed for a moment, waiting, but he didn’t speak up again. “Except I didn’t. And you don’t think I ever could have.”

“No, I mean—she’d come in worked up at him, like you used to get... so much like you, so how could you think she’d do any different from you? When you’d never... You’d never.”

“No, when you broke up with me, I clocked you and got over it,” Becky said tiredly.

“About sums it up, if you skip you breaking your finger on my face and my mom driving us to the ER,” he said. “You’re still proud of that, huh?”

It’d been two fingers, and she’d sobbed her eyes out in the minivan the whole ride there. She remembered the pain, the feelings, but they were shadows to her now, like Nick himself.

“Yes,” Becky said, then, “No. Of course I’ve been sorry for years.”

“Really now?” At her defensive look, he explained, “Cause you sure held to your word.”

“Word, *what* word?”

“In the waiting room.” He stared at his pear. “You were still crying. So I said how of course we’d still go to prom, stay friends after you went to Boston. You said, we weren’t friends, never again, wouldn’t I be *sorry*. I didn’t know what to say. I just handed you some magazine.”

Oh yes—the *People* magazine. Having shaped those words with her lips, heard her voice say them out loud, stayed foggy, but still the memory clicked as true and brought with it another thought, ever-so-so-briefly imagining, that angry night after, dressed up and dateless, that if a

dreaded prom-night accident should happen, wouldn't Nick be sorry forever if she died.

She could get no closer than that thought, the brief imagining of the 'what if,' to understanding Emily. Something at her core held the thought, forever, as just that, a wisp and never more, and she'd always assumed her sisters were the same. She'd counted on it.

"You did say something, too," Becky said to Nick. "You said I'd get over it."

"Ahh," he said. "I was dead wrong. I meant we'd be friends again in a week, a month."

Becky bit her lip. "Wrong about that, maybe. But it was still true."

Becky knew, then, in a few months, a few years it would be too true when she said she was fine. The gap torn in her life, the grief, the questions, they wouldn't be gone, Becky *couldn't* ever let them be gone. But she was going to be okay, her life in London essentially unchanged but for the absence of her Emily's phone calls and idle plans for a distant visit. That was the most dazzlingly awful thought imaginable right now. It diminished mourning to a moon phase that would come and go, though undoubtedly with less regularity. Adaptability: maybe the greatest and most terrible facet of humanity. The tough get going.

Nick spun his pear on the countertop. "You know, I've been sorry for years, too," he said, very low, and she felt at once something more was there, if she chose to ask. But she didn't.

She smiled, painfully but genuinely. She tossed her apple core and reached for another. "Thanks for bringing the fruit basket," she said. "It was— friendly."

She headed back to the other room, Nick following. Chris must have come back around the other way, either avoiding passing by her again or letting her talk to Nick. He was back with the group, up on his feet just then, grabbing Anne a Kleenex box. She stopped and watched for a second, as he got Jo to take a Kleenex, too.

Nick followed her gaze, too. "So. You and him, huh?"

Becky truly didn't need Chris to get through this. Not to live. She'd bet anything he could live without her. She didn't believe any answer, any choice down some lifeline, would shatter his core. And those two truths meant, she supposed, that she could lean on him. If she let herself. The way she leaned on Jo and Anne now, the way she wished Emily had chosen to lean on her.

"Me and him," she agreed.

She longed, suddenly, to tell Emily, like some girl in a book or show, with a boiled-down ending that came in the nick of time, see, see, love needn't be need. Wait till tomorrow and see.

Fayne Girls Story #2 of 3

Stopping

Jo Fayne got up in the early morning on the second day of Emily's wake, with no alarm but the Colemans' barking dog and her own throbbing need to screw somebody, and soon. She couldn't shut up the dog; *she* hadn't brought any convenient guy, much less a perfect British boyfriend, home for the funeral; she couldn't bring her littlest sister back from the dead. And she couldn't get back to sleep. So she got up.

She worked to keep the nest of pillows and blankets on Anne's bedroom floor from whispering against each other as she untangled herself. But the moment Jo stood, Anne sat bolt upright in bed. "Where are you going?" Anne asked.

"To work on the eulogy," Jo said.

"I thought you wrote it on the flight?"

"I did," Jo said. The whole flight home to Florida from New York, she scribbled on six

napkins and an in-flight magazine, but all she got down was the word *selfish*, over and over again. *The stupid, selfish little bitch*. “It’s not entirely done. And I can’t sleep.”

“You were sleeping all right,” Anne said, her voice too floating and fragile for Jo to bristle at her. Her eyes looked unfathomably dark in the shadowed room. Jo’s room, once, before home became more a mere stopping place. The walls were still her navy, rendered nautical by Anne’s cream décor, her bookshelves still up but mainly empty since Anne, too, now lived away, at school. They’d all left Emily behind.

“Becky seems to be sleeping okay, too,” Anne added.

Jo felt like Becky was still in London, instead of next door. Becky had slept off her jetlag all Sunday, right through to mid-Monday, and last night she fell asleep in her British boyfriend’s arms during the car ride from the funeral parlor. For all Jo knew, she’d been sleeping since.

“Becky hasn’t been eating,” Jo said. Anne couldn’t sleep; Becky couldn’t eat; both were doing enough of one to make up for the other. It was like a horrible nursery rhyme, a joke Jo had no way to make funny. Awfully, even embarrassingly, she herself was eating and sleeping fine.

“She said she’ll eat when Mom eats,” Anne said.

Jo snorted involuntarily. Anne, misunderstanding, reached to grab her the Kleenex box.

“Mom’s a machine,” Jo said. If her mother wasn’t barricaded in her room, with nonstop murmuring that could be phone calls or prayer, she was striding out, picking out a grave plot, finagling a Catholic burial even though the one-car crash screamed “suicide.” Beyond condolences, all friends and family seemed to say was what a *marvel* Mom was, and Jo herself, so *composed*. First of the Fayne girls home to Florida, ordering the flowers, picking the readings. No surprise, she was the oldest, always good in a crisis. Hadn’t she managed her parents’ divorce so beautifully some fifteen years ago, when she’d been little more than a slip of a thing?

Anne gave Jo a meaningful look, and before she could follow it with anything about Jo emulating their mother, anything so completely off-target Jo couldn't bear to hear it, Jo said, "Try to rest," and slipped out the bedroom door.

She meant to go find pen and paper. Her laptop was parked in some corner, but she wanted nothing to do with it or its winking, waiting cursor. She crept quietly down the stairs, since Dad was on the couch, and every time he blubbered Jo needed to step into the bathroom and press her forehead against the mirror until she stopped wanting to hit him.

But he wasn't on the couch. The blanket her mother had laid out was still neatly folded.

Jo moved toward the kitchen, checking the front window on her way. Dad's car was still there and her aunt's. Dad could be with his sister in the front room, if he'd fallen asleep in the armchair, or with Mom behind the locked master bedroom door. Processing, Jo knocked her shin against a stool and noticed there were dishes, tumbling out of the sink into stacks along the side. Mom probably meant to get to them this morning.

Jo unloaded the dishwasher, quickly, and started rinsing, sending a murk of coffee cake and crockpot beef and the inevitable lasagna down to where the garbage disposal would get it later. She wanted to smash the plates, Mom's wedding china, over thirty years old, going on twice Emily's age of eighteen. Outlived by plates and the neighbors' damn dog.

She found herself lashing out with a sponge at the same plate over and again, long after its lasagna smears were gone, till her breath came harsh and her eyes finally watered.

She heard the shuffle behind her and whipped around. For a wild second she thought Nick Coleman stood in her kitchen, but it was Becky's current boyfriend, Chris. Dark hair, light eyes, strong nose. No one could say Becky didn't have a type. Nick had been Becky's best friend till the two dated, and though Becky had barely been civil to him in the decade since, he and his

father had brought food over to the house and turned up again at the funeral parlor yesterday. Chris couldn't have failed to notice the self-resemblance; Jo wondered how *that* had gone over between him and Becky.

Chris stopped backing away. "Morning. Give you a hand with those?" he asked mildly, with a nod at the dishes.

"Thanks, I've got it." Jo stepped away from the sink. "Did you want something?"

Chris hesitated in the threshold. "Could you point me to your tea kettle?"

"Don't have one. We have that thing," Jo gestured at their single-serve coffee machine, almost hidden behind the clear-wrapped baskets filled with fruit and jams and even a fondue pot. Their counter looked like a Chinese auction. "But I don't think we have any tea."

"I think your friends brought a bundle of boxes, actually." Chris would know; although a stranger to everyone but Becky, he'd collected and sorted most of the food arrivals.

Jo took pains to soften her tone. "That thing can spit out hot water for you, then. If you need me to work it for you—"

"We do have all kinds of coffee makers in London, you know," he said, with a smile and thankfully no pity lurking in its corners. "Do you want anything, while I'm at it?"

"Coffee," she said. She was seated at the kitchen table, without really remembering leaving the sink. "I should be doing more," she said and then, belated, as she heard him press buttons, "Thanks."

"Holding up as well as you are, that's something enough."

Jo spread her fingers on the table. "How's Becky?"

"Reckon you could tell that better than me," Chris said, leaning against the counter corner. "She likes seeing her friends. It helps, being around people."

“For some,” Jo said. She was not looking forward to another day in the funeral parlor. She never wanted to touch the slippery pages of a newspaper again, after seeing Emily’s name in not once but thrice, the death announcement, the obit, and worst yet, the headline story in the *Orlando Sentinel*’s regional section. “It seems like it should be more private, what happened,” she blurted, “and it’s more public instead. Everyone wants to know, and we barely do.”

All the e-mail had said was *I just need everything to stop*. Jo read it under the table at an editors’ meeting and managed to make her excuses before she broke into a high-heeled sprint out of the building, as if she could dash all the way home to Florida from New York City. Anne sent a reply from San Diego with x’s and smileys about how college would be better. Now Anne couldn’t stop worrying aloud whether Emily received that oblivious reply before driving her car straight into the retaining wall of a highway bridge. Becky, who’d been on British Standard Time and gotten the news from home before ever seeing the email, assured Anne she wouldn’t have understood it either. But Jo, eleven years apart from Em, never before able to hear the thoughts behind her words like she could Becky’s, had known it on sight for a suicide note.

The confusion on her sisters’ faces wrung Jo like a sponge. It made her want to give an answer to how she knew. She didn’t have one that would comfort them.

Chris handed Jo a coffee from behind, before returning to the machine. He’d made hers first. “There’s never any surety, thing like this. No way to know.” His lips went taut.

“Did you know someone?” Jo asked, carefully.

“Yeah,” Chris said. He turned all the way back toward her, but his eyes were on the ceiling and far away. “Not close like this, but yeah. A few.” He shrugged away the question before Jo could ask and smiled again, too. But this time it crumpled his chin. “I’m from Cornwall. We’ve got cliffs.”

Jo took a swallow of coffee to hide her sharp inhale. The roof of her mouth burned. She thought of mist from below, of falling and falling and not flying, versus concrete and tires. It would be dangerous, living somewhere that made death look that easy. “Is it beautiful there?”

“Oh, beyond,” Chris said, to the soundtrack of crumpling, squeaking wrap, as he opened one of the baskets for a box of tea. “If you get across for a visit, we’ll take you.”

His quiet assurance of a future with Becky threw Jo. She’d known they’d moved in together, recently, but Becky had lived with men before, never for long. It was easy, long-distance, to forget Chris existed, hard to gauge the seriousness from Becky’s rapid-fire reports. But here he was, doing all the right things like a boy in a book. Jo wondered if they were having teary comfort screws on Becky’s childhood bed, once upon a time the girls’ favorite to jump on, before they grew tall enough to crack their heads on the ceiling. She tried not to wonder.

“You’re not Becky’s usual type at all,” Jo said. Becky’s cardboard boyfriends ranged from disposable to boorish, from born-for-community-college Nick Coleman to that Argentinian.

“No?” Chris said. His eyes crinkled.

“You’re an improvement,” Jo said. Oh hell, that bridged on flirting. Fleeting she considered whether Chris would go for it if she were, god forbid, to try anything. Though she tended not to think well of men in the faithfulness department, she thought not. Every time Becky moved, Chris’s eyes went to her like she had bells on only he could hear.

Jo wished her mind, at a time like this, just went blank, instead of chugging along, off the rails of sanity. “I can’t remember if I said it,” she came up with, at last, “everything aside, it’s nice to meet you.”

* * *

Chris and the priest were the only new faces at the second day of the wake. The first day there were more of her father's golf buddies and a pouring of Emily's school friends. It was worse, having to deal with all the relatives who'd made it in from out-of-town, the close friends who'd returned for a second day, her own old friends who were there for her, not Emily.

And it was a problem, since Jo had determined getting laid was the only way to stop herself from snapping like the hairband she'd wrapped around her wrist for hours. Tightened one loop too far, the band shot off unnoticed to the far end of the coffin. Mom held court there, Anne hovering beside her like a lost lady-in-waiting.

"I'm sure she's in a far better place," her mom's cousin was saying to Jo. She'd taken her hand. Jo didn't even feel it.

Another one of Dad's sobs reverberated through the funeral parlor with such ferocity it seemed like the picture frames they'd set up all around should be shaking. Even Mom flinched.

"Do you think?" Jo replied, flatly. Jo had skimmed Dante's *Inferno* recently, while editing a romance novel centered on venturing into the circles of hell. There was a forest for suicides, where their souls became trees. Jo didn't know enough about trees to know what sort Emily would be. But the wood for the closed coffin was all wrong, too dark, too rich, for sun-streaked Emily, enough of a dreamer to want to play ice hockey in Florida and enough of a charmer to get her parents to troop all over the Southeast for travel games. Who might, in the box, still have on her close-cut nails the fancy salon polish Jo had sent for her birthday.

Her mom's cousin nervously skidded to the side, letting her son through to Jo to give her a murmured 'sorry' and a kiss on the cheek.

Jo watched as he moved off. "Alec, third cousin once removed?" she asked Becky, when her sister was released from yet another former teacher's hug.

“Second,” Becky said, on autopilot. Her pageboy hair looped out of the silver clip meant to hold it neatly to the nape of her neck. Jo stepped behind her, gathered it in a wave, and re-clipped it. Her hands felt terribly weighty, her motions stiff.

No cousins, Jo told herself firmly. She cast her eyes down the line for quick possibilities. Mr. Kilbride, gray-haired but handsome and single, was the sort of man Jo might consider in New York, but here he was her dad’s old friend and frequent golf partner. Corey Mulvich from down the block? He’d grown up to resemble the Michelin Man. Dave Cochrane from high school? He brought Jo a crayon drawing his three-year-old daughter had done of Emily, her favorite babysitter. Jo wondered how he’d explained to his kid that Emily wouldn’t be coming over anymore.

“How’s New York? The job?” Dave asked, as Jo put the drawing in her blazer pocket.

“Wonderful,” Jo lied. “It’ll be hard to go back, with everything here— but wonderful.”

Each volley of condolences upped the feeling of corded tension, sped up her heart. The way her teeth clicked together seemed unnatural. She must be grinding them again.

Jo glanced to see where second-cousin-once-removed Alec had gone. She looked past Becky deep in conversation with Chris, spotting Alec’s mother conversing with... Chris.

Jo craned her neck for a better look at the man facing Becky. On second glance he proved a little broader, a little shorter, than Becky’s present boyfriend. Of course it was Nick Coleman. Back for the second day, apparently without his father this time. That was as interesting as it was unexpected.

He’d do nicely.

Jo pounced. She turned away from the line, toward him, and tugged on the end of his suit coat. “Back again, Nick?”

He turned to her in surprise but put his arms out to enfold her in a patting hug. “I didn’t think you saw me yesterday,” he said, looking back at Becky to add, “Your mother didn’t.”

“So thoughtful, to come back to see us,” Jo said.

“It was, it really was, Nick,” Becky said, touching his arm, and then with a nod at Jo, slipped away to free Chris from Mom’s cousin. Nick’s eyes tracked her, which worried Jo, plans aside. Their long-ago breakup ended with Becky in the ER. She broke her hand on his jaw.

Jo pressed close to Nick’s side. He tore his stare from Becky to blink down at Jo.

“You okay?” He flushed a ruddy red. “Bad question. But you seem—”

She slid her hand into his suit coat pocket. It was a little too short on him, pockets falling above his belt line. “Car keys?” she asked, low, when he didn’t seem to get the idea.

“Other pocket.” He frowned. “Guess you’re stranded here, flying in. You need a ride?”

Very slowly, Jo said, “I need to not be here.”

Just as slowly, he nodded. “Okay,” he said quietly. Then he looked up and caught Becky’s eye with a nod like the one she’d given Jo. With gun-draw speed he pointed at Jo and then jerked his thumb to the exit.

Becky, over someone’s shoulder, widened frowning eyes at Jo.

Jo mouthed ‘I’ll be back’ and then tapped her head. Becky was probably the only person in the world who’d take that as ‘need to think about the eulogy’ rather than ‘headache,’ but Becky’s eyes went clear again. She gave a thin shadow of her ‘got it’ smile.

Jo excused herself through the crowd like she was heading to the ladies’. She found Nick’s side again only as they headed to the parking lot.

He opened the door for her, hand briefly hovering at the small of her back.

“Surprised you’d pick me,” he said, sounding baffled.

“Are you really?” She presumed he had condoms in his car. If they parked far enough away, she could be back where she was supposed to be, less explosive, within an hour easy.

“I’ve never known what to say to you,” Nick said, matching her clipped pace. “I was telling Becky, about Emily coming into the store, since Tommy Wales works for me—”

“Who?” Jo asked, distracted, and then remembered. Emily’s Boy. He broke up with Emily, she crashed her car, but that was oversimplifying it, Jo thought. There’d been tears every night over papers, labs, college application work, fretting over next year’s workload and the commitment of a scholarship athlete, and all the hysterics left Jo cold because she’d done all that, and it only got harder. And she’d said as much to Em. “Oh, him,” she said, when she realized Nick was staring. She badly needed to get out of her own head.

Jo walked right past an SUV when its lights blinked, and she realized Nick had unlocked his car. He opened the passenger door for her and said, “Well, I’ll have you home in a few.”

She’d been too subtle for him. “I don’t think we’re on the same page,” Jo said, as he shut the driver’s door behind him. She put her hand on his thigh and slid it up his linen pants.

“Josephine,” he said, very fast. She hadn’t even remembered that he’d call her that, sometimes, when he used to be in their house every day. “You drunk?”

“Not at all,” she said tiredly. “But that wouldn’t hurt.” She slid her hand to the seam of his pant legs.

“Could you, maybe, ah,” Nick said, breath hitching.

She moved her hand. Through the linen she could feel the loose line of his boxers and poking hair, and when she curled her fingers around the fleshy shape beneath he went half-hard.

“Holy fuck,” Nick said. He grabbed her wrist, delicately, but clearly intending to lift it up and away. “This isn’t right,” he said, all in a breath, when she let him go. He swung her arm back

over to her side and lowered it like a lever to her lap. “This isn’t you.”

Jo’s chest went very tight, loosening again only as the tautness shot to her fingers and toes. “Oh right, because you know me, you know me, clearly,” she said. She reached for his car door. “Never mind, I’ll find someone who doesn’t.”

Keys jingled behind her, and Nick reached over, pulling the door closed with her hand still on it. Her elbow jerked. He started the car, his jaw set.

“Put your seatbelt on,” he said.

She’d won. Jo supposed she should feel satisfaction or anticipation, something.

Nick drove. He did not put on the radio or look at her in the four minutes it took to get back to their neighborhood. Jo busied herself checking her tights for runs, but there were none.

There were no cars in her driveway, since all were at the funeral home, but Nick pulled along the curb instead of pulling in.

“Not my house,” Jo said, nodding at his ahead. He still lived with his father, yet even if Mr. Coleman was home, it was a big house with a side entrance straight to the basement.

He put it in park. “No, Jo, I think maybe you should get some—”

She surged forward, fast enough to stretch the seatbelt’s pull on her, and kissed him, hard, on the side of his mouth. Her tongue stole along his lips, and she could feel the pressure of his teeth beneath his cheek.

His hands came down on her shoulders, and he drew back against the door while holding her still. “What’s wrong with you?” His eyes scanned her as if expecting to find an answer.

Everyone said they were so alike, the Fayne girls, equally clever, nice, neatly pretty. Not enough, she guessed. If she said, *pretend I’m Becky*, Jo wondered what he’d do. Becky wasn’t a horrendous person. She was still at Emily’s side, not that Emily could care, while Jo’s only

defense was, better Nick than Chris. “Better you than a cousin,” she said aloud.

“Maybe you should go inside,” Nick said, undoing her seatbelt.

Jo grasped at it, flailing, as it pulled away from her. She caught the belt, holding it, and found she was crying. “Don’t do this,” she said, all she could think of, her vision blurring like a windshield in rain. “Don’t.” The empty house seemed a horror, worse even than all the faces with sad cow eyes she’d left.

She could hear Nick shifting in his seat. “Where do you want to go?” he said at last.

She thought of Becky and faced him with a strangled laugh. “Another country.”

Nick rubbed his palms over his face, his elbows resting on the steering wheel. “Why?”

“Drink. Sightsee.” People she’d never seen before. People she’d never have to see again. Cornwall and its cliffs. “Drink,” she repeated, fast, to kill the thought.

Nick lifted his head from his hands. “I’ve got a bar in my basement.”

Getting drunk, she thought, was a start. She nodded him on.

She was still brushing tears away when Nick unlocked a side door leading directly to a downward staircase. He stayed two steps in front of her.

“Am I that terrifying?” Jo asked his back.

He hit the lights instead of answering.

She’d never been in his basement. Becky had lost her virginity down here at seventeen and told Jo it was cold and all concrete, with white leather couches, but it was carpeted now, and the couches were suede. There was a tremendously large TV mounted on the wall and a sleek bar built into the far end, complete with an old-fashioned jukebox.

She drifted toward the bar, running her hand along the navy-blue painted wall. His father’s hardware store must pay better than she thought, or maybe he’d done a lot of it himself.

“Take anything,” Nick said, hopping onto a stool and watching her.

Jo went behind the bar, checking the premium vodkas in the glass cabinet and popping open the mini-fridge. “Nice stock. You could Drink Around the World.”

He looked up in surprise at that. Becky had done just that for her twenty-first, at Epcot, the one Disney park that sold alcohol, in the countries of the world section. There was beer in Norway and Germany and America, cocktails at the Tea Stand in China, sangria in Morocco, plum wine in Japan, margaritas in Mexico, where Jo and Becky and Becky’s friends made the mistake of ending instead of starting. It was ninety degree weather and an all-day event, and Jo, twenty-three, already employed in New York, was home for the birthday and supposed to be the responsible party. That amounted to her being the only one who wasn’t vomiting by nightfall. Becky was drunk and upset enough to call Nick for help. He gave them a ride and complained the entire time. But he did come.

“Epcot,” Nick said. “Closest I’ve gotten to another country.”

“You’ve got time,” Jo said vaguely, hefting a bottle of Grey Goose. “And money.” Emily had never set foot in Mexico, Europe, Canada even. She was never going to be twenty-one. Jo pulled out the tequila.

“I’m buying the store from my dad, a little at a time. House, too.”

Still cradling the tequila, Jo reached a pack of Beck’s, some stray Guinness, and the only bottle of wine Nick seemed to have at all out of the fridge, and clinked them down on the bar top. “Let’s start with Mexico,” she said. “Shot glasses?”

Nick pointed to a cupboard. “My life,” he said, shaking his head, “is only strange when the Fayne girls are involved.”

“I’m not ‘the Fayne girls,’” Jo said sharply and took a shot from the bottle before

pouring.

Nick didn't comment, and he didn't turn down the tequila either.

Between shots, Jo focused, intently, on remembering the order of the countries.

"Germany, Italy," she said, pushing the bottle of wine, even though it was from California, closer to the Beck's. She found Bailey's to add to the Guinness. "Ireland."

"There isn't an Ireland in Epcot," Nick said.

There were fake cliffs, Jo remembered, but in Canada. "Isn't there an Ireland kiosk? I guess you wouldn't have sake. There's this sushi bar I get sake at, when I go for lunch."

"During work?"

Jo leaned across Nick's bar. She had a mini-fridge in her office where she kept a bottle of Riesling. It got her past the three o'clock push, most days. "You sound so scandalized."

Nick ran his hand through his hair. "Not much left in way of a line to cross, is there?"

There was plenty. "I haven't actually gone off to Disney World while Emily's dead. Or even a real bar. You're the only one in the whole world who knows how awful I am."

"I don't think you're awful," Nick said. Jo was sure he was lying. "Gonna make yourself awful sick, though."

He wasn't stopping her, and he took the shot of Grey Goose she poured him. France. Jo couldn't remember if it was French or Spanish that Emily took in school. She hadn't lived at home for any of Em's high school years. "I never get sick," Jo said. "I got my stomach from my mother and drinking from my dad."

Nick stopped with the glass at his lips. "How are your parents?"

Possibly getting more action than her. Jo found it hard to think about, let alone look at them. They were three times Emily's age, divorced, professionally disappointed. Her father

never got far as a pro golfer; her mother wanted to be something literary, wound up in insurance, and raised them to never choose a man over a career. Shouldn't her parents be the ones tired of life? "Disappointed," she answered, choosing it over other 'D' words: distraught, destroyed, disturbed, defeated. "They've always expected things of us—right there in our names."

Nick cracked open a Beck's and the first couple buttons on his shirt. "The book names."

He'd been in the corner of their lives for so long. How much he knew about their present, long-distance lives probably depended on how much their mother went around saying, but he knew them of old. "Final Jeopardy, Nick," Jo said, with another shot of vodka, "which books?"

"I've seen the movie, of yours," he said. "Beth dies."

"Four sisters, of course one dies young," Jo said. "Everyone knows that."

She hadn't, once. In fourth grade, a girl asked which of her sisters was 'the Beth.' Jo hated that girl, since she read the best in class and got even more answers right than Jo, and because Jo hated her no one sat with the girl at lunch.

Jo told that girl matter-of-factly that she'd read *Little Women*, too, in *second* grade when her mother gave it to her. *Nobody* died, not even the old neighbor or old aunt. But Jo's friends for once took the other girl's side. They'd seen the movie. The shy sister, Beth, definitely died, and Laurie married Amy, the blonde sister. Go ask the teacher, they dared, when Jo called them liars.

She was afraid to ask, since deep down she believed them, and when she took the copy of *Little Women* from the bookshelf at the back of her classroom and compared it to her own, she found it was twice as long. There was a second volume, originally published separately, but Mom hadn't given Jo that part.

For a while after that, Jo tried being a Josie, but the name felt clumsy on her, and no one used it. Being a Josie took more panache.

Nick cleared his throat. "And I've seen *Rebecca*."

Jo snorted mid-sip of vodka. It burned its way up her nose. "Hitchcock's *Rebecca*?"

Nick tapped his beer can, shoulders stiff. "Yeah."

"No, no. She's *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*. Maybe you don't know us so well."

He jerked upright. He'd been the one to break up with Becky. His expression of dismay, ten years later, seemed nonsensical. "What?"

"Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm. Who, for that matter, was named after Rebecca from *Ivanhoe*. Have you read that?" Jo shrugged. "There's probably a movie."

"Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm?" Nick repeated, almost forlornly.

"They're all 'of' something, except me," Jo said. "I got Mom's favorite name. I was supposed to be the odd one out." She reached for a Guinness.

He grabbed it first. "Don't mix that in," he said, looking queasy at the thought, rather like when she'd been touching him. He looked like he wanted to add something, but didn't. Jo prompted him, and Nick finally spoke. "You shouldn't... you sound something like jealous."

"Of Becky?" Of course she was jealous of Becky, in a proud sort of way. Becky who could golf, Becky who could forgive Dad, who fell in love easily and hugged everyone, who thought so much like Jo but had something Jo didn't. She wasn't sure what it was, but it lay in the difference between Jo going to New York because that was where the job was and the way Becky chose Boston for college, for its autumn and cobblestones, and worked to find a job that would let her have London, for its Underground and accents. Why Anne went to San Diego for college, Jo couldn't say. And she didn't know what Emily had wanted, either.

"Of Emily," Nick was saying.

"Death's easy for the dead," Jo said. "Especially if she's a tree."

A beat passed. “You do terrify me,” Nick said eventually. “Mostly ’cause I’ve got no clue who you are.”

Same back, Jo thought. “Did you ever, besides ‘Becky’s sister’?”

“Yeah,” Nick said. He poured himself a shot, then another, and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. A few more and with any luck he’d be all over her. “Used to think you’d be my sister someday. You were the kind of sister I wanted.”

“Good Lord,” Jo said. She had to sit down, found her way to the stool. She was close enough to kiss him again but couldn’t on the heels of that. “Why?”

Nick held up empty hands, even as he answered. “You had it together. Even when we were real little you’d come out in the back yard, and Becky would calm down, stop throwing things at me, and Anne would pay attention, and Emily—” He broke off with a frown, because Emily had been too little to play with them. When she was old enough, they didn’t play anymore.

“Emily cried,” Jo said, toying with her shot glass. She couldn’t get it to spin. It kept falling right away. “But I guess everyone thought she had it together, too. You know, Becky thinks something went wrong because we left her, and first thing Anne said was, it was sex.”

Nick’s eyebrows hiked. “How’s that?” he said. He reached across and way over the bar. He came up with a bag of pistachios from a shelf beneath.

“Something about oxycotin and serotonin and the hippo—the hypothalamus,” Jo mused, “and brains not being fully developed till a person’s twenty-five, that Emily wasn’t ready, that sex made her fall too, too in love, made her crazy. I didn’t even know she’d lost it.”

Nick shelled pistachios with the fingers of one hand and snagged a bottle with the other. “That sounds...” He shook his head and swigged. “Who knows. Anne is some kind of genius.”

Anne’s a virgin and doesn’t know what she’s talking about. Jo took a pistachio, though

she needed both hands to crack it. “Emily’s brain is never going to be twenty-five. Twenty-five was a good year. I wanted her to have twenty-five.”

Nick shuffled pistachio shells before saying, “Me, too. Not a year like my twenty-five—but I did, too.”

Two years ago, two years ago? “Oh, your mom,” Jo said. “Sorry.” Soon that would be all Emily was, to everyone else—a reminder, a sorry, a story. “Sorry we weren’t there.”

“Your parents were,” Nick said. “Though not together.” He smiled suddenly but not quite sudden enough to cover his crumpling expression. Jo bet he’d worn the same suit he had on now. She bet he’d wanted Becky there.

“Did you give her eulogy?” Jo asked, and at his slow nod, “Was it any good?”

“Everyone said so,” he said, “but they always say so. I don’t think anyone could even make out much of what I was saying.”

Hearing her dad’s sobbing in her head, Jo imagined Nick doing the same. Something about big men crying made her feel ill. Or maybe that was the drink, on a near-empty stomach.

“I’m not sure what to do with my dad,” Nick said. “I thought they’d be growing old together. And he’s not the sort... She was his best friend. She was his happy ending.”

In *Little Women*, three of the sisters end up married, with kids, but Jo went on to read the sequels, to make sure, and the oldest sister’s husband died, young. “There’s not enough of those to go around,” Jo said. “If at all.” She’d been to the Louisa May Alcott house, when Becky was living in Boston, with its charming colors and rope beds. Louisa had four sisters too, like in her books, and after one died young and one lost her husband, it got worse than fiction. The third died, young enough to leave a two-year-old daughter, and Louisa went slowly, with mercury poison in her blood, no longer able to run, no longer pretty, ancient and sickly at fifty-six.

“Don’t you work in romance novels?” Nick asked her, quirking his head.

“It’s a circle of hell,” Jo said. They’d recently published a Seven Daughters of the Duke series, where each daughter ended up with a well-hung man with a fat purse and safely-delivered fat babies. “No one ever dies, and someone has to.”

Nick waited until it was clear she wasn’t going to continue. “Quit, if you hate it.”

Jo laughed, awfully. She did hate it. When it was for the job, instead of for herself, she even hated reading. But she’d hated school. Hated doing work. Hated getting ready, going out. Hated being away. Hated being home. Hated being, sometimes. “It was supposed to be me. I was going to be unhappy enough for all of us. Are you happy, Nick?” she hustled to say, before he commented.

His hands were in his hair, massaging it till it looked windblown. His stormy expression matched. “Enough. And I remember the last while I was happy, till I make it to the next happy stretch— doesn’t everybody?”

Jo didn’t know what everybody did. She thought she was different and never knew Emily was too. “Do you ever want everything to stop?” she whispered to the bar, since Nick wouldn’t get it. “I think— the most awful things.” Like Chris’ cliffs. She wondered if they were white.

When she dared to look at Nick, she realized she was wrong. At most he could have talked to Becky twice since Emily’s death, for a quarter hour at a time, but she must have told him, about Emily’s email, because he knew.

“I could give you a job at the hardware store,” he said, fast. “Just a junk job, but if you want to come home... Do you talk to someone? You should talk to someone.”

“I only think about it,” Jo said. “I can’t, now.” She thought too much. She thought, what would her mom say? She thought, Emily’s so young. It’d break my parents, my sisters. So Jo

chugged on all these years. And Emily, *selfish selfish selfish*, didn't think at all.

"I should have said something," Jo said, and suddenly she was off the stool, in Nick's arms, on the floor, without being quite sure how she'd gotten there. She dug her nails into his shoulder, which felt a little better, and shook without crying.

They were always bookends, her and Emily, oldest and youngest, and it never occurred to Jo that like bookends, they might mirror each other. "My thoughts are all wrong," Jo said. "And I have to come up with something to say."

"Jesus, Jo," Nick said. He patted her back in a soft, constant tattoo. "I'm not the guy to tell—this serious, dark—it's beyond me. But, wrong thoughts, wrong time, inappropriate—" He broke off on a sigh. "Shit, I've got my share. I think... everybody must. We only say the part people want to know." His hand came to rest, in a slow, warm trace of her spine.

She pulled back, to see if he might kiss her, but he just squeezed her hand and let her squeeze back till his hand turned red and hers white. She wasn't sure how long they stayed there, not moving, but at some point, he pulled her up with him and got her up the stairs.

As they stepped outside, the hugging, humid air turned crisp by darkness, Jo thought, that's Emily, crisp air and nail polish and the hockey bag that stunk up the house. She was funny-sweet and talented and so wonderful we didn't see how breakable she was. And we loved her.

She could take those thoughts and make them longer.

The family cars were crowding the driveway again, the Fayne house busy and bright. Nick gave her to Becky at the door, and Jo couldn't quite make out the conversation, something about what happened and Drinking Round the World. "Becky," she said, falling onto her sister's neck. "Can we stay together tonight? You, me, Anne?"

"I'll put Chris—somewhere," Becky said immediately. He could have Dad's couch, Jo

figured. Becky seemed so tall, like a stranger, still in her shoes while Jo's heels were somehow in Nick's hands. Jo thought, I know you best of all, and still not all the way. She wished she could take all the spinning, secret thoughts in her sisters' heads and weave them into a tapestry, to see which colors and patterns they shared and where they broke away, into sharp difference that might be great or terrible. Instead she had to gather one dropped stitch at a time, day by day, with some parts always out of reach, and a gaping hole of questions and might-have-beens where Emily should be. Jo knew how they all grieved, now, a mystery threaded in scores too soon.

"If I can't hold together," Jo said and stopped, looking at Nick in the door. She wasn't together at all, but tonight wasn't the time to tell. She had tomorrow. "Can you give it?"

Becky said, "Yeah," fiercely, and pulled Jo tight.

"Love you," Jo said, to Becky, to Anne and the house bustling with family, to all the cars parked in the driveway behind Nick Coleman, and maybe to him, too. And to Emily, in the trees or breeze or sky, wherever she was stopped. Jo wasn't sure of much, but she was sure of that.

Fayne Girls Story #3 of 3

Null

Anne Fayne went back to school with her younger sister's laptop. She'd stolen it out of the room she and Emily had once shared, but Emily wouldn't notice. Emily had killed herself. And the laptop was going to tell Anne why.

Anne hadn't had time to search its contents during the week of goodbye her family had just lived through. She felt uncomfortable pulling it out on the plane. As soon as she was back in her San Diego on-campus apartment, she powered it on and installed herself on the couch.

"You got a new laptop?" her roommate Di asked, when she found Anne there.

"It's not new," Anne said. But it almost was. Emily had gotten it for her eighteenth birthday, persuading Mom she needed her own laptop immediately, not next year for college, and it had to be the Macbook, which was guaranteed to last. Anne, whose own bargain laptop was falling behind the times, had been pissed. Now it just made her cling to the idea that only

two months ago, Emily had no thought she'd be long gone in five years' time. "It's inherited."

"From one of your older sisters?" Di asked, cautiously.

"Nope," Anne said, popping the P with a sharpness which surprised her and sent Di scurrying. They usually operated fairly separately, each overloaded with first-semester work toward her PhD. Still, they lived together well and had bonded over their inability to match the wardrobes and fitness level of the California girls surrounding them. So Anne found herself downright outraged by how little Di had to say on the subject of Emily *dying*. She'd said her sorries, of course. But otherwise? Stilted silence.

Anne tried a few combinations on the laptop: Emily's name, Emily's ex-boyfriend's name, birthdays, a compression of all four sisters into "JoBeckyAnneEmily." The password-lock was a real surprise, since Emily never bothered with real-world locks. She'd forget to secure the back door when she came in at night and never once bothered with her bedroom door.

Anne expected, too, more of a glorious mess of Emily-information. Emily left smelly hockey gear all over the house. Her room was a mountain of clothes. Anne had crept in to survey it, like a crime scene, while the rest of the house passed out with funeral fatigue, and couldn't help herself from tidying. (Surely, if Emily's one-car crash had been a plan, and not the maddest of impulses, she would have cleaned her room.) But when Anne went through Emily's school notebooks page by page, she found only neat, generic notes. The only secret record Emily left behind: stray doodles of eyes, floating around pages to be read and calc problems to be done. Anne thought at least to find "Mrs. Tommy Wales" or such in the margins. Given that Tommy's breaking up with Emily precipitated her death by a week to the day, it looked very much like that was the cause to Emily's effect. But his name wasn't scribbled anywhere, perhaps too grade-school for Emily, who, with three older sisters, had always been in some ways old for her age.

Anne felt vaguely sure of something more ominous than freckled Tommy Wales at work in her sister's death. Anne had studied science long enough to know her way around a fallacy.

Emily's laptop was Anne's only hope of more answers. And its exterior did not seem promising. Anne's own laptop keyboard badly needed a good cleaning. Dust outlined every little rectangle and square. It was littered with fingerprint smears, from she-didn't-even-know-what, dried grease or some other residue. Whatever-it-was showed up a ghostly white on the black keys, some of the marks even forming a gross Braille on the otherwise glossy finish. Even if Anne bought proper cleaning solution, she doubted she could ever get it to its original state. She used it, ruined it, owned it, left some of her self behind on it. It made Anne hurt to find that Emily had left no fingerprints behind, not a single solitary smudge on her factory-white keys.

* * *

The facts were these: at 8:28 on a Thursday morning Emily sent, from her phone, a one-line, no-subject e-mail to all three of her sisters: *I just need everything to stop.*

(This was ET: Eastern Time, Emily Time. Anne had been three hours behind.)

At 9:04 that morning Emily drove her car straight into the concrete support of an I-4 overpass. The Medical Examiner's Office found no drugs or alcohol in her system. At the scene, no tire marks or signs of evasive action to prevent collision. The phone company reported no record of texts sent or received by Emily's phone right before or after.

The phone itself didn't come back with Em's effects. It was an iPhone, last seen by Anne in August, en route to the airport to head back to school. Emily had pulled her phone out to snap the sun coming up. "I should get up at this hour more, but let's be real, I never will," she'd said. She was teary giving Anne a hug, but when Anne turned back for one last look from security,

only Mom was waving. She could easily pick out Emily's back, in line at a coffee cart: the faded blue sweatshirt Becky once borrowed from an old boyfriend, knee-high rain boots that had been Jo's, her hair, lightest of all four sisters', lit auburn by airport fluorescence. In any clothes, at any distance, Anne could've picked out Em by the space between her shoulders, her unweighted stance, how her hands hovered at holster-height and left her arms at obtuse triangles.

There had been video calls, but that was Anne's last sight of Emily, in person, alive. Emily as Anne knew her: not at all the sort of girl who killed herself.

This forced Anne to consider what sort of girl killed herself. She made a little list of her instinctive guesses, before research: A girl who stood on the outskirts of conversations. Who worried about possible misinterpretations of her every word. Who sat in on Friday and Saturday nights. Who was unathletic. Who listened to the Joni Mitchell-Fiona Apple spectrum of singers that filled Anne's iPod. Not the girl who mouthed along to the Rolling Stones' "Start Me Up" before hockey games, who never bothered putting a cover-up over her bikini all summer long.

And yet, when Anne was unhappy, she'd go lie in a bath until the water lost its warmth or go put on an audiobook. Once she'd tried both at once and ended up ruining her iPod, but most of the time a little wallowing never hurt anything. To her, the thought of dying, especially dying unaccomplished, unfinished, was not inviting. It scared her shitless.

And even though all-important to Anne, what sort of girl Emily had been was extraneous to the facts. By 9:54 that morning Emily was at the hospital, pronounced dead on arrival. Anne was eating breakfast at the lab and typing an epic reply to Emily's email, a sad-face after every idiot line: *I know... my workload's wild... maybe I should be researching a life-pause-button... Ugh I remember senioritis... hate to say college isn't easier but you get more choices... you'll meet so many new boys, I'm not the best example there haha but just ask Becky... 38 days*

to winter break! Wasn't LAST summer just starting?... it all goes so, so fast...

She sent the email at 10:13. Mom called at 10:46, working so hard to keep her voice even, despite its unnaturally high pitch, that she sounded almost auto-tuned to Anne.

Anne was on a plane in the San Diego airport by 4:15, waiting in the Las Vegas airport from 5:45 to 8:00 at night, waiting for Dad to pick her up at the Orlando airport from 11:38 on. In each airport she reread her own words to Emily, the rambling, empty email, every past text she could recover. *My life is a joke*, Emily wrote, in regards to losing expensive sunglasses, *FML*, she sent every other day, *saveeee me from school pleaseeee*. After her breakup with Tommy Wales went Facebook-official: *seriously I hate everything*.

Anne had that type of texts from every friend she had, she sent them herself enough, and Emily also sent dozens of *LOL!!s* and happy pictures. This did not make Anne feel any better as she reread her own replies: *If your life's a joke what does that make mine? ... I can help if Calc or Physics is a problem but I can't exactly kidnap you... Really, you hate every single thing?*

Okay no I don't hate everything, Emily answered. *But can't it all be easier?*

Emily had never had a job, wasn't in nearly the number of honors classes Anne took in high school. She did play travel-hockey year-round, was sometimes up to all-hours finishing homework especially after weekends away, but she had all three sisters to call on for help. She constantly posted pictures of her in the middle of groups of ten, twelve girls, arms around each other, all in perfect eighteen-year-old-athlete's-metabolism shape.

So, Anne's reply, unremembered by her but preserved on her phone: *What's really so hard? Life is uphill stuff. Trust me, I'm a little higher on the slope over here.*

Emily's next text had been the next day: *Watching TV at Daddy's! He misses you, says keep being brilliant as you are!* She'd been perfectly breezy when they next actually talked.

At the airport, during the wake, now at school, Anne kept calling up the *What's really so hard?* text. She stared at it until the words floated up and tick-tocked accusingly before her eyes.

* * *

Hypothesis no. 1: It was their parents' fault.

Anne was meant to be comparing other research trials' delivery strategies for therapeutic agents. Instead she bought M&Ms from the vending machine and edgily downed the whole bag while she dove into her school's library database for correlations between "divorce" and "suicide". What surfaced was a study in a journal called *Psychiatry Research*, which found that women who'd experienced parents' divorce before the age of eighteen were eighty-three percent more likely to seriously contemplate suicide.

(When controlled for factors like abuse, parental addiction, parental unemployment, decided non-issues in the Fayne family, that eighty-three-percent-more-likely shriveled right up.)

Mom was Anne's age, twenty-two, when she'd come home from college to figure out what to do with her life and gotten with Dad. He was a touch older and goofily gorgeous back when, making money to pay his way on a few pro golf tours and hopefully work his way up. They married and moved to Florida, some seven months before Jo was born: easy math.

Anne had been eight at the split and remembered her parents' marriage mostly as set in the kitchen, Mom humming along with the show tunes Dad played as he made blueberry pancakes. He still made pancakes after the divorce, but no blueberries. It was Mom and Jo who liked fruit in theirs, and Mom and fourteen-for-the-divorce Jo who never forgave him. Anne marked the divorce by the visit to see Dad's new place and Becky's first fit over Jo not coming to Dad's. Their parents wouldn't force Jo, even on holidays.

Emily was not quite five when Mom found out Dad was cheating and kicked him out for

keeps. When Anne mentioned Mom's humming to her one time, Em let out a startled laugh. Mom had no pitch and knew it. Sometimes she murmured lyrics or clicked her tongue in time with the beat of the radio, but no singing or even humming. Em had no memory of their parents married.

Post-divorce, their parents were not warm with each other but hardly what Anne could consider traumatic. "Your father's something of a chump," Mom would say, when Dad's attempt at running a pro shop folded as fast as his pro career, when he downgraded to a smaller apartment, when he let Becky stay out with her boyfriend way past Mom's curfew, when he let Emily add blonde highlights to her hair at eleven years old. Mom never called him anything worse, ever. But she called him a chump a lot. Dad, for his part, said nothing, just smiled funnily through whatever his girls reported on Mom, whatever parenting criticisms Mom laid on him.

Parental pressure was a noted factor in suicides, too: maternal expectations matched with paternal conformity was a deadly combo, according to Anne's research. Mom was a fan of pressure, but Anne wasn't sure it was *bad* pressure. It was never criticism or condemnation for a poor grade, only "you're capable of so much better," and "what do you need to help you be better?" Jo once had a math tutor, Becky made the teary choice to drop track when it hurt her school work, Anne under her Mom's encouragement made the last-minute decision not to take AP Chem the same year she took Physics. As Mom's favorite message went, "You can do/be anything!" And her second favorite, "Balance is all!"

And Dad, well, went along with anything his girls wanted. But Anne couldn't call that conforming with "maternal expectation."

Anne had heard Emily rant about hockey, "It's not worth the time, it's not like I'm that good, it's not like I'm going anywhere with it after college, I'm missing out on all kinds of stuff

with my school friends!” And she’d heard both parents say, separately, “If you want to quit, you can.” “I don’t really want to quit, I don’t really want to quit,” Emily said, each time.

Hypothesis conclusion: rejected (almost, almost entirely).

* * *

Since the funeral, friend requests from some of Emily’s friends started seeping to Anne, Becky, and Jo on Facebook. “I’m not accepting,” Jo told Anne. “It’s nosiness, or something like, and I’m well out of their age group.” Becky said it was sweet and accepted them all. Anne accepted, too. With purpose.

She picked her targets carefully. The ones who friended Anne were all posting *RIP Emily* and *Miss you Emily!* and sharing old pictures of them together. Some of the same girls had already posted new pictures of themselves, toothy grins, tilted heads, heading out in shiny skirts. Anne went after the girls who weren’t broadcasting their return to routine, mainly the hockey girls, ones with names she recollected hearing the most from Emily’s mile-a-minute stories: the likes of Stacy-from-school, Francesa-the-line-mate, Lindy-the-goalie.

She messaged them every fishing question she could think of. And they replied.

Did they know Emily’s computer passwords? Of any secretive internet activity?

[No... you mean like how she spent a lot of time looking up cute pro hockey players?]

Anything strange or secretive about her relationships with any teacher or coach?

[Emily didn’t really talk to teachers outside of class... Or much in class...]

[Um the coach is my DAD.]

Seeing her day-to-day, any changes to her eating habits, any weight gain/loss?

[Do you know something we don’t? Because no way she was bulimic/anorexic/pregnant like you seem to be hinting at, I would NOT believe it! But. None of us believe this either...]

What did they know about Tommy Wales?

[Nice. Only a junior. Not a jerk, but not all about Emily. Pretty typical hs bf, you know.]

Except Anne didn't know about high school boyfriends. Plenty of secondhand knowledge. No experience. She should have had a frame of reference, should have *been* a frame of reference for Em, but instead she was chasing after her.

Francesa-the-linematte followed up Anne's questions with one of her own:

[So do you actually think some one big crazy thing is behind this? I mean please let me know if there is but don't you hope not? Because then isn't it like we didn't really know Emily?]

Anne didn't answer.

* * *

Emily's password turned out to be a series of numbers: 18369288.

Doing lab work on her own laptop one night, Anne finally Googled ways to open a locked computer. The answer came up at once: hit F8, open Safe Mode, change the password from the Control Panel. So absurdly easy, after two weeks of failed guesses, Anne cried for an hour. For someone supposedly so smart, she found herself frequently stupid about simple things.

("Blonde moments," Jo always called them, and Emily would tug her not-quite-brown hair and say, "Hey!"—and then proceed to rattle off blonde jokes she'd learned at hockey rinks.)

What really made the tears come was that the numbers meant nothing to Anne. Emily's birthday was (had been) November 5th, but there wasn't an eleven or five to be found. Nothing doing for any of the sisters' birthdays or birth years or any arrangement of their ages past or present (28-26-22-18). There was the 18: Emily's age. That was a start, maybe.

Tommy Wales was still seventeen. No match for his birthday, culled from Facebook.

Anne could make the numbers fit into longitude and latitude coordinates. (Wasn't that

always what strange series of numbers turned out to be in all those adventure series Jo and Becky used to read to them?) Splitting the numbers in various ways, haphazardly placing decimal points, landed Anne with actual places: provinces in Turkey, towns in Louisiana, spots in the Ivory Coast and Czech Republic, all places Emily had never been to, would never be to, had never even thought of so far as Anne knew.

The numbers haunted her, saved on Emily's computer as website passwords for her email and Facebook and Twitter. No other major site, no little blog like Anne kept for herself, no second or third email account hiding a secret life that might provide some answers.

There were plenty of documents saved to the computer, but none labeled "abracadabra," no secret journals, only school papers. Anne read through them all, telling herself, Emily wrote this, this was her sister's voice. But the only trace of Emily she could hear in sentences spitting back AP Gov text on delegated powers was that they tended to be run-on and exclamatory.

Drafts of Em's college essay, centered around the theme "Not many girls in Florida play hockey," should have been Em preserved on paper, a treasure. Mom even framed the final copy and put it out for the wake. "Skating, for me, means flight," the final version went. "It's a constant opportunity to push past lingering stereotypes and limitations, to fight with dancing grace on a surface it's always a little magic to step upon."

Anne knew immediately: that was not Emily. The limitations stuff was all Mom's anything-boys-can-do-you-can-do-better attitude. The flight and flourishes were all Jo, professional editor and practically a professional older sister, still looking over all her younger sisters' assignments, resumes, occasionally even emails, on request.

Emily's much-shorter original started with an enthusiastic paragraph about the inspiration of first seeing *Mighty Ducks 2* and then descended into voiceless cliché: "I will always be so so

thankful for my parents who separately have driven me up and down the East Coast to many hockey tournaments over the years,” and, “I have made so many great friends playing hockey!”

Anne did call up Jo to ask about one line in the final draft.

“The part about planning to play, even just for fun, until she’s an old lady—Em or you?”

Jo paused, and Anne knew she would be pursing her lips. “My suggestion. I believe.”

“You believe, or you know?”

Jo sighed into the phone. “I’m not a hundred percent on it; it was all over the phone, but, yes, I think I threw that one at her... Are you handling life okay, out there?”

Anne was wrapped in a fleece blanket on her apartment’s couch, two laptops on, Emily’s iTunes on shuffle, with five empty baby cereal boxes and Di’s jar of peanut butter next to her. The question made her eyes start hurting. “I caught up on my coursework so my A’s and my fellowship aren’t in any jeopardy,” she said. “I’m, uh, I guess I’m out of food—”

“I didn’t mean to start you crying again,” Jo said, very quietly.

“You didn’t, I’m not,” Anne said. But she was. She’d always been an easy weep. Time after time in recent years she’d heard from Emily, “Don’t be such a baby,” a million times more condemning from her younger sister than from Jo or Becky or Mom.

“I should let you go,” Anne blubbered.

“I can stay on,” Jo said. “I don’t really have anything I can say, but I can stay on...”

Anne slowed her breath to match Jo’s and stared at the blue glow of Em’s computer screen. “One-eight-three-six-nine-two-eight-eight,” she said.

Jo took her lips-pursing pause. “What was that now?”

Anne repeated the numbers. “It’s Em’s password. Does it mean anything to you?”

“Should it?” Jo sounded concerned.

That was it, Anne thought, what was bothering her exactly. She thought it should.

* * *

Hypothesis no. 2: The boyfriend was to blame.

A year ago December, Anne first heard of Tommy Wales from Emily. (Technically she had ‘heard of’ him before, since they knew his family from town, but he’d never mattered.)

Emily dropped his name for weeks in conversation, as her “friend Tommy.” She mentioned excuses to go to the hardware store where he cashiered, met him for tennis. At first he had a girlfriend, but, Em said, “She’s a sophomore with toothpick arms, I could totally take her.”

The girlfriend went away fairly quickly. Anne was home New Years’ Eve when Emily came in, a little drunk and completely crying over failing to find Tommy for a kiss at midnight. But they went to a dance soon after, and Anne got an ecstatic phone call: Em got her kiss and her guy. Just before summer, Facebook let Anne know Emily Fayne was actually “in a relationship” with Tommy Wales. Nothing seemed that different in the weeks Anne was home. Tommy wasn’t suddenly at the house all the time. Anne caught glimpses of him more than anything. Tall, slouchy shoulders, surprisingly deep voice, freckled face, freckled hands.

End of October, Emily called, hysterical: Tommy thought they should break up. She called back giddy: he’d taken it back. She seemed collected to Anne when a few weeks later he changed his mind again. “He’ll probably start texting me again tomorrow,” Emily said. She’d sounded tired. “I don’t know, I miss him being my one perfect thing.”

“A perfect thing, huh? What’s that like?”

“Oh school’s *your* perfect thing,” Emily said. “The part that’s all set so you don’t have to worry about it ever again. I was thinking maybe he was that. Because he’s great, and just sometimes, people don’t break up. That search-for-love stuff? I could be set, with him. And I’d

just have to deal with the other stuff. Being stuff, and stuff.”

Anne should have asked about the stuff. “School’s not perfect for me,” she objected.

That was exactly a week before Emily crashed her car.

In four years of college Anne had seen definite evidence to support a theory that girls breaking up with their first serious boyfriend, especially when he was also the *first*, could lose it a little. That could be a physical reaction, not mere melodrama. Sex was a chemical-unleashing force; chemical imbalance in the brain was linked to mental illnesses.

Not to mention, brains were not fully developed at eighteen: fact. The frontal lobe was only halfway through its connective process at eighteen. Insight and concepts of consequence: halfway in place. Ability to plan and organize, to inhibit impulses: works-in-progress until the mid-twenties. Basically, Emily had still been growing. (So was Tommy Wales, but this went into the pile of facts Anne didn’t know what to do with yet.)

She felt this even more strongly after accessing Emily’s private Facebook messages. The one string of numbers (18369288) was Emily’s password to every online account.

From the message thread to Tommy Wales:

[What up girl

Haha what up boy

so the other night was great

so SO great what was your favorite part?

Oh you know haha did you have one?

Um couldn’t you tell???

I wasn’t sure. was that when your legs were shaking?]

Anne walked around nauseated all day, troubled above all by the idea that the single

greatest reason her sister was dead could be a boy whose go-to line was “what up girl”. She could never show this to Jo, who refused to even acknowledge texts with “though” spelt as “tho,” let alone “u” for “you” or “r” for “are.” Maybe it was a good thing the lost phone meant never having access to Emily and Tommy’s texts. Maybe there were moments about her only baby sister’s life she didn’t want to be aware of.

Even with unwanted details, Anne didn’t have enough data. She tried a null hypothesis: Emily’s boyfriend breaking up with her was unrelated to her suicide.

Emily’s last online message to Tommy: [*Not calling you back. Your voice makes me sad.*]

Statistically, odds of the hypothesis versus its null, Tommy Wales had to bear the blame.

* * *

Di was growing visibly concerned that Anne was crazy. Anne supposed it was justified, seeing as she’d started doodling eyes amongst her class notes, walking around under the sunlit Spanish-style arches of campus chanting numbers under her breath. And she knew she wasn’t being a very good roommate. Di would say something like, “I made a big thing of healthy chicken chili! Please, help yourself.” And Anne would reply, automatically, “Chili was Em’s favorite. This one rink where she played had it at its concession stand, and she could tuck away bowls of the stuff.” Di would say, “I need to unwind, want to watch *The Notebook*?” And Anne would say, “Sure, I’ve never liked it, but my sister loved it.” She’d say, “Super cute shirt!” and Anne’s answer would be, “Emily picked it out for me last Christmas.” Di’s new approach seemed to be smile, nod, give a “how’s it going?” and run into her room before Anne could come up with an Emily-related answer.

Anne heard Di take a phone call one Saturday night. Then she knocked on Anne’s door.

“It’s open,” Anne called from her bed.

“I thought you might be napping,” Di said, tentatively poking her head through. “Sorry.”

“Just sitting,” Anne said. She sat cross-legged on a nest of blankets and yesterday’s clothes. The laptop—Emily’s—was on, but Anne wasn’t doing anything with it. She’d hoped to Skype with Becky, but Anne had slept in wildly late and missed her window to get through to her sister on London time. It was too unsettlingly long without hearing Becky’s voice, especially what with a startling amount of phone time with Jo. She always felt the need to talk to Becky after hearing from Jo, though this had never held true the other way around.

“You’re not doing anything?” Di asked. “Because actually I got invited for drinks—”

“Hey, great.” Anne gave her a thumbs up and turned her attention to the screen.

“Good, so you’ll come? A lot of people in my program are going. You can meet them...”

“Oh— thanks. I’m not up for that.” Anne clicked, busily, on Emily’s bookmarked sites.

“I thought it could be, a, um, a nice distraction. At least, an okay distraction.”

“Distraction?” Anne said. “For the record: I’m not trying to not think about my sister.”

Di’s eyes were on Em’s laptop as she said, “Sorry—and that’s a double... or, just, sorry!”

“You don’t need to apologize,” Anne called, but Di had already turtled her head away.

“Okay,” Di said from the other side of the door. “Hope, um, everything goes well.”

Anne decided to clamber off her bed and go apologize to Di, but a pop-up dinged on the laptop. She’d clicked on Facebook, left logged in under Emily’s account.

The pop-up was a chat message from Tommy Wales: “?”

Anne moved the mouse to change the settings to ‘invisible’ as quickly as she could. She hadn’t thought about Emily’s Facebook popping up as ‘available’ on her friends’ screens. The message from Tommy sat blinking and unanswered at the bottom of the screen: to him and God-knew-how-many-others, Emily’s name would have appeared and then vanished from the sidebar.

Did you think it was a ghost, Tommy? Anne thought at the screen, viciously hoping it terrified him. *Are you that much of a stupid fuck?* Another thought slammed into that one: *Or brave.* If she had the chance (however slim or silly) to talk to her sister's Internet ghost, if there were such a thing lurking in the traces of life left online, would she be bold enough to take it?

She told herself she didn't need to feel guilty. Still, she logged onto her own Facebook, looked up Tommy Wales, and sent a brief private message his way, to explain, not apologize.

His reply came back within seconds. [*Hey thanks I wondered.*]

She could let that end it. She sent the numbers (18369288) at him instead. [*Speaking of wondering, do these mean anything to you?*]

[*Sorry*], he sent back, along with a face that looked like it was crying.

She shut the laptop. The stupid emoticon face pissed her off.

(The last message from Tommy to Emily in their Facebook thread, before her last reply: [*hey call me back you looked sad/intense is it all me?? Can't we be cool again I miss that*].)

Later, up to five that morning going through every picture of Emily online, saving them to the desktop, it hit Anne she'd cheated with her null hypothesis. Tommy being to blame and the breakup being related to the suicide were not exact opposites, not, actually, at all.

* * *

There was a message in Anne's inbox early the next morning, from Tommy Wales: [*Hi. Sorry I'm stupid. 88's her jersey number. Idk about the rest. Sorry again...*]

She'd been staring at pictures of Emily, some in hockey gear, over half the night. Mostly, though, she'd been looking at her face, her eyes, trying to see if they looked sad. The number was only partially visible in a few, but she could make out enough to confirm the 88.

She called Jo, emailed Becky. Neither knew any of Emily's numbers.

She called Mom, catching her before work. “Do you know Emily’s jersey numbers, from over the years?”

Mom hummed in thought, startling Anne. “I washed them all enough times, you’d think I would. Mmm, it’s been eighty-eight for a good while.”

“How many jerseys has she even had?”

“Three at least,” Mom said. “You know who’d know is your father. I’ll get him.”

“Perfect,” Anne said, then, “Dad’s there? In the morning?!”

“It’s a big house,” Mom said defensively. Then quietly, “And you know your father, he’s something of a chump, no idea how to look after himself or keep his chin up at,” her voice wavered, “a time like this. And he’s someone to talk about your sister with. And you girls, too.”

Anne heard Mom walk downstairs, then Dad’s sleep-rough voice: “What’s wrong, what’s wrong?”

Mom must have covered the receiver, since Anne heard only mutters, then Dad: “How’s my brilliant one? What’s this about the jerseys?”

Dad confirmed Em’s jersey was a 92 as an under-fourteen player; her first ever was 36. He didn’t know about the 18.

“I guess that was just her age,” Anne said, stumped. She’d found an answer, and yet, not.

* * *

Hypothesis no. 3: The Fayne girls (especially Anne) had failed. They had not been what it was sisters were supposed to be, had not done what sisters were supposed to do.

This was what Anne was afraid of. What, she supposed, Becky and Jo were too. Emily’s need-everything-to-stop email had come to them, only. It could’ve been meant as apology. Or as remonstrance. It certainly wasn’t much of an explanation. That warranted more words.

Emily's privacy-locked Twitter turned up a few words more, but none of the tweets were incriminating, or important, or even particularly numerous.

Anne didn't have a Twitter, but Becky, who did, was upset when Anne mentioned it. "She had a Twitter and wasn't following *me*? Was she following Jo?"

For some reason, Emily hadn't shared her tweets with her sisters. Now they studied them.

Okay, look, I'm here!!! Emily posted first, last June, under username *@eefayne*. The sporadic tweets after were links to Youtube videos, replies to friends, and snippets of song lyrics. (Anne spent ages Google-searching and dissecting phrases like '*nothin' sure in this world/look for something left in this world*' and '*boulder on my shoulder, feelin' kind of older*.' She couldn't tell if Emily was upset and hinting to her friends or upbeat and reaching for cool in quoting Billy Idol and Bruce Springsteen. She wondered if, seeing these before, she'd have rightfully worried.)

That IS the question, Em replied to *@tommythewaler* in October, a month before dying.

"Obviously senior English still reads *Hamlet*," Jo said, going over the tweets with Anne on the phone. "Existentialism ahoy—though what to make of the winky face she included?"

"Jo," Anne said, "it was answering 'To shave or not to shave?'"

Burnt out on no's and or's, Anne messaged her sisters that she'd been through all of Emily's laptop, closed it up and set it next to hers, and went to sleep at a normal time. Used to less rest, she woke up before dawn, which worked out since Becky got in touch at five a.m. Anne's time, impatient for the Pacific to catch up with her day.

"And?" Becky said carefully. "What was there? What now?"

"And nothing." Anne thought of Jo talking about *Hamlet*. Anne, too, read it senior year, when Emily was in eighth grade, still asking Anne to hurry up with homework and spend time with her. "The rest is Twitter silence. Facebook as a memorial page. The ghost in the machine."

Becky said, “Maybe you forgot to check the laptop’s trash? Maybe there’s a secret blog or vlog, any videos? Even, maybe, sometimes I’ll use my webcam to put on makeup, there’s probably thirty videos of me checking out my face in my Recycle Bin...”

Anne could, actually, see Emily doing that. Staring down the camera, turning her chin carefully from one side to the other, as measuredly as Becky would do flippantly. “You used to read us enough Nancy Drew books, I knew to check the garbage. No recordings. No to-do lists. I’ve had the computer for weeks, I’ve collected everything. There’s no more.”

Becky’s sigh rattled through the phone again. “I was afraid of that from the moment you started looking— but I thought you’d be more of a wreck.”

“Still a wreck,” Anne said. “I just can’t keep crying all the time. I feel like I should, I would if I could, but I just can’t.”

Becky didn’t say anything for a while. “I keep wondering why she wouldn’t tell us she was on Twitter,” she said. “What’s here that she wouldn’t want us to see?”

“Maybe she was waiting to see if we’d look for her,” Anne said. “Or, maybe she didn’t want us looking over her shoulder.”

“That’s a way to put it. Your one choice makes it seem like we overlooked or abandoned her, and the other suggests Emily thought we were smothering her. Damned from both ends.”

It was like a pendulum, Anne figured. They’d each done their share of too much of one, too much of the other, over the years. There’d been nights spent at separate TVs, on their own computers, behind closed doors of their own rooms, and then whole years literally thousands of miles apart. It seemed like a strange ballet of missing each other. There’d been the nights all at home when they fought and couldn’t wait to be long-distance again. And there’d been connections, the exact same opinions on movies and books and flavors of ice cream, the times

Mom drove them equally crazy, when they were almost the same person.

“But maybe it went back and forth,” Becky continued. “Maybe we were mostly in the middle, as sisters go.”

“Becky,” Anne said. “Seeing as I’ve had three of you to judge by... I think maybe the middle *is* how sisters go.”

* * *

Anne came out of her room while Di was cooking dinner.

“Di,” Anne said, sitting down at a kitchen counter chair, “am I upsetting you? Talking about Emily, I mean? Is it, I don’t even know, personal?” For all she knew, Di could be really religious or could have been through something like this, or had some really, really tough shit of her own (plenty of that in the world) that made it hard to be sympathetic to an eighteen-year-old, with *everything going for her*, just giving up. God knew the trying to understand was hard enough for Anne. Especially when Emily wasn’t pregnant or on drugs or bulimic or failing out or—Anne cut off that train of thought before going as far as ‘involved with a covert government agency’. “I am sorry, for being a relentless drag and especially if I’m offending you. But I am going to be crying and talking about Emily no matter what because, you know. It’s my sister.”

Di stood petrified, holding her spatula out in front of her. “Of course it’s not personal!” she gasped. “God, I’m awkward with everyday things, I’ve never had a sister, I just don’t, um.” She turned back to her eggs, shuffling them around in the pan. “Do you want some of these? I know, breakfast food for dinner, but I... had dinner food for breakfast?” Di winced.

Anne looked at her a minute. “Do you ever think about everything you said and worry about it all night? Because I do that. I always figured my sister didn’t, but... I never asked.”

“Oh boy do I do that thing,” Di said. She grabbed two plates for eggs. “I was going to de-

stress for a while. You want to watch a movie or something? Or too much work?”

“I did get *Mighty Ducks* out of the campus library,” Anne said, “but I’d watch anything.”

But Di said *Mighty Ducks* was okay, so they made some extra eggs and watched that.

Anne had forgotten a lot of it, though she’d bet Emily hadn’t. The jersey number of the only girl on the team: 18.

* * *

Hypothesis no. 4: There was no understanding Emily.

Anne still spent a lot sleepless nights, pulling at her memories and stretching them like taffy. She rethought every hockey game of Emily’s she’d ever skipped, every time she’d stayed home with Mom on a travel weekend or been on a laptop at one and missed it just as much. She had gotten to more games than Jo, Becky, even Mom, many times of Emily stepping off the ice, so tall in her skates, her hair wet when she took off her helmet. It was the only part of Emily that ever seemed strange, before: she wasn’t a sunshine girl. She was happier in the cold air, with a challenge, than anywhere. And yet. Anne tugged on a scrap of conversation one night.

“I don’t care if Coach thinks I’m a lazy player,” Emily complained, not long ago, to Anne. “They’re always saying that about Russian players—”

“Who are?”

“I don’t know, Annie, people, fans, media people—it’s an off-base stereotype, okay? Russian players are fantastic—”

“Okay, but we’re not remotely Russian so, why does the coach think you’re lazy?”

Emily stopped talking. “I don’t know, Annie,” she said. “Sometimes... sometimes I don’t see the point in trying.”

And maybe that was it. The kicker, the unfair part, was that there was no getting around

that maybe.

Maybe, too, she was reading something in, in retrospect, but looking at the memories she did have of Emily on the ice, she could see it. There was Emily slowing her pounce to the puck if the other girl pulled ahead, Emily circling the action, a step removed, Emily taking a penalty and not exactly hustling out of the box. Anne could sketch out of memories an aimless, lonely skater. And against that, Anne couldn't say whether the sister she thought she knew (cheeks flush with purpose, gliding on joy) was still real, too, or a mask, only. It was, in the end, one more question.

Joyous Gard

The bay remained Bernie's kingdom, as ever. And so Deacon was afraid to go back. It was the fear that drove him, come August, to dust off the summer keys to his dad's cottage and boat garage. He did not want to be a coward.

Before bed he asked Wendy, once Bernie's girl, if she felt like a week at the bay.

"I always want to go to the beach," she said, as she tightened the drawstrings of the silk bag where she kept her Tarot cards. She tucked the bag under her pillow, as she did every once in a while, before she did a reading for herself. "I like it more than any place."

Deacon was ready to say Bernie might be related to half the families in the bay, but it was no less his own summer place for that. He'd remind Wendy of early mornings when the lake was pancake flat, of sunsets and their wobbling pink reflections. "Oh," he said instead. "Good."

"Let's go tomorrow."

"I thought this weekend. I still have to take off work."

She stretched onto her toes with a yawn, which lifted her shimmery night shirt all the way up her thighs. “Tell your dad the Perseids are at their peak and it’s simply wrong to spend the next few nights under urban skies.”

Deacon liked shooting stars fine, but that was by no means what he’d tell his dad to take off from the dealership. “Maybe the day after tomorrow. You were already going to, anyways.”

“Going to...?”

“Spend the next nights here in the city.”

Wendy climbed onto the bed and sat cross-legged. “I suppose that’s true,” she said, as she undid her French braid. Loosed, her dark blonde hair plummeted to the small of her back, to just the spot where Deacon’s hand went, protectively, when they were out together.

Bernie was taller than Deacon and used to place his hand higher on Wendy’s back, often catching her hair by mistake. Seeing it had made Deacon wince every time.

Deacon leaned over to kiss her brow, since he could do that freely now, and climbed onto the bed with her. He still found it amazing how amber her eyes looked up close, how easily they trapped him. “If you want to go tomorrow, I’ll drive you before work and come back after.”

She tilted her head, her wave of hair following the movement. “Would you?” she asked, solemn. “I could collect seaglass. Morning’s best.”

When Wendy took walks on the beach, she came with back pockets weighted with the water-smoothed shards of glass that had never actually touched the sea, only the lake. As boys Deacon and Bernie brought buckets of seaglass back to their mothers, but the pieces only dusted their cottages like the sand they tracked in. Wendy turned her bits of broken bottles into baubles, pendants and bracelets and wine charms and earrings. She had a sense for how to choose among them, which ones she could delicately drill holes in, which ones would crack and required a clasp

instead, which ones were best left as décor for a jar or a glass base for a bedside lamp.

Deacon hadn't realized her supply had run out. He once loved watching her at her small arts, but she'd put so much seaglass around the apartment, it was a relief not to have any more coming in. Every brown or green piece had him wondering if it could be from a bottle he or one of the boys left to the lake in a decade's worth of drinking together. In recent years Deacon had gotten Bernie and his cousins to pick up after themselves. But when they were just kids, downing Labatt's on the lonely rocks at bay's end, they hurled the evidence into the water.

Back then Bernie always got the beer, out of his parents' basement fridge. He wasn't wild like his Griffith cousins who lived at the beach year round, brash crew-cut Ian and heavy-browed Kevin. But Bernie had the same slow grin that signaled danger from the Griffith boys. At nine Deacon learned that grin on Bernie meant adventure, when Bernie talked him into laying pennies down to get flattened on the train tracks they weren't supposed to go near. When they were old enough to drive themselves up in the winter, though nothing waited at the beach except the frozen lake and the bored Griffith boys, Bernie grinned as he pointed out picking the locks of empty cottages, to see what hid inside the familiar fronts, wouldn't do any harm.

Bernie most of all wanted to get inside the castle-house, the boys' name for the giant cottage alone at the far end of the bay, near their hangout rocks. Bernie always had an eye on it, once going up to peer in its windows, brazen where even the Griffiths balked. Deacon, sure that'd be the one cottage with alarms, talked him away.

Maybe they should have just gone for it, since Deacon was never sorry the times he let Bernie override his voice of reason. Rambling with Bernie and the boys through the narrow staircases, crawlspace basements, and climbable rafters of all those dark-wooded, old cottages they'd broken into made for the very best days he'd ever had.

Except for days with Wendy, Deacon told himself. A year now, just him and Wendy.

“Course I’ll take you,” he said to her.

She slid her legs apart and around him, but her eyes focused off to the side, to the pile of healing crystals she kept on the night table. “I feel bad,” she said, “always asking.”

“As if I’d say no,” he said, lightly.

She looked at him and said, “I know.” But her eyes were still far away.

* * *

Wendy didn’t drive. That was practically the first thing Deacon ever heard about her, after that she was beautiful and already Bernie’s. Two summers gone she worked at the sole gift shop in Lilydale, the spiritualists’ town. Bernie met her when he drove his cousin Ellie and her pack of girlfriends up from the bay one Saturday to have their futures read. Deacon volunteered to keep Bernie company, but there hadn’t been room in the car. Besides, Bernie joked, he liked Ellie’s sixteen-year-old friends idolizing *him*: Deacon’s too-damn-good looks would turn all their heads. When Bernie came back hours later to drop the girls home, he announced to the guys, awestruck, he’d met the Mrs. He’d be heading right back to Lilydale to take her to dinner.

“Bad sign if the girl wouldn’t meet you halfway, Bernie,” Ian warned.

“No car.”

“Well hey, you can offer her your employee discount,” Deacon said. When he’d first started at his dad’s dealership as a lot boy, Bernie had too. As both stayed local for college, Bernie for a good scholarship offer, Deacon because college with Bernie sounded more fun, they’d worked up the part-time chain to sales reps.

“No license, either,” Bernie said. “Just the permit.”

“What is she, fifteen?” Kevin looked hopeful. He’d caught flak from everybody, even

actual fifteen-year-old Garrett Griffith, for seriously hitting on Ellie's underage friends.

"Or she failed the test a lot," Garrett chimed in. He was on the outside of their circle, as usual, and Deacon moved over to let him in. Since Bernie started slacking on his and Deacon's summer morning runs, which Deacon never missed, no matter how hung over, Deacon let Garrett tag along. Garrett came to Deacon, not Bernie, with girl problems, life questions, and beer requests.

"Not hardly," Bernie said. "Said she never felt the need."

Western New York's public transportation wasn't such that cars were optional. Deacon, who'd been allowed behind a wheel at twelve within the quiet of the bay, was dumbfounded.

Ian shook his head. "Never saw a need to get out of little Lilydale? You've got to stop going for the crazies, bro. If she says she knew you in your past life, run."

"I didn't have any past life," Bernie said, moving to swipe casually at Ian's shoulder, only to still his paw mid-gesture. "But if this girl said she did... well, something in her eyes."

"And when this chick tells you she was Cleopatra?" Ian asked.

Bernie mulled. "Don't know. But I'll tell you one thing—I'd buy Wendy as a queen."

That was the first time Deacon heard her name. He'd never met a girl named Wendy before. He mentioned to Bernie the name made him think of a blue nightgown and wire-flying, like his old high school's production of *Peter Pan*. "Closer to Springsteen's "Born to Run" Wendy," Bernie told him, and Deacon mentally stuck a motorcycle jacket over the nightgown.

He started a tally of firsts, soon. He met Wendy two weeks later, when he came to pick Bernie up for Saturday fishing and found a girl on Bernie's stoop. She was in a sweatshirt he'd left at Bernie's last poker night. When she evenly met his gaze his first thought was *Please no*.

"Are you a friend of Ellie's?" he asked.

“Possibly, once I get to know her,” she said. “But I’m here as Bernie’s friend.”

Deacon managed to smile. “Course you are.”

She surveyed him. “You must be Deacon.”

He wondered how Bernie had described him. Bernie had called her “beautiful,” which the guys translated as “hot,” but Bernie’s word was closer. Tall, coltishly thin, with eyes so wide and bright it took a moment to register the rest of her face and its perfect bone structure, she could’ve walked off one of the Pre-Raphaelite paintings from Deacon’s easy art elective. He felt an absurd impulse to kiss her long-fingered hand.

He got a hold of himself. “Guess I’m easy—the only one who doesn’t look like Bernie.”

“That. And he forewarned me there’s no trading up for his better-looking best friend.”

Deacon sucked in a breath, right as Bernie clapped his arm over Deacon’s shoulders from behind. “In those exact words, too,” Bernie said, “except the ‘forewarned’. Wendy Grance, my new favorite person, meet the owner of that sweatshirt, heir apparent to Blakely Chevrolet, and most importantly, my oldest favorite person—but don’t tell my cousin Ian I called Deke that.”

Wendy, for the first time, looked unnerved. She plucked at the sweatshirt. “I was cold.”

Bernie’s arm heavy on his shoulders, Deacon assured her he didn’t care and since she was coming with them, she’d want it for the boat.

As it turned out, Wendy did not do well with fishing. She liked the wind whipping by on the way out, but once the boat was stopped, rocking on the waves, she grew pale and rubbed her temples. She didn’t want to hook any worms or try casting a pole. She didn’t want to stay seated, just paced the boat and assured Bernie she was fine when he asked.

Deacon suggested heading in early, but Bernie’s face brightened with a plan. “Not trying to be funny,” he said, taking Wendy’s elbow, “but how do you feel about jumping off the boat?”

Treading water behind the anchored boat turned out to be an instant cure for Wendy's headache and nausea, once Bernie convinced her. Deacon kept looking over to see her bobbing head, hair piled high on her head but still getting wet.

When he mentioned to Bernie he felt overheated, Bernie said go ahead and keep her company. So Deacon dove in and treaded too, and, while trying to come up with small talk, he teased her about making it into her twenties with no driver's license.

She pushed her chin a little higher out of the water. "The week I was supposed to take my test, I was diagnosed with cancer."

Deacon bobbed silently. He thought that explained her eyes. There was something tough or old in them, a mark left in her iris, like she'd *lived*. Nothing bad had ever hit him—no deaths in his small family, no real illnesses. He felt like a phony beside her, only playing at adulthood.

She kept talking as he stayed quiet, as if preempting his questions. That had been years before, but signing up for her test again felt like tempting fate. Yes, it'd come up with Bernie, and he'd said "I'm glad you got better," so warmly it didn't annoy her. She couldn't believe Bernie had gotten her swimming, but he had a way about him, didn't he? And Deacon, he was as good a listener as Bernie had said. "There's a familiarity, about you," she said.

Maybe he had one of those faces, Deacon said, but Wendy said that wasn't it, at all.

Bernie dropped the ladder over the side then, so they could climb back on. "The better to reel you in, milady." And Deacon knew himself to be as good as sunk.

After taking Wendy home, Bernie didn't come back until morning. He grabbed donuts on the return trip and summoned his guys over for breakfast, wanting to know what they thought.

"Feed her many cheeseburgers," Ian intoned. "Hope they go to her boobs."

Deacon cracked his knuckles.

Kevin shrugged with his mouth full. Garrett called her the prettiest girlfriend any of them had ever had. Bernie looked to Deke for the final word. “Perfect,” he said, with raw honesty.

Bernie grinned around a bite of donut, triumphant. “I knew you’d like her.”

* * *

Deacon’s dad’s cottage was not beachfront or particularly cottagey, like Bernie’s. But it was white-carpeted and airy, with no wireless but two TVs and a garage that fit the extra fridge and the jet-ski. Deacon opened the place for Wendy at five a.m., got his run in there before heading to work, and at five p.m. returned tiredly to the pebble-ridden bay roads. He found the cottage unlocked and no Wendy. Service was spotty at best in the bay, but when he finally got through to her cell, he found it inside, ringing away next to the cottage keys. He hurried over to the beach’s public walk, not sighting her on the sand or in the water. Edgy, he jogged back, only to find Wendy returning from down the other street, chockfull plastic bags pulling at her wrists.

He hustled to take one for her.

“No, don’t,” she said, when he reached for one, “I’ve got just the right balance going. You can get the door for me.”

He did. Once inside she let the bags drop to the floor, the seaglass spilling over.

“That’s a lot of seaglass for one afternoon,” he said, scratching at his shoulder.

“I ran into Bernie’s mother and aunt,” she said. “They’ve saved bags for me all summer. I’d promised last year to make them sea glass signs. I’ll need some flat pieces of driftwood, too.”

“How is—” Deacon stopped short of calling her Aunt Sharon. “—Bernie’s mom?”

“Cordial,” Wendy said, after a stretch. “No, that’s not even fair— warm. Like Bern.”

She always called Bernie that. Just like she always used Deacon’s full name. Only his dad ever called him Deke nowadays.

“Some people are just good like that,” Deacon said. “How, ah, how’s he doing?”

“She didn’t say. I couldn’t really ask.” Wendy settled down on the floor beside her bags.

“Well, hey, what do you say to me grabbing my trunks and hitting the water?”

She poured out clinking little hills of seaglass. “You should, the water looks nice.”

“Or I could stay here, it doesn’t matter,” he said. But, focused, she didn’t look up, so eventually he went alone, to swim by the public walk, and not, anymore, the Griffiths’ beachfront. He lapped between buoys, long after the last sunshine dipped and the temp with it.

When back, he fell asleep beside Wendy early and easily. He only realized she’d left their bed mid-night when she slipped back into it, her cold hands curling against his back.

He valiantly tried not to ask where she’d been, afraid of seeming controlling, suspicious.

“Stargazing,” she answered, unasked. “I didn’t want to wake you. Besides, not worth it, I wasn’t seeing any meteors, and it was too chilly to last long.”

“I’d have gone. You’d have been warmer with me; I’d have spotted one for you.”

He thought she’d fallen asleep, when her breathing steadied and the answer never came, but a long while later she said, “That’s no good with shooting stars. They’re too fast; you’ve got to find them for yourself.”

That sounded like something Bernie would say. Sleep did not return for him easily at all.

* * *

Deacon’s commuting from the beach through the week’s downhill days meant an hour’s drive each way, the crystals in his car rattling against each other the whole time. Wendy left a few of her good crystals in his cup holder, some in the glove box, and some must have fallen between the seats and slid around every time he braked. He kept forgetting to hunt them out.

Wendy always carried at least one around with her, usually the amber or the smoky

quartz, but lately her pile had been growing or pulled out of storage. She had whole boxes of witchy things. She'd been a dabbler since seventeen, when she'd been sick.

She told him the names, when asked. Amethyst, rhodonite, larimar. Deacon memorized them like mantras, asked about their properties and listened to her hushed answers. He didn't know if he believed, but he took her seriously; it'd made him crazy how Bernie merely humored her, cracking jokes about the Catholic wedding his mother expected not being in the cards.

She'd brought her nightstand crystals up to the bay with her, though there was no nightstand beside their cottage bed. Deacon woke up at night to a crystal digging into his back. He stepped on another en route to the bathroom. Wendy's hand curled about some stone in her sleep, too. She'd never been so intense about them before, that he'd seen, that he'd heard from Bernie, and he wondered, uneasy, what they were meant to stave away. Knowing Bernie, he'd have bothered her about it, but Deacon said nothing. She'd tell him if she wanted him to know.

* * *

It took two years for Deacon's slow-tally of Wendy-firsts to build. He wished he could explain that, how slow and right, how like an old-fashioned courtship, especially against how soon it was all done now, how Wendy moved in with Bernie before their first summer was up.

The first time Deacon made Wendy laugh, they were briefly left sitting alone at a bar table, in the aftermath of Bernie, in front of the group, urging her to drop a superstition and get her license. Deacon told her about Bernie's first bay girlfriend, when they were fourteen, turning out to be yet another cousin Bernie wasn't aware of. Wendy laughed so hard she cried. Deacon added, while handing her a napkin to wipe her eyes, he'd be her backup ride, anytime.

He tried thinking of her as a cousin, at that, but he still took Bernie up on the invite to come along when he walked Wendy down the beach to first see the castle-house. It was strange,

really, to consider it a cottage, the periwinkle-colored, two-storied building easily three times the height of the average bay building. Its great door was made of windows, its windows the size of doors. The front entryway pushed out from the front of the house and rose to a capped tower just above the white-crenellated roofline.

Wendy, grabbed by some force at the sight of it, lunged toward the castle-house, never mind the lights were on and its owners in residence. She made it right to where the beach rolled up into the lawn before Deacon, since Bernie was only laughing and watching her go, snagged her to stop her. And that was the first time he grabbed her hand.

It was winter when they first kissed, summer again the first time they slept together. The stolen kisses started with a card reading. On poker night at his place he'd asked her to tell him his future, something Bernie never wanted done, saying he wrote his own fate and didn't want any self-fulfilling junk.

She didn't have her Tarot with her but said she could manage with playing cards. So they left the round card table in the living room to sit on his kitchen floor. She told him to pick a card as his signifier, and he went for the jack of hearts.

"Good choice," she said, even as her expression made him think he'd chosen wrongly. "Hearts equates to cups. And that suit naturally inclines toward the brown-haired, light-eyed."

"I didn't know Tarot was that shallow," he said, as he cut the deck and handed it back.

"Also the introverted, helpful, self-sacrificing, compassionate— that's all cups."

He liked that. "And the Jack of Hearts would be the Knight of Cups?"

"Maybe." Wendy began laying out the cards. "Tarot goes King, Queen, Knight, and Page or Knave. The Jack's closer to the Page... or, in some Tarot Decks, the Knave."

"That's—an untrustworthy guy, right?"

Her eyes flicked up to him, but she didn't answer.

"What about Bernie?" Deacon asked. "What would you choose for him?"

She tapped the King of Hearts, which had come up in the spread. "King of Cups. Made of all fire and confidence, reigning in the suit of water."

"A better card," Deacon said. He started to stand.

"It's not about better," Wendy said. "Don't you want your reading?"

"I thought it'd be nice to do something Bernie was scared to."

Wendy stood up, too. "I don't like that."

Despite the months of burying feelings, that was the first time Deacon thought, why should Bernie deserve her more than me? And without thinking further he kissed her. She didn't kiss back, but she didn't stop him either. After a moment she trembled. Remembering his friends in just the other room, he pulled back, furious with himself and desperate to apologize.

She was staring at his lips, looking like she wanted to launch toward him as she had the castle-house. She turned away, wordlessly, and started picking up the cards. He bent to help and she slid them his way across the linoleum and left him to it.

They never talked about it, never planned. There were only a handful of kisses stretched from then to summer—but summer was something else. In summer, Deacon's dad's cottage was a minute's walk from Bernie's, and Bernie thought nothing of Deacon sitting with Wendy on the beach while he threw a ball around in the water with the cousins. Nothing, if Deacon walked the gravelly streets with her alone to fetch something out of a cottage or car to for the beachfront. Bernie left her alone too often. Bernie, so broad and tall, was putting on slight post-college bulk, and Wendy looked so frail. Deacon pictured Bernie crushing her in bed. It kept him up nights.

One morning before dawn, after no sleep, he headed to the beach, to run off his guilt and

resentment, and found Wendy in the waveless water, swimming far out beyond the buoys.

He went to her.

“I can’t hurt him,” she said, after, as they walked out of the water.

Triangles were pointed for a reason, Deacon thought. He should be the one to take the sharp end. “We won’t,” he promised heavily. He couldn’t let himself keep thinking goofy words like destiny, pretending he was in an otherworld with no consequences, no Bernie. Never again.

He ran into Bernie while he was still wet from the lake. Bernie wondered where he’d been; he and Garrett had gone looking for Deke to run.

For the first time, Deacon lied to Bernie. Despite what he told himself, it wasn’t the last.

* * *

Wendy had subs waiting for Deacon as early dinner when he came back Friday afternoon. She’d walked earlier over the tracks to the bay’s small grocery, and there she’d seen Ellie Griffith, working at the deli counter this summer. Ellie had not been exactly warm, but Wendy didn’t think she’d do anything to the subs.

“Bernie’s not even here this week,” Wendy reported. “He’s looking into grad programs.”

Deacon swallowed a bite fast to ask, “What? History Masters? MBA? Law?”

Wendy shrugged.

“He never said anything to me about more school,” Deacon said. “That’s— new.”

“You didn’t think he’d work in dealership sales forever, did you?” Wendy asked, breaking off a piece of her sub. “For your dad and someday for you?”

“Me in charge of Bernie? Who’d imagine that,” Deacon said. He crumpled up the sub’s white paper wrapper and reached for his beer. “Look, now that I’m off and vacation’s really in gear, how about I go out to the marina tonight, get out my dad’s boat?”

“Not really time before the rain comes in.”

Deacon paused, the bottle cool against his lips.

“Deacon, really,” Wendy said, shaking her head. “You’ve no sense for the weather.”

* * *

It should have been a disappointment, but a rainy weekend kept the bay quiet and meant fewer chances of seeing people. Deacon still swam in the near-empty lake through the rain, until lightning jetted over the water. In coats, he and Wendy took walks on the rain-speckled sand in search of driftwood for her sign-making, though her soaked finds would have to dry thoroughly first. Mostly though, Wendy stayed wrapped up in Deacon’s sweatshirts and worked laying out seaglass while he watched golf’s PGA championship. He turned it off at a key point in the match when she wanted to peruse the bay town’s hardware store for the right kind of glue.

He watched a few different signs take shape, as she tested glass pieces against each other jigsaw-style, forming letters against the wood, each letter a different color. One said “To the Beach.” On another a pile of green glass made a shamrock.

“What’s this one?” he said, of one that struck him as strange.

“Just practice,” Wendy said, sweeping the letters apart. “These should be happy signs. They’re actually Bern’s idea. He thought I could sell them and jewelry, and... it doesn’t matter.”

He’d seen the words before she’d pulled them apart. ““Joyous Gard”? That sounds like a happy sign.” He pushed a curved white piece over toward her. “You should put it back together, for us, for here. We’ll hang it up.”

She laughed, once, biting. “That’d be rich.”

“Am I missing the joke?” He wondered if it was a Bernie thing.

She slid the seaglass piece back in his direction. “Joyous Gard was a place in legend that

wasn't happy very long. It was Dolorous Gard, first, and it became Dolorous again in the end."

"Got it. Who died there?" he asked.

"Nobody died."

"Something had to make it 'dolorous.'"

"Someone left."

"Ah," Deacon said. He picked up the seaglass piece and stood. "At least nobody died."

"If you follow a story long enough," Wendy said, very quietly, "somebody always dies."

Later, being quiet himself, Deacon looked up the place on his phone. But with no Internet access, no friend's cottage with wireless to go to, his attempted search failed, utterly, to connect.

* * *

Last year's August, whenever it was just his buddies around, Bernie was plotting out his proposal. He mused on it whether they were fishing, taking out the kayaks, having some brews, or even on Deacon's jet-ski, which took some real hollering for Bernie to be heard.

It was going to go like this: he'd take Wendy on a walk, and right in front of the castle-house, Bernie would stoop like he'd found a great piece of sea glass. "I think you'll really like this one," he'd tell Wendy, while, really, he palmed the ring. Deacon could see it, down to the real slow grin that would spread across Bernie's face, down to Wendy being unable to say no.

A planned proposal made everything suddenly real. Either Deacon had to end it, never touch Wendy again, or the cheating became something he couldn't excuse with the word love.

One night, Bernie leading the gang from one of his cousins' cottages to a bonfire at another, all the guys with beers in their shorts pockets and Garrett dutifully toting the cooler, Ian slung an arm around Deacon's shoulders, friendly-like. And then, with a brash laugh as cover, Ian dragged Deacon back out of hearing range.

“My family might think you walk on water,” Ian said in Deacon’s ear. “Bernie might think you’re his brother, and maybe you think Kevin and I haven’t brains like you. But I got *eyes*. So does the rest of the damn bay.”

Deacon’s feet stilled, but Ian kept moving, his arm sliding to Deacon’s neck and wrenching him forward in a stumbling step.

“Handle it, *bro*,” Ian said, letting him go with one hard clap on his back, “or I will.”

Immediately Deacon got Wendy away from the bonfire, off the beach and off the roads where a car’s headlights might find them, to a narrow span in between two dark cottages.

He meant to tell her Bernie’s plan, Ian’s discovery, unsure if he wanted to beg or ask her to say no or if he meant a kind of goodbye, where he’d still see her year in and year out but never as a lover again. There was too much moonlight, not enough shadow to bury his feelings; her wan, worried face didn’t look beautiful so much as unearthly. He thought he wanted her above all things, the only family, friend, god he needed. “Everything’s going to be ruined,” he said.

She pulled his head down, but not for a kiss. She held his forehead hard against hers. “I saw you coming, you know,” she said. “Right away. I couldn’t stop myself anyway.”

Deacon was not sure later if they stood like that for one moment or many. What mattered after was the soft scuffle of shoes over stones, Bernie’s broad shoulders outlined in the light of the open night behind him, his face unseeable as he stepped toward their shadows.

Wendy moved away from Deacon first. She lifted her chin and stood rigidly in place.

“I was sure it was a lie,” Bernie said, looking only at her still form, and turned away.

Deacon followed him, before Wendy could. There was a rushing sound, waves in his ears, as he chased him, easily catching Bernie’s steady walk. “Bernie, let me explain, I’m sorry, I love her, I’m sorry, I love you, man, I didn’t want this,” he said, but Bernie didn’t even change

his pace. Deacon jogged to stand in Bernie's way, bobbing and weaving to stay there when Bernie stepped to move around. "Hit me," he said, again and again, growing too loud, drawing a crowd of Bernie's family, of Kevin and Ian and Ellie and Garrett. "Go on, just hit me!"

Bernie stood in the street, working his jaw, cracking his knuckles, only moving at all when Deacon put out an arm, to shove or hug him. Bernie pushed the arm aside.

So Ian stepped up and slugged him. "Somebody had to deck him," he shouted, when Bernie pulled him off.

Deacon, on the ground, agreed.

* * *

Near vacation's end, Deacon slept in, waking up for his run at the more forgiving hour at which he used to run when he jogged with Bernie. Wendy had already finished her yoga and was completing her signs so intensely he left her a note instead of interrupting.

Once out the door his feet took him on his old route, along the water to the castle-house.

It was under construction, which he hadn't known, with a whole new tower being added to its side. The addition was still just wood, stark against the blue siding of the castle-house. On the lawn stood a new, small gazebo, white to match the balcony over the glass front door.

Deacon didn't know why it needed any additions, especially since its family only stayed there in the summer. It would be even more a castle than a house when finished; that was sure.

He went by quickly, just in case. Kevin and Ian sometimes worked summer construction.

He kept going, past the rocks where they used to drink to the pier. An arrow-slim runner was turning around at the pier's very tip. From a distance, he looked like Bernie a few years ago, before Wendy, before his shoulders finished broadening. Maybe it was him. Maybe Ellie had lied or Bernie was back from out of town. Deacon kept on heading down the pier. Turning

around would be cowardly. The runner must have seen him, too, and one better, the runner had no way off the pier but to pass him in the four feet of space, no way not to acknowledge him.

Within a few yards it became clear it was not Bernie but Garrett.

Deacon raised his hand in greeting as Garrett approached. Garrett turned sideways in order to step around him, slowing right beside him, his lips parting as if to speak.

Garrett hocked a mouthful of saliva at Deacon's feet and kept running by.

Deacon stopped still and tried to meet his eyes, but Garrett was already jogging away and didn't glance back. Deacon tried to resume running, pushing his pace, but when he started really sweating, he started itching. That kept happening lately; he thought it might be an allergic reaction to Wendy's tree oil shampoo stuff. He gave up and walked slowly down the beach.

He wasn't looking, and his foot swept right through a soft pile of sand, a familiar feeling.

"Shit," he said, bending down. He'd kicked over a sand castle. A good one, too.

Whatever kids built it had dug a moat, so waves could lap around without ruining the higher-ground castle, and created a little bridge of sticks. The remains looked hand-shaped, not from a bucket mold. Deacon crouched to attempt repairs, but there was no hope of saving it. He took up a handful of wet sand and dripped it from his fist, a sorry little sludge of a castle. He could only hope that when the kids came down to the beach for the day, they'd get the small apology.

* * *

When Wendy saw him come in, sandy and with sweat stinging his eyes, she came to him, brushed him off and pulled him into the cottage's shower. He was uncomfortable the whole time, and not only from holding her up and his back rhythmically hitting the faucet or even the stupid crystal which somehow wound up in his shower and under his foot. The water running down her cheeks looked too much like tears; her barely-there sighs sounded like goodbye this time. She

was as quiet a lover as she was a crier, though he'd only ever seen her succumb to real tears once, legs tucked up in his passenger seat right after Bernie found out. He probably should have gotten her to drive, that once, with his right eye closed shut from Ian's punch. But he hadn't.

When they were clean and she was toweling off her hair, he retrieved the stray crystal, a deep blue one, from the shower. He felt driven to ask something, but 'Are you leaving me?' and 'How can I make you happy?' sounded so comically stagy he was abashed to be thinking them.

"What's this one for?" he said, holding the crystal out toward her.

"That's the azurite," she said, without looking. "You hang onto it. It's like your eyes."

"If you say so. But what does it do?"

"Doesn't matter." She pulled a sweatshirt over her reedy frame. "They're not working."

She stepped into her sweatpants and walked out of the bathroom, running a hand over his wet hair as she passed. Deacon stayed still, struck, hand still out.

Numb, he put on his clothes without even drying his skin and went after her. She was standing at the fridge and looked mildly surprised to see him come charging out.

"Your crystals. Aren't working. Your *healing* crystals aren't working?"

"I don't feel like they are," she said, reaching into the fridge for a can of lemonade.

"Tell me you mean they're not keeping away stress and negative energy, they're not bringing forgiveness and harmony into your life, tell me that."

She popped the lemonade can. "No," she said and sipped it like it sorely needed whiskey.

Deacon wanted to hit the lemonade out of her hand. But he was not that guy. "You think you're sick again," he said, managing not to shout. He hadn't thought. He'd never imagined cancer would ever again be anything more to Wendy than an astrological sign.

Wendy kept sipping. All the color from the shower had left her face. "Maybe not. But

I've been feeling like I did before. Same early signs."

He didn't know what that meant, exactly. That was a past Wendy's life. "How long?"

She finished the lemonade and closed her hand around the can. "A while."

"And you've just been playing with your crystals, not doing anything real about it?" At her look, he said, "Sorry, I don't mean that. All right, what're your cards saying on this?"

Wendy turned to the sink, rinsing her can before putting it with the recyclables. "I haven't wanted to read my cards," she said, so lowly her voice mingled with the running water.

Deacon strode to the bedroom and yanked Wendy's pillow aside to get to the silk bag with her cards underneath. The movement knocked something hard from the bed up flying against the wall. He didn't look to see if it was a healing crystal or more seaglass, same difference, for all their use. Deacon felt cold as he returned to Wendy.

"Let's have it then, our future," he said, throwing the bag down on the table beside her seaglass signs. When she didn't move, he pulled the cards out himself. He shuffled through until he found ones even Kevin could have interpreted: The Fool, The Lovers, Strength, Death. He took out The Tower, too, with its picture of a castle crumbling. "Tell me, Wendy, which one do you want? You do still *want* a future?" It struck him that even while she was sleeping with them both, her ending things with Bernie never came up. He'd thought of it in terms of not breaking his bond with Bernie, not breaking Bernie, never what Wendy really wanted in her future.

"Death in Tarot doesn't mean *death*," Wendy said. "No need for melodrama yet."

Deacon wasn't listening. He was studying the Strength card. He could never say as much to Wendy, but it surprised him that the card showed a woman. A woman in a gossamer gown with flowers in her hair, leaning against a lion. "Why tell me, then, what do you want from me?"

"I knew you'd try to take care of me," Wendy said, sighing. "It wasn't real, until I said

anything. I suppose..." She reached over and restacked the cards. "Now I'll have to see."

He could take care of her. He watched her long-fingered hands shuffle. He could.

He kept thinking how, as a boy, being around Bernie made him braver.

* * *

That night Deacon made a point of volunteering to take Wendy's finished signs, the ones promised to Bernie's mother and aunts, over to one of the Griffith cottages. "You don't really want to go over there, do you?" he asked her.

She hesitated. "Ian Griffith will kill you, not me."

"I'm bound to run into him sometime, but he probably won't be at Bernie's cottage," Deacon said. "And you heard Bernie's out-of-town. Bernie's parents used to like me a hell of a lot. I'd like to at least be... cordial, with them."

"All right," Wendy said, suspiciously, and she let him have her cargo.

The lights at Bernie's cottage were on, the door unlocked and open as usual but no one in. Deacon piled the signs on the porch step, sifting through them as he waited. Somebody was bound to show up whose phone calls Bernie would answer, who could put him through.

Wendy never had made a 'Joyous Gard' sign, after all. At the thought, Deacon took his phone from his backpocket and lifted it into the air to see if it could catch the wireless from Bernie's cottage. The password was still in his phone, if it hadn't been changed.

"You really snaking our Wi-Fi?" a voice came, someone coming up from the cottage's beach side. The harsh tone sounded like Ian, so Deacon shifted his weight as he turned, stance ready. But it was Bernie, in a Bahama shirt, a towel slung over his neck. He'd let his hair get a little long and leonine. No doubt Ian and Kevin were giving him flak about growing flow.

Deacon lowered the phone. "I'd heard you weren't around."

“Yeah. Curious, you turning up first time all summer as soon as I check out of here for a minute.” Bernie gripped both ends of his towel and made a little motion with his chin that told Deacon plainly to step off his porch. “Like I’d steer clear of my place ’cause you were around? I don’t think so, brother.”

The last word hit like a wall of cold air, as clearly intended. Deacon got off the porch.

“I, uh—Wendy has signs.”

“Oh yeah?” Bernie said, glancing down at the heaped pile of driftwood. He picked up the one with seaglass shamrocks. “Cute.” He pointed the sign at Deacon’s phone. “And what’s so important you had to look it up at my door?”

Bernie was right in front of him, and Deacon was missing him, more than he ever thought possible. He’d never seen a future without Bernie, not since he was eight, but he knew he and Wendy both would never be back in Bernie’s life. He’d come here with a plan, but if he said now Wendy was crazy, that she was throwing him over, that he’d been nuts to get all mixed up about her, if he let her go and worry about herself, maybe they could start to mend things, man to man.

It was a wild, cruel thought. Deacon sighed. “Would you know what a ‘Joyous Gard’ is?”

Bernie squinted at him, then reached over and palmed Deacon’s phone. He typed one-handed and waited a second, holding the phone up toward the house. Then, his brows folding down to his eyes in an even deeper squint, he handed him the phone back.

The top results of a search read ‘Lancelot’s castle.’ And Wendy called him melodramatic.

“You here to joust or something?” Bernie asked, straight-faced.

“I wish,” Deacon said, thinking of long-ago duels with sticks. “Wendy thinks she’s sick.”

Bernie’s squint did not change. But he moved, bending to lay down the sign he still held, taking the towel from off his neck and clearing the sand left behind in his hair with one brief

shake. “Thinks?” he said, when he straightened. “She hasn’t done anything about it yet, has she.”

It wasn’t a question, but neither was it the reprimand Deacon didn’t realize until right then that he’d been awaiting, like all this was on him, like he hadn’t taken care of Wendy properly, in Bernie’s place. That was not how it was. “She’s at my cottage.”

“She would be, wouldn’t she.”

“She misses you.”

“Ah. Wendy tell you that? Come on now.”

Deacon gestured emptily. “She won’t even tell me she’s scared. But I can tell that, too.”

“I’ll see her,” Bernie said, right away, “if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Yes,” Deacon said, pained, relieved. “You mind walking over with me?”

This, Bernie had to consider. “You go on,” he said, “I’ll be by. I still know your place.”

* * *

At the cottage, Wendy was laying out her entire deck in a spread on the main room floor. Her mouth moved in soundless word-shapes as she worked, intently.

Deacon went right to the fridge and grabbed a six-pack. He carted it over to the window and popped one bottle cap off against the windowsill. For some minutes he looked back-and-forth between the streets, and the one or two night walkers strolling, and the increasingly card-covered carpet. He spotted Bernie by the amble of his silhouette even before his bright Bahama shirt caught a light.

“Bernie was here, after all,” he said, as casually as he could. “He’s outside.”

Wendy turned around. He wouldn’t have seen the sudden tremble in her hand, but the cards she was holding fluttered and gave her away. “Who for?” she asked, clearly aiming for her queenliest voice. But her voice quavered, too.

Deacon hoisted his six-pack and went to the screen door. “If you want me, you can figure where I’ll be,” he said. “Or at least, Bernie can.”

He managed not to slam the door on his way out. Bernie was almost to the cottage’s two wood steps, as Deacon came down them. Deacon, with a lowered-head nod, walked on by.

Bernie let him pass. Then he called, “I think you owe it to me to leave me at least one beer.” He made a quick catch when Deacon threw one back at him. “Whoa, there, Deke—”

Deacon turned all the way back around, but Bernie had stopped because Wendy had moved to stand at the screen. Neither of them was looking at him.

So he re-shouldered his six-pack and strode down the gravel-paved streets, down the walk to the sand. The water had gone mirror-still for the night. Deacon kicked off his sneakers by the water’s edge and left them there, then stepped to ankle-depth. The sand of the bottom held the ripples of the waves that had passed over it. He dragged his feet across it, smoothing it over.

Then he walked, in the water, down to the castle-house. At times the shallows deepened. His jeans ended up wet to his calves, but he walked on till the water only covered his feet again.

At the castle-house he marched out of the water and straight up to it, till he was close enough to touch the walls. Its lights were dark, as in winter, empty for the construction. The gazebo was much larger up-close, wider than some cottages. Deacon checked the new wooden tower and found the door installed but one of the new windows unlocked. He shimmied through.

There was a door inside the new addition to the castle-house itself, locked, of course. The wallet in his pocket held credit cards and a few of Wendy’s extra bobby pins tucked in the crease. He remembered the Griffith boys’ lock-picking lessons well enough that he bet he could get in. But even this close, he didn’t care anymore to see its rooms or stairwells or to go hunting alone for any of the secret passages they’d once imagined.

The new tower's stairs were rough-hewn wooden planks at this stage, the ground visible between their spaces. Deacon climbed, looking down all the way, until he came to the top. He found a small, raftered room with large windows. Slots had been made in the rafters, he noticed, and a canvas was stuck in one. He pulled it out and found it was blank, probably used for sizing. He looked at the window, with its perfect view of the bay, designed to let in optimal light, and knew someone had made this place for an artist. It would be the perfect spot to watch for shooting stars tumbling to the water, but the night sky was obscure and black-clouded.

He sat and drank, wondering what Bernie and Wendy would say to each other. Here Deke was, finally in the castle-house, but not because he was brave. He knew himself for more knave than knight, whatever he wanted to believe. Maybe, if he was still here in the morning, he'd see Garrett run by or Ian would be on the morning construction crew, knock some sense into him. Maybe Bernie would come get him or wait with Wendy for Deacon to return.

He was waiting, too, he realized. But only the sunrise came for him.

The Movie Men

“Either I’m dead right or I’m crazy” ~ Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (1939)

I met the “uncles” for the first time at my dad’s wake, when I was fourteen. None of the uncles were actually related to Dad, or me. They were the seven other guys who’d lived in the baseball house with him during his college years at Colgate. I’d heard their voices on our answering machine, and I’d idly checked out their kids on the Christmas cards—if their daughters were better-looking than me, if they had boys my age.

But it was the movies I recognized them from, when the first few walked in, somber-faced, wearing long coats over their suits. Not home movies, since Dad’s college days were years before he got his hands on a video camera, but the movies Dad would find on TV, late at night.

“Vi, Vi,” he’d say to Mom, who’d be falling asleep on the couch. “Doesn’t Bogie in this one remind you of Sweeney?” Or, when *Field of Dreams* with Kevin Costner was playing all

weekend and we had it on for the third time or so, he'd sit up, laughing, going, "Finally clicked—Costner's a dead ringer for Martin."

Dad and Mom met in college, so she always knew who he was talking about, even when Mary and I were a little lost. And she'd always say, "I don't really see it, Jimbo."

"C'mon," he'd say, running his hand up and down just in front of his face as if demonstrating something: "It's that Midwest cornbread vibe," right over Mom's protests Costner wasn't actually Midwestern, or "It's the hangdog eyes," or "But you got to admit, they're both so starkly *German*."

Mom was appalled by the last one. "You wouldn't dare say so to Bosch."

Dad didn't like that, so he called up his buddy Bosch in D.C. Mary and I ran upstairs to listen on the upstairs extension as Dad let it drop that we'd been watching *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* and dammit if the one Nazi captain didn't look like he could be Bosch's brother.

There was a moment of silence and a click. Mary and I thought Dad's friend had hung up before the voice came back with a roar of laughter, saying he'd dropped the fucking phone and letting loose a slew of R-rated words that I hadn't known could be said so affectionately.

Sometimes Mom would humor Dad by agreeing, which seemed to frustrate him more than her disagreeing because he could tell she didn't really see it. "Don't *patronize* me, Vi," he'd say, raggedly. I only ever heard them argue with real heat over stupid little things, but that line could set them off. For all Dad's comfortable jokes about Mom being the breadwinner, for all that he loved having time for volunteer coaching, losing his bank job left a dent in his soul.

I didn't get that then, but Mom did, and right around when I'd start panicking about how many of my classmates' parents had divorced, her voice would soften, and she'd admit that no, she couldn't see it at all. Dad would groan about how she had no imagination, but that would be

the end of it. Mary and I didn't give his comparisons much heed. He'd call us his Katherine Hepburn (not the Hepburn who Mary hoped to look like) and Maureen O'Hara. Especially since I wasn't a redhead like Maureen, I didn't get it. "Look at Maureen in a black-and-white and tell me you don't see yourself," Dad insisted. Her face was slightly squared-off like mine, but my bone structure added up to "striking" *in place* of even "pretty," while the iconic actress defined "striking beauty". We figured Dad was being generous and, like most dads, a little kooky.

But when Dad died and the uncles showed up, I saw he'd been right all along. They introduced themselves as Uncles Tobias, Pete, Mark, so on, not the last names Dad usually tossed around, making for too many new names to match to too many tall men, particularly then. But I could pin the man with the mournful dark eyes that seemed to take over his face as Uncle Bogie, and the tallest man, with thinning hair, I recognized as Uncle Costner, though the resemblance to the actor was really just in the crinkling of his eyes and maybe the voice. The gaunt, straight-backed man with the hawk nose, I felt terrible for thinking of as Uncle Nazi, especially when he was the first one to grab me up in a hug and the first one to make me smile, when he said with a straight face, "I was with your dad every day for four years of college, and I was with your dad all four times he got arrested." (At the time I was sure he was joking.)

I didn't slip out loud, though, until night, when Mom insisted the uncles come back to the house. Surely we were too tired, they protested, but Mom wanted her girls to get to visit with them. I'd already been following them around at the wake, hanging onto their every word of Dad, leaving Mary to be older and responsible and stay with Mom by the coffin.

We had so much food and drink from neighbors and relatives I imagined it had to amount to more than Dad consumed in his whole life. While Mary grabbed beers and Mom put out sandwiches, the uncle who'd come all the way from Georgia asked me, "Do you have any

coffee, sweetheart?”

I hadn't ever heard a Southern accent like his in real life before, and with his curly, prematurely gray hair and startlingly bright eyes, I thought him exceptionally handsome for an old guy. Our coffee machine was buried somewhere under the fruit baskets, I explained, and pointed to a packaged bag of gourmet teas and the like. “Sorry, Uncle Ashley, hot cocoa?”

He paused. “Pardon, Laurey hun, what’s that again?”

Turning red, I repeated the part about cocoa, but he'd actually heard the “Uncle Ashley” bit all right the first time and wanted to know if that’s what my daddy said to call him.

I had to tell him not exactly and explain about having seen part of *Gone With The Wind* with Dad one night.

“At least I’m not Uncle Scarlett,” he said, smiling, and agreed to the cocoa. When I came back with it, the other uncles wanted to know if I had names for them, and Uncle Nazi said, oh brother, he hoped he wasn’t Uncle Nazi or something.

“You got types?” ~ The Thin Man (1934)

I didn't mean to start hanging out at the tattoo parlor. I found tattoos a turn-off on guys, I'd never managed to last five minutes with a temporary tattoo or henna before wanting to scrub it off, and Mom would probably cry. But after turning eighteen I found myself lingering around the parlor down the street from my high school. And one day I walked through the door, nodded at the guy with eyebrow piercings manning the counter, and circled the shop, looking at the photographs of tattoos pinned to the wall, especially the quotes.

“Just browsing,” I said, if anyone asked.

Usually the only person who acknowledged me at all was the guy with piercings, one of

the artists. He was usually just behind the counter when I came in, but I'd spotted him etching a blue bird on a girl's shoulder one day. His only visible tattoos ran up his left arm, and I assumed he'd done them himself. Scales started on his middle finger and spread up to spiral around his wrist, becoming the tail of a dragon that took up his entire arm. It was stylized like the sea monster on an old map, and old-style font letters marked up his shoulder. I thought they read "Here Be," but I'd never gotten close enough to tell for sure.

"I'm beginning to think you just like me," he said the sixth time I came in, crossing the dragon arm over the other.

I jumped. That thought hadn't occurred to me, since I'd grouped him with his tattoos—fascinating but not at all part of my world. I supposed he was twenty-something, okay verging on attractive if he took the piercings out. "I like your work," I said.

"Just trying to get up the nerve?" he said, looking me over. I thought he might be arching a brow, but it was hard to tell under all that metal. "Let me guess: you want a classy little line. Maybe in Latin."

"I don't know Latin."

"Neither do I, really, so there's some risk there. But it's usually the stock phrases. *Amor vincit omnia, bibo ergo sum, cave canem*—"

SAT root words and little bits from history class filled in more than I'd expected. "*Bibo ergo*— I drink, therefore I am?"

"Fairly fucking popular," piercings guy said, nodding.

"That's pretty lame," I said, "for something meant for forever." I thought about my grandfather when he went swimming, the way the skin sagged like drapery over his rib cage, and imagined stretched-out letters and fading colors on such a shifted canvas.

“This boy last week,” he said conversationally, “wanted ‘Thank You’ right here.” He planted a hand over the belt loops of his jeans. “In case he forgot to say it.”

“Now that’s *gross*.”

He tilted his head. “How old are you? Is that what you’re doing, plotting out what you’ll get when you’re of age?”

“No, actually I’m—” I hesitated. “Well, I don’t know what words I’d want.”

It was Dad’s words I wanted to keep forever. The end of high school neared, and fourteen suddenly seemed a long time ago. That scared me. Dad didn’t seem like a long time ago. He never could be, for me, and sewing his voice into my skin would make sure it stayed that way.

But I couldn’t boil him down to one motto, and his words were always borrowed. When I was little and he’d drawl, “It’s not the years, honey, it’s the mileage,” or joke he’d lasso the moon for his girls, I thought he was coming up with that stuff himself. When we’d finally gotten around to clearing out some of dad’s clothes and papers almost two years after, I’d trembled at finding a leather-bound journal, counting on its pages to add to my hoard of Dad’s words. But it was mostly blank. The first fifteen pages were filled, but with one-liners, mostly from John Wayne and Jimmy Stewart movies. There were no dates, though Mom thought the first faded pencil marks might go as far back as Dad’s high-school movie usher job, and the last, in still-bright pen, were from *A Knight’s Tale*—my movie. Dad took me and my friend to it in seventh grade because we couldn’t get into PG-13s ourselves. He’d grumbled but then laughed so resoundingly in the dark I’d been mortified, more so when he tried to discuss the movie’s high points on the drive home, while I just wanted to gossip about how cute Heath Ledger was. Later, though, it became one he and I could agree on renting.

Piercings guy snapped his fingers in front of my face. “You still in there?”

Dad hated being snapped at by anyone. It was treating a man like a dog, he'd say. "I'm thinking," I said. "'Change your stars,' I like that."

"It's pretty," he agreed dubiously. I wanted to be annoyed, but out loud, out of context, the quote sounded stock, vague. To me, it was a reminder how much Dad took from even a fun adventure movie. Dad wrote two lines from *Knight's Tale* in his journal; first "You have been weighed, you have been measured, and you have been found wanting," carefully penned and just as carefully crossed out. "Change your stars," rewriting the sky to lead a better life, was its reply.

But aside from his could've-been-a-contender work frustrations, I didn't want a better life than Dad's. Just one a lot like it. "It's one idea," I said to piercings guy.

He asked for some of the others, but I demurred, saying I had to go.

He pulled out a card, scribbled his cell number on it, and said, "If you decide. Or if you have that birthday."

I'd never had the chance to bring a guy home to Dad. My sister Mary had a succession, dismissively dubbed by Dad as Spicoli, Bill/Ted, and Harvey, as in the silent, invisible seven-foot rabbit. Dad hated nothing more than blank stares. He expected conversation to be a game of catch, a smooth arc of back-and-forth, with both players competent at fielding any topic that might be thrown at them. I wondered how piercings guy would fare in Dad's book, cover aside.

I did take his card. "Do you like baseball?" I asked.

Piercings guy laughed. "Not much for that country club shit, no."

"Ah," I said, "no. Country club stuff would be golf. Same principles to the swing really, but the ball doesn't move."

"I know what golf is," he said, still amused. "Like you said— same shit."

I glanced away from his eyes, to the dragon climbing his arm.

“So, what, that your kinda deal breaker? You only go with guys who bat two hundred?”

“Two hundred’s a pretty low bar,” I said.

“Hey, all the better. Trust me, high bars never stay high long, if you ever want to get any-fucking-where.” This time he caught my flinch at his ‘fuck’. He clicked his tongue, the metal in it clanging on his teeth. “Shit, you even seventeen?”

“It’s not about the years,” I said, “I’m just taking my time with the mileage.” I waited to see if he’d catch the reference, if he’d play on a quote in reply.

His wink moved his whole eyebrow bar. “Well. Let me know when you’re set to rack some up.”

I didn’t. I stuck his card in my souvenir box and stopped drifting into the shop. I felt like I was supposed to be in my rebel stage, like Mary was when she was eighteen and Dad was alive, but no real McMurphy or Cool Hand Luke was surfacing to shake up my schedule, and there was nothing I really wanted to break away from.

I window-shopped at other places for a while. But I never did get a tattoo. Dad’s voice in my head pulled me up short, maybe something I once heard him say, maybe about something else, or maybe only my best guess of what his take would be: *You like it so much, why don’t you just put it on a T-shirt?*

“Not just one wish, a whole hatful” ~ It’s a Wonderful Life (1946)

I kept tabs on the Christmas card boys, to the extent of secret Internet stalking. It started with the College World Series when, all excitement, Mom shouted for Mary and me to rush downstairs, the ballgame turned up to surround sound. We found Mom, phone against her ear, jabbing her finger urgently at the screen. Even count, and the batter swung at a fast ball, a little

high and outside. Uncle Costner's son was pitching.

"Oh," I said, and "oh," again, as he wound up, knee lifted in perfect form, and fired one straight across the plate. His uniform shirt was light blue, and even from the long camera shot, I could tell his eyes were, too.

Mary stayed and watched for a few minutes. I sat down with my mom and watched Uncle Costner's son's team win the game. Then I went and pulled out Mom's Christmas card file.

There were newspaper clippings from Uncle Costner in there, about his son's high school championship and summer leagues, though he'd sent far fewer since Dad had been gone. The crisp, bright Christmas pictures of the family by the mantle gave me a much better look at the pitcher's face and smile than the quick TV shots and his cap brim had allowed me.

I stole my sister's laptop, logged onto my just-started Facebook account, and found his name right away. And I started plowing through the rest of the uncles' cards, too, with purpose.

I didn't even hear Mary coming in to take her laptop back.

"This seems vaguely Oedipal," Mary said, checking out the pictures over my shoulder.

"Obsessing over Dad's friends' kids? Really?"

"I'm not obsessing," I said. "They just seem like the same type I'd like if we just— met."

"You'll meet plenty of guys at college."

"I don't know, I saw the guys you met at college."

Mary made a face at me, lifting an old picture of the Bogie boys in Halloween costume.

"Who's Robin Hood?"

"Actually, he only lives about two hours away—"

Mary took a second look at the picture. "Oh, God, the one dad tried to convince to drive up to take me to *prom*? He was always doing that, especially when the uncles got together to go

see a game— this one’s boys have a band, and this one’s a gentleman, and why can’t I bring home a boy capable of saying ‘Hi, Mr. Hobbs’ with a handshake, not a silent nod—”

“I remember,” I said, too shortly, and was immediately mad at myself. Mary rarely wanted to talk about Dad. “I mean—”

Mary put down the picture. “Forget it,” she said. “And forget this. You’re never going to meet these guys. Anyway, isn’t the lesson of all that Hollywood stuff you love usually to look for the person who’s been there all along, give the schlubby guy a chance?”

“Not my kind of movies,” I said. “And it’s not like I’m asking for the moon.” I didn’t expect any guy of my generation ever to tell me I looked like Maureen O’Hara, particularly if I wanted one who’d also want to hit the batting cages with me. “I don’t see the problem with doing a lot of looking. Especially ’cause if there were all these decent, strapping guys around in WWII and when Mom was our age, there still are. Possibly hiding somewhere. Or just taking a little more time growing up.”

“Or they don’t come that way anymore,” Mary said.

“But then there’s the boys,” I said, waving my hand over the Christmas cards.

“They’re—like some kind of proof.”

“Legends never die” ~ The Sandlot (1993)

Dad was five years gone when Uncle Bogie’s death showed up on Facebook, by way of both of his sons switching their profile pictures to one of their father when he was young, whip-fit, wearing a squinty smile. Since I’d Facebook-friended the sons, I’d seen updates on how their dad was doing, requests for thoughts and prayers, even one picture where Uncle Bogie’s bones all but leapt from his skin. I figured it out before Mom got the phone call from Uncle Ashley.

It was a summer wake so I was home from college. Dad would've gone, wherever in the world he was, and Uncle Bogie had lived just outside of Buffalo, not a bad drive. But Mom couldn't get out of an advertising business trip, and when I asked Mary to come with me, she said it was weird without Mom, we barely knew him. That wasn't how I felt.

I felt a connection to the Bogie boys, too, beyond the loose, long-distance awareness of each other. There was proof we'd met. There are baby pictures of me and the older boy, propped on a couch like dolls, and Mary and me with both Bogie boys at Niagara Falls, wet and in ponchos for the Cave of the Winds tour. I was six, and yet when I try to recall the sound of the water, all I come up with is movie waterfalls; I try to see myself there, and it's a patchwork jumble made of photographs. I had fourteen years with Dad. I remember about half of them well.

I went thinking I was really prepared. I'd been to wakes since living through Dad's. My insides froze up every time, but I could deal with scrambling and shock. I could muster small talk of the right weight, a smile that was somber without being one of the pitying ones I hated.

But I walked into an atmosphere of exhale, no coffin, walls of picture-covered poster boards with the quote "I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth," in big, block letters at the top, and over the thrum of a packed parlor, "Centerfield" playing in the background: "A' roundin' third, and headed for home, it's a brown-eyed handsome man..."

I doubled back, struck by tears. I ducked my head down, trying to hide my face in my hair, groping for the ladies' room. From movies I felt acutely aware that if I was noticed like this— a twenty-year-old girl generally unknown to family and friends bursting into instant tears at the wake of a middle-aged man— it looked bad.

Once I made it into a stall, I tried to choke my tears down, feeling I had no right. I kept thinking how my dad had loved the old Lou Gehrig movie with the "luckiest man" quote though

he didn't even *like* the Yankees, how this other man who knew and understood and *remembered* Dad was also gone too soon, taking with him all the scraps of conversation and adventure between only them, never again to be recounted in an email to Mom or ever known to me.

Eventually I managed to clean my face of its blotchiness and smeared mascara—I hadn't thought I'd need waterproof—but I'd given myself the hiccups and couldn't get rid of them.

I looked for a path to the exit as soon as I stepped out of the ladies', only to find myself facing Uncle Luca Brasi.

"Fellas, fellas, look what I found," he said over his shoulder, even while holding out thick arms to me. "Laurey, I hope you don't mind giving out hugs to a bunch of old gaffers..."

I didn't. I almost started crying again because they weren't that old, not at all, but instead I laughed, still hiccupping, as they took me over to the poster board wall to point out pictures of all of them with long hair and stupid beards, as Uncle Nazi told how Dad got himself and Bogie arrested at a college bar by calling two cops Starsky & Hutch.

The older Bogie boy was making his way down the line of people waiting, shaking hands. He was the one Mary's age, the one I knew from Facebook pictures, which I looked at a little too often, to be handsome in a tall, bony way. When he passed by the uncles, Uncle Luca spun me toward him. "This is Jim's girl," Uncle Luca announced me.

"One of," I corrected and started my condolences spiel, but the older Bogie boy, tired-eyed but very calm, even smiling at me, was already saying, "I know you, you're Laurey," and shaking my hand, in a fierce grip. "My dad loved your dad. Talked about him a lot lately."

He staggered me. I finally managed to say, "My dad loved yours too," and only then did he let go of my hand. Some older woman nearby was calling to him, and suddenly he was saying, "I'm so sorry," which I was supposed to be saying to him and, to Uncle Luca, "Make

sure to show her!” The next thing I knew he was hustling off to more handshakes.

“Show me what?” I asked Uncle Luca immediately.

“The other room,” he answered, adding, dramatically, “more pictures.”

“C’mon, Laurey girl, you’ll see,” Uncle Ashley said, stepping up and even offering me his arm. “You know how your Uncle Bogie was a movie star for a minute?”

The Natural, with Robert Redford, filmed in and around Buffalo, New York in summer 1982. Every one of the dozen times I’d seen the movie with Dad, he brought up that somewhere deep in the crowd of “Wrigley Field,” his buddy Bogie was there as an extra. I knew all right.

There wasn’t much to the other room but extra elbow space, some more poster boards, a table with burnished medals and trophies, until I saw them.

Photographs of seated men were propped up against the far wall. They looked like cardboard cutouts, old ones, seeped of color so I could barely tell it had ever been there, parchment yellow around the edges. The men, all unknown faces to me, were scaled just shy of life-size and came only waist-high, cut off at the bottom so it looked like their knees grew out of the parlor floor. Lined up side-by-side, they had the look of a bullpen, even though they wore suits, bow ties, hats, nice dress for the 1930s, instead of uniforms.

“Meet some other minor movie stars,” Uncle Ashley told me. “I think you’re familiar with their work filling out stadium seating.”

A tanned boy, double-fisting water bottles in dripping hands, elbowed his way to stand next to me and Uncle Ashley. “At last, the girl who called my dad ‘Uncle Bogie’?” he asked me, hoarse-voiced. No question he was the second son, not as recognizable without the ear-to-ear grin of the Christmas cards and much older-looking than he’d been on last year’s. “He got such a complex about that.”

"I'm sorry," I said, while he drained a water bottle. His eyes were wet, too.

"No, a good complex. Like, he went and bought fedoras when he started chemo. Sam Spade, *Casablanca*, that was cool stuff."

"I think so, too."

He pressed closer to Uncle Ashley, making us more of a circle among the crowd, then, with a gesture of the water bottle, directed our attention to one of the photograph men. "Remind you of anyone?" he asked me.

"Sure does," Uncle Ashley said.

Not getting it, I stepped closer, bending for a better look.

This cut-out was a young man in a flat cap, which shadowed half his boyish face. He looked all the skinnier for being scaled down, smaller-than-life; my head could halo his. He sat legs apart and arms folded, assessing, lips parted. A small hole, where the photograph had peeled away to show the paper behind, formed right in the middle of his lips. I brought my finger to it.

"A cigarette used to stick out there," the younger Bogie boy said. "But my dad pulled it off when we were kids. Said the shows were giving us enough ideas." He nodded at me. "You can pick it up."

I did and was surprised by the heft. I knocked on the back and found it was real wood, thin as it was, dark and strong, with none of the give of plywood.

"You see it?" the Bogie boy asked impatiently.

I took another look at the cutout's face. "Jimmy Stewart?"

"Jimmy Stewart?" he said, disappointed, while Uncle Ashley laughed.

"Circa *Mr. Smith*," I added, a little defensive.

"He did have that look, some," Uncle Ashley said. "Skinny guy, dark flop of hair..."

I looked again, this time with expectation. And this time I did see it, not Dad as I'd ever known him, with a broader build and fuller cheeks, but another Jimmy, the baseball boy of his old pictures. It wasn't exact, something profoundly different about the proportion between chin and forehead, but the nose was alike, the assured expression, and the eyes, in distance apart, in intensity, in the worlds that seemed just-barely walled-off behind them, those were really close. So close I didn't know how I hadn't seen it right away, how I could ever not see it again.

"My dad got a hold of this guy for the resemblance," the Bogie boy said, watching my face. "And the rest then just 'cause. Always meant to send this one to your dad as a joke, but he kept him. You see it now?"

"I see it," I said. My stomach had the warm, funny feeling I get right after finishing a coffee. These Bogie boys, who I didn't really know, they knew my dad, grasped a sense of him, *remembered* him without having really known him themselves, as I did theirs, melancholy minor movie star who got Dad into as much trouble as Dad did him.

I think I'll love them a little forever for that, and for insisting that I take the cutout, which sat in the passenger seat while I sang "Centerfield" my whole drive home.

"No man is a failure" ~ It's a Wonderful Life (1946)

We wondered, later, if Dad's mix-ups his last summer were actually signs we missed.

"Pleasure to meet you, Mrs. McFly," he said, when putting out his hand to Mary's boyfriend's mother. She'd come to our house to take prom pictures and politely corrected him that it was *McCabe*. Dad, for once, was more mortified than Mary.

A few weeks later, he walked in from a golf day looking perturbed. Dad had *Wonderboy* stitched on his golf bag, like the baseball bat in *The Natural*, as a self-reminder that the essence

of the swing stayed the same. He meant it to be funny but said sometimes people took it for conceit. “Well, I gaffed,” he said, as he set down his golf bag. “Remember John Murray, Vi?”

Mom didn’t. Apparently he was a friend of a friend who Dad had known for some years.

“I spent the whole day calling him ‘Bill’.” Dad shook his head even as he grinned, as if he couldn’t decide whether he was amused or troubled. For some reason, which he attributed to just seeing *Caddyshack*, he’d honestly thought that was the man’s name. Everyone thought he was joking so nobody told him otherwise until John got fed up and told Dad off. Dad made self-deprecating jokes about that mistake all summer. But even I could see it really bothered him.

Dad was grouchy the day we moved Mary into the dorms. I was, too, since Mary’s first year of college was my first year of high school, but she got all the attention. School was near enough that she could have commuted, but she wanted the dorms for one reason: college boys.

“Jesus, what is this, a national decline?” Dad said, aghast at the boys spotted on our dorm safari. Some boys had attached a Playstation to the common room TV and barely glanced over at Mary and me hauling boxes before turning back to their game. “These guys make McFly look like Tarzan. Our day, we’d have jumped to help a pretty girl move in.”

Mom told him he was being ridiculous and just managed to forestall a technology’s-the-death-of-social-skills rant.

He wasn’t any happier with the roughhousing guys in jerseys who grabbed the elevator we’d been waiting for. “Hey, fellas, fellas,” he started to say, but the door closed.

“Ever heard of respect?” he yelled at the departing elevator. “Don’t college coaches teach discipline anymore?”

“Oh my God, he’s like a cartoon character,” Mary said to me. “Next he’ll be shaking his fist.”

And I giggled.

“We’ll get the next one,” Mom told Dad.

Deflated, he hoisted Mary’s TV and said, “Forget it. I’ll take the stairs again.”

We’d finished making Mary’s bed and were beginning to wonder what was taking him so long, whether he’d taken a wind break on the sixth floor or something, when someone shouted for help from down the hall.

It was a stroke, the doctors told us later, or rather, told Mom, who told us. Mary, over and over again, somewhere between a chant and shriek, kept going, “I need to see him, I need to see him.” I understood her then maybe more than ever. Movies told me nobody was dead for sure till you saw the body and that strokes were a thing people survived, at least the first one.

Maybe that wouldn’t have been a blessing. All his life Dad was an athlete, and with his personality and battered pride, if the stroke had taken his facilities instead of his life, maybe that would have been harder, on him, than winking right out of the world.

But I think sometimes, if that was the deal, I’d take it. Because what I want, even more than a game of catch or that last meaningful conversation, is his company, whether his running commentary or the near-silence of shared popcorn and reactions, for a few movies more.

“If you build it...” ~ Field of Dreams (1989)

I dragged Mary to the batting cages last week. “You’re a dope,” she said. “This is ridiculous,” she said. But she came.

“No jewelry,” the guy at helmet rental advised us, and we took off our dangling earrings and Mary her ring, to put in the plastic bag he gave us.

Dad used to take us to the cages. Mary had outgrown it before he died, but I never

stopped going. I only quit Little League when Mom finally convinced Dad overhand pitch was just too much, and I never took to underhand-pitch softball. Dad kept coaching town baseball even after I wasn't one of his players, and I'd sit at the games with scorebook and little snub pencil, marking up the miniature diamond grids. I got a little rusty myself, but after Dad died, swinging at something coming at me fast seemed like a good idea.

I tapped the plate free of dust and then pulled the bat up and back till my left shoulder was under my chin, my right elbow a firm upright triangle. I pivoted as the first ball came at me, left heel dropping down, right heel rising. Close the door, squish the bug, Dad would say. Maybe I should put that one on a T-shirt.

My balls arced high and far into the mesh, but Mary's rattled against the cage behind her.

"You want me to show you?" I asked, but she waved me off.

"I can remember," she said, red-faced and huffing as she adjusted and took another swing, her arms jolting when she connected.

We used up our ball tokens and packed the gear.

"Laurey?" a voice said. I didn't know the face when I turned, but I liked it.

"I'm Nate Lain," he said. "Your dad coached me?"

It took me a minute. My dad had a lot of baseball boys. "Sure I remember," I said, laughing, "Nate the Great." Really, Dad had him down as *Brando* in his scorebook, his own rebel without a cause. No mouthing off in baseball, Dad would shout at him.

Brando held up his bat in one hand, as if it was a palette, then put his hand in the batting glove over the handle. "I still grip Coach Jim's way," he said, settling both hands on the bat.

Mary fussed with the little plastic bag. I smiled. "Me too," I said. "Thanks for telling me. Means a lot to know somebody else does, too."

Mary clicked her tongue, probably thinking he was a bit young or that I was playing again to Dad's type. But I measure any man off him and his movies because it's my measure for myself. I can't respect a guy with a lousy swing when I spend so much time practicing my own.

"One of you girls getting married?" Brando asked, noticing the diamond ring flashing in the plastic bag.

"Mary's marrying Rambo," I replied.

Mary sighed long-sufferingly, but she seemed, at least, less stressed than when I'd picked her up to hit a few. "He was in Special Forces," she said, "and Laurey, like my father, thinks she's a riot. For God's sake, it's not like my guy has a penchant for headbands or anything."

Rambo was actually crew-cut, round-faced and smiley. He was okay. He didn't have a whole lot to say, but he brought Mom flowers, and if he didn't like my name for him, that didn't stop him from grinning at it.

The uncles should be coming in from all over for Mary's wedding. I'd lightly suggested Mary invite their whole families, but she shut that down fast. She admitted, though, each uncle got a plus one. Whoever they might happen to bring along was entirely on them.

"I think Rambo actually wore a bandana," Brando said. He grinned at me. "I like your T-shirt."

I was wearing one of my *Princess Bride* quote T-shirts. I'd started buying shirts like it all the time, at malls, online, custom made at print shops. They're cheaper than tattoos. Easier to try on and take off. Some subtler than others. This one read, *Fencing, fighting, torture, revenge, giants, monsters, chases, escapes, true love, miracles*. "Thanks," I said easily, "you know, not everyone thinks it means what I think it means."

I could practically hear Mary rolling her eyes behind me.

“Means the movie’s got sports in it,” he said, still grinning. “But if you were thinking of something else... as you wish.”

It was Dad’s kind of answer. My kind of answer. A sure sign he could play conversational catch. My grin back actually strained my cheeks. “About that left-handed grip of yours,” I said. “Fairly nice-looking. So, these days, can you hit anything?”

“Sometimes,” he said, and he took some jingling tokens for his pocket. “If you’re sticking around a minute, you can tell for yourself.

“Oh, swing away, Nate,” I said. “We’ll stick around.”

The second he stepped into the cage, Mary grabbed my arm and tsked in my ear. ““Fairly nice-looking?” ‘Can you hit anything?’ Seriously? Did you actually just give him the set-up for the Sundance Kid to show off?!” I turned toward her, elated and actually impressed, though she ruined it a little by going on to, “Good Lord, that’s not remotely about baseball.”

“All baseball movies boil down to life and magic,” I said, watching Nate set up his swing. Maybe nowadays he was a Sundance. I could use a Sundance or two in my life. “All good movies are arguably—meaning I’ll argue it, just try me, Mar—about life and magic. By which logic, all movies are baseball movies.”

Mary studied me. “Is that you or a Dad quote? Or a Dad-quoting-something-quote?”

“Well,” I said, unable to hide my silly-pleased smile, “it came from somewhere.”

VITA

Cara Cotter was born in Buffalo, New York, but grew up outside the city in the town of East Aurora, in a house with a purple door and a backyard with room to run around. Somehow she ended up attending Catholic schools for sixteen years, including an all-girls high school (when friends learn this, she often hears that it explains a lot). She's lucky enough to have both a younger brother and sister, who are at once her favorite people and capable of driving her madder than anyone else. She has many cousins whom she loves as friends and a good handful of friends as close as cousins. Cara also has a host of aunts and uncles who have been fairy godmothers and knights in shining armor more times over the years than she can count or ever repay. Cara's parents shaped her soul. Her mom gave her *Little Women* and *East of Eden*, Led Zeppelin and Joni Mitchell, and (although some days it's still a work-in-progress) the gift to laugh at herself. Her dad gave her *Scaramouche* and *The Thin Man*, Sam Cooke and Ronnie Drew, and some measure of his great gift with words. From both, Yeats, piano lessons, a cat named Guinness, her education, and the sure knowledge that love can be real and lasting. Cara is thankful to her mom for reading all her stories, these among them, and sharing her thoughts. She wishes above all things that her dad, the best editor she'll ever have, was still here to read them, too.