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Before it even began| [Stories]

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BEFORE IT EVEN BEGAN

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS:

kennedy fisher 1
before you get the chance (it’s already too late) 18
of human residue 30
now we’re photogenic 53
who could blame her 58
house arrest 79
simon says or when lily forgot to fill her time 99
rough in comparison 119
Kennedy Fisher

Kennedy Fisher had been looking forward to baby-sitting for the Macintyres all week. They lived in the same apartment building as Kennedy and her father.

Neil and Judy Macintyre were in their early thirties, they wore fashionable but comfortable clothes, and Kennedy had seen them holding hands in the elevator numerous times. Their apartment was pleasantly cluttered, filled with thick and soft furniture, colorful candy in decorative dishes that, in her father's apartment, would have remained empty. And now the Macintyres had a baby, Alissa, who was four months old.

For the past week, when Kennedy couldn't fall asleep, she'd imagine herself lying in the baby's crib, its warm quilt pulled up to her chin. Kennedy was fourteen years old but she allowed herself to breathe loudly, in the selfish way that babies do, the way Alissa was breathing as Mrs. Macintyre taught Kennedy how to feed her and change diapers.
When Kennedy got to the Macintyre's apartment it was five o'clock and Mrs.
Macintyre had her hair in curlers. Kennedy stood in the entryway, unsure of what she
should do. The air in the apartment was warm, it smelled sweet in her nose.

"Okay," said Mrs. Macintyre, "come on in. All the way," she said, and she
touched Kennedy's arm lightly, the way a distant relative would. Mrs. Macintyre told her
there was no time to be shy, and the way she said it made Kennedy relax a bit, as if Mrs.
Macintyre spoke the literal truth and now shyness was an impossibility.

In the living room Alissa was sleeping in a multi-colored baby chair next to the
couch where Mr. Macintyre was sitting in a dark suit, his tie loose around his neck. He
said hello to Kennedy and smiled without showing his teeth. Alissa was in her pajamas
already, a one piece zip-up stripped pink and yellow. Her skin looked pale, pure in the
midst of the all the colors surrounding her. Her hair was still wet from a bath, the thin
strands darker in places, clinging to her head. Kennedy touched Alissa's foot lightly and
smiled at the baby, she wanted to show the Macintyres how kind and gentle she would
be. But Mrs. Macintyre was already leaving to finish getting ready and Mr. Macintyre
was watching a basketball game and didn't watch Kennedy at all.

"Want to have a seat, Kennedy?" he asked her after a minute. He must noticed
how awkwardly she was standing over the baby, though he didn't look up from the
television.

Kennedy would have preferred to go with Mrs. Macintyre, to watch her hair
unravel and fall to her shoulders, but she sat down on the couch, as far from Mr.
Macintyre as possible. "You like basketball?" he asked, though he didn't seem to want an
answer. He kept talking about the game, commenting on the players, more to the players
themselves than to Kennedy. And she didn't know if she was supposed to respond. She felt silly sitting there silently, but she had no idea what she might say. So she simply smiled and nodded and laughed, hoping these gestures followed appropriately what he was saying. And it wasn't entirely uncomfortable, not exactly. She imagined that Mr. Macintyre was her father or her husband, that he was happy simply to have her at his side.

Kennedy's father hated basketball, he hated all sports. He liked sappy night-time soap operas, modern dance performances and ballet. Kennedy wasn't sure what else he liked—he always said that his interests were purely intellectual, but Kennedy didn’t really understand how that could translate into things to do. Her father owned an art gallery where he spent most of his time, but Kennedy never saw him doing very much when he was there. Mostly he sat at the desk and talked to the people, especially the men, who sauntered in and out all day long. They’d have obtuse and muted conversations that frightened Kennedy, as if her father and these people were conversing in code, communicating something way beyond the words Kennedy heard them say. She hated the gallery, it made her feel awkward and clumsy.

But Kennedy tried not to think about her father as she watched the game. It felt wrong, disrespectful to the Macintyres and their clean apartment, disrespectful to the game of basketball, as if the mere thought of her father could sully all of these things. And it felt disrespectful to her father too-- these thoughts made it seem like she was embarrassed of him, of their life, and she wasn’t really, not all of the time. Besides, thinking about her father kept her from thinking about the game. It kept her from enjoying the moment.
On the television, one of the players dropped the ball and it rolled between another player's legs. Kennedy laughed loudly. "I love it when that happens," she said. All of a sudden she was bold, she wanted to make this work, she wanted Mr. Macintyre to see her for who she was and love her. "You know what I like best about basketball?" she asked. "I like it when teams play each other for the first time. I like the way they watch and respond to each other, you know?" Mr. Macintyre looked at her as if he didn't understand. "Each team tries to play with their own personal style," Kennedy explained, "but they can't just rush into their own style because first they have to see what the other team is doing. It's like, well, it's like a first date." She was going to say that it's like kissing someone for the first time, but she was too embarrassed to say it. Besides, she had never really kissed anyone in her life-- what if she was wrong?

Mr. Macintyre looked at her and he smiled. A beautiful smile, Kennedy thought, the kind that would make her father blush and giggle and grin in the way he reserved only for men, never for Kennedy. "I've never thought about it that way," Mr. Macintyre said, not entirely displeased, as far as Kennedy could tell. Still, she wished that Mrs. Macintyre was there to hear what she had said, to talk with Kennedy about first dates and first kisses. Then Mr. Macintyre would laugh at them and say that he was trying to watch the game. He would tell them to take their girl-talk elsewhere, but secretly he'd be proud. Then Kennedy and Mrs. Macintyre would go to the master bedroom and brush each other's hair.

During the commercial, Mr. Macintyre turned to Kennedy. "So how's school going?" he asked.
It made Kennedy almost breathless, this line of questioning, the idea of conversations like this every day, Mr. Macintyre as her father. She wanted to just sit there and think about it, imagine the whole situation, but she knew it was her responsibility to continue the conversation, to keep his attention.

"School's fine," she said. She couldn't think of anything else to tell him.

"And your dad?" he asked. "How's he?"

The question felt like a reminder, a direct warning. She had a father already, Mr. Macintyre was just a stranger who had a daughter of his own. "My father's busy with the gallery," she told him, trying to insinuate that he does nothing else but work, that being gay is merely a requirement for the job, nothing in which he relishes. Kennedy had seen her father flirting with Mr. Macintyre at their Christmas party. She had wondered what would happen if her father had somehow positioned the two of them under the mistletoe. And she had almost wished for that kiss, that Mr. Macintyre would open his mouth and let her father's tongue push at his teeth. She reminded herself that she had been angry at Mr. Macintyre that night, his refusal to appreciate her father's charm.

"I stopped by the gallery the other day," Mr. Macintyre admitted. "Did your father tell you?"

Kennedy shook her head, though her father had told her every detail of their interaction, Mr. Macintyre’s new hair cut, his shiny silver tie. "The gallery's got some pretty cool stuff," Mr. Macintyre said. "Your dad's a really interesting guy."

Kennedy wanted him to explain what he meant by that, if he too secretly wished that they had kissed, if he was only saying nice things to be polite. But the game came on again and Mr. Macintyre didn't say anything else.
Kennedy stared at the television feeling bored and anxious. She couldn't wait for the Macintyres to leave, to be alone in their apartment with the baby.

When Mrs. Macintyre came back into the living room she was wearing a tight black dress that accentuated her milk-filled breasts. She wore the dress even though her stomach still protruded, she looked about three months pregnant. But Kennedy thought she looked beautiful. She would have liked a hug, to feel Mrs. Macintyre's belly press against her own and to rest her head on her half-revealed chest. Mrs. Macintyre looked like a mother, and it only made her more beautiful.

"Wow, you fit into it," Mr. Macintyre said.

Mrs. Macintyre only rolled her eyes in response, but Kennedy worried that she was secretly feeling sad and embarrassed. "You look really nice," Kennedy told her. She had wanted to use the word beautiful, but it seemed inappropriate.

"Thank you, Kennedy," Mrs. Macintyre said. "Us full-figured girls need to stick together, right? It's sexy to have curves."

Kennedy felt her face turning red. She pictured herself poring out of a tight dress, Mr. Macintyre averting his eyes in embarrassment. Skinny boys fucking her, making her flesh bounce and jiggle, fucking her and then laughing as they zipped their pants and walked away. Her father was always telling her she should lose some weight, and maybe he was right. Mrs. Macintyre had a husband and she had a baby, before that she had been stick-thin. But what was Kennedy's excuse? A dead mother and a gay father?

Mrs. Macintyre walked over to her baby and gave her a kiss. "She should wake up soon," she told Kennedy. "And then you can feed her." She reached into her purse,
pulled out a twenty dollar bill and handed it to Kennedy. "In case you want to order in," she said. "But feel free to eat anything we have here as well."

Kennedy pictured the Macintyres coming home to find that she had eaten everything. "Thank you," Kennedy said. She pictured herself finishing all of their food but still ravenously hungry. She had bad dreams about excessive hunger, eating and eating without realizing what she was doing. Even when she woke up she'd feel guilty, never completely relieved that it was only a dream, because after all, something inside her wanted to eat like that. And what if if the Macintyres came home to find that Kennedy had eaten their baby? What if Kennedy ate Alissa without realizing what she was doing?

"You remember where everything is?" Mrs. Macintyre asked. "And you have our number, not that you'll need it, but in case you have any questions."

Kennedy nodded and tried to smile. She thought she could feel her chin doubling.

The Macintyres left, and neither of them hugged or kissed her good-bye.

Kennedy took off her shoes and socks and walked barefoot through the apartment. The carpeting massaged her feet as she walked, as if it welcomed her with every step.

She had begged her father for carpeting, at least in her bedroom, but he refused to cover the beauty of the hardwood floors-- a beauty which Kennedy herself found intimidating. Against this carpeting Kennedy was able to admire her own toes, those fat wrinkled little stubs that she could now recognize as beautiful, sort of like an infant's. In the master bedroom the carpet was so soft she let herself lie down on the floor, for just a few minutes. She loved the fresh, slightly salty smell of clean carpeting.
Everything was still possible. She put her hands on her stomach and then on her breasts. Mrs. Macintyre thought she was sexy, Kennedy let herself believe that. Mrs. Macintyre would love her no matter what she looked like.

When the baby started crying, Kennedy jumped up, it felt like someone had caught her lying on the floor. She was more excited than scared, though, she could do a great job with this, she could make Alissa love her, and then the Macintyres would love her too.

As soon as Kennedy picked her up, Alissa stopped crying. "Hi, pretty baby," she said, pressing Alissa to her chest. "Hi, baby." It felt nice to talk to someone who couldn't understand what she was saying and couldn't talk back. "I'm your mommy," she said, just to test her theory. The baby cooed and nuzzled her head under Kennedy arm. "Okay," she said, "I won't do that again. I'm going to take very good care of you, I won't lie anymore. I was just kidding, you know who your mommy is. I'm way too young to be your mommy, I'm your sister, I'm more like your sister. We're not related," she said. "But I love you."

She kissed the baby's forehead and then her cheek. It occurred to her that she could kiss this baby anywhere, she could push her tongue into the baby's mouth, just like her father wanted to do to Mr. Macintyre, but no one would ever find out. Alissa would probably enjoy it, she'd probably suck on Kennedy's tongue just like it was a pacifier. Of course she wouldn't do it-- Kennedy wasn't crazy, even if she sometimes had crazy thoughts. And crazy thoughts were okay, no one had to know she was having them. Mrs. Macintyre could still love her even if she had these thoughts all the time. It was her father's fault anyway, his stupid lifestyle. And her mother's fault as well. But she wasn't
going to be like her mother, she wouldn't let the thoughts control her. Kennedy didn't even remember her mother, she had killed herself when Kennedy was just four months old, how much of an influence could she have had?

"Let's sit," she said to Alissa. "We can watch some TV and then we'll have dinner, okay?" The couch, when she sat down this time, felt soft and embracing—she hadn't noticed how comfortable it was when Mr. Macintyre was there too. She found it funny and also encouraging that she had been so oblivious, that she had forgotten to enjoy something. She could relax now, she could force herself to appreciate every comfort available.

Kennedy took three jelly beans from the candy dish and popped one into her mouth. "I'll just have three," she said to Alissa. "You're too little to have any but some day you can eat as many as you want. You can eat as much as you want," she said, "and we'll still love you, okay?" Kennedy, absurdly, felt as if she were about to cry. She took a handful of jellybeans now, and she ate them two at a time. "See," she said, "I'll set a good example. You can eat whatever you want, don't be scared." The baby stared at Kennedy while she chewed. She reached up and touched Kennedy's lips. The baby's fingers now had traces of Kennedy's saliva on them and Kennedy started to feel panicked-- the candy dish was half as full as it was when she got there.

Kennedy put Alissa back in her chair and she ran to the dinning room. She took a few jellybeans from the dish in there. Alissa was crying again and it sounded like an alarm going off, Kennedy imagined that the whole neighborhood could hear it. But she had to finish what she was doing, she had to. She ran to the guest room and the kitchen table until she had gathered a huge handful of jellybeans from the various dishes without
diminishing any of them noticeably. She put the sticky handful into the bowl in the living room. "It's okay," she said to Alissa, lifting her up again. "Crisis averted." She tried to act calm but she felt so shaky she was sure that Alissa could feel it. Even if she understood nothing, Kennedy's jitters would make the baby suspicious.

She held Alissa in her arms and rocked her back and forth, but Alissa wouldn't stop crying.

"What is it?" Kennedy asked. "What's the matter? Please stop, I love you," she said. And as if in answer, the baby nuzzled her head into Kennedy's breast. Then she opened her mouth and the next thing Kennedy knew, Alissa's mouth was clamped around her breast, over her shirt. Mrs. Macintyre had warned her that this might happen, that Alissa did this by instinct when she was hungry, but it still felt horribly, horribly wrong. Kennedy was sure that she somehow provoked the baby to do this.

"I'll get your bottle," she said. "Okay? I'll get you a bottle because I'm not your mommy, I told you I'm not, so stop it, okay?" But the baby wasn't sucking anymore, she was only crying.

After feeding Alissa and after burping her, Kennedy looked for a video for the two of them to watch until bedtime. She was looking for something slow and comforting, but she found a tape that was labeled, "Alissa's Birth," and she choose that instead.

When she pressed play, she saw Mrs. Macintyre with legs spread open and Alissa's head, covered in blood, pushing its way out. The sound was staticy, but she could still hear loud, rhythmic breathing.
"You passed through your mother's vagina," she said to the baby. She was hoping to register some reaction in her face, but Alissa just stared at her. "Every part of you has rubbed against it— your nose, your mouth, your ears, your belly and your toes." As she mentioned each part, she touched it, as if taking stock. "Your tongue probably tasted it," she said, just realizing. All of this was okay to tell a baby, it was just the truth. "Don't feel weird about it," she said. "It's not your fault."

When the camera zoomed out and Kennedy could see Mr. Macintyre staring at his wife's vagina, she turned off the tape. Alissa shouldn't be watching it— because even if Mr. Macintyre really enjoyed looking at his wife down there, Alissa might mistake his expression for disgust and then she would never feel comfortable with her father again. Kennedy would have to remember to rewind the tape and put it back before the Macintyres got home, then everything would be fine.

"You know what?" she said to Alissa. "I was the last thing to pass through my mother's vagina, in or out." Again, the baby exhibited no reaction. "She died when I was a baby," Kennedy explained. "So she's now lying in her grave and my foot was the last thing to touch her down there." Kennedy held up a bare foot to show Alissa. "Unless someone put something in there once she was dead." Kennedy was initially thinking about preserving chemicals or something like that, but now she couldn't help considering other possibilities. "Maybe people work at morgues because they like to have sex with dead people," she said. "What do you think? It's possible, right? And no one would know." Kennedy imagined an over-weight middle-aged man fucking her mother's dead body, rubbing the scars on her neck. "He would have pushed away my traces," she said.
"Maybe there were still some of my skin cells on her, I mean deep inside, where she
couldn't wash. They would have stayed there forever."

Kennedy could feel the jellybeans in her empty stomach, it was making her feel
sick. "All right, enough of that kind of talk," she said to Alissa, as if the baby had started
it. "I'm going to teach you a very important lesson," she said. "You have to stop yourself
from going crazy. Anyone can, just like my mother, but you just have to keep it from
happening. You have to stop yourself, or you'll be really, really sorry."

But Kennedy couldn't stop herself. Again she pictured the big man pushing
himself into her mother's soft, decomposing body. "Do you think that's wrong?" she
asked. "Maybe fucking a dead person is no worse than having bad thoughts, since either
way no one finds out and no one gets hurt. I don't know," she said. "Don't think about it,
okay, Alissa?"

They sat silently for a few minutes, Kennedy stopped talking finally. She looked
down at the baby and smiled. It felt like an evil smile, even though she was trying to
look happy, and she was worried that it would frighten Alissa. But the baby smiled back
at her, a wide toothless smile that made Kennedy feel like crying. But Kennedy hadn't
done anything wrong, Alissa was happy, the Macintyres could still invite her back.
Maybe they'd ask her to live with them that summer and watch Alissa. She could sit on
the couch like this every day. They would buy extra jellybeans just for her.

Kennedy was feeling completely relaxed when Alissa started crying again. The
baby's face wrinkled horribly and turned bright red. Kennedy could see her tongue
trembling in her opened mouth. She held the baby to her chest and tried to comfort her.

"It's okay," she said. "It's okay. I love you." But Alissa kept crying.

And again Kennedy felt panic, she felt shaky and she wanted to cry right along. Her hands were sweaty from holding the baby and her shoulder and chest and her neck too. She stood up and started to pace through the apartment with the baby crying in her arms. "Please stop," she said. "It's okay, I promise." But the more Alissa cried, the more Kennedy wanted to cry too. But she wasn't sad, she realized, she was angry. She was furious. "Why are you crying?" she asked, trying to stay calm. "Your life is perfect," she said. "You shouldn't be crying. You're making me really mad," she said, trying as hard as she could not to yell.

Is this how Kennedy's mother felt? Is this how she felt the day she decided she didn't want to live anymore, back in Connecticut where they had a perfect life? Because Kennedy wouldn't stop crying, she wouldn't let things be perfect. Kennedy had always imagined that her mother threw her to the ground that day, or pushed her stroller down a flight of stairs, then felt so awful that she had to kill herself. And now Kennedy felt like she could do the same thing to Alissa, if she wasn't perfectly careful, she could throw her to the ground just to show her that there are certain things really worth crying about. And just like her mother, Kennedy could hang herself from the ceiling. She could let the Macintyres come home to find their baby bloody on the floor and Kennedy dead and swinging from a rope—just like her father probably found Kennedy and her mother. Kennedy was sure she had a scar on her forehead from that day, a tiny scar that her father claimed was nothing at all, but Kennedy knew the scar noticeable if someone were really to look.
"You really shouldn't cry," she said to Alissa, strangely calm now. "But if you're going to keep on acting this way, I'm going to put you to sleep. I know what to do. I'll just put you into your crib and you'll fall asleep."

When they got to Alissa's bedroom, Kennedy looked at the crib and she remembered the fantasies she had had all that week, her body inside the crib, tucked under its blankets. It was stupid, she realized, the crib was so small and Kennedy was huge, she was full-figured.

She put Alissa down on top of the blankets. The baby squirmed and cried harder.
"Good-night," Kennedy said. "I tried to love you, Alissa, but you wouldn't let me."

Kennedy closed the bedroom door, so she wouldn't hear the crying, and walked to the kitchen. She paced around in there, trying to resist the urge to eat. She opened and closed the cabinets, the refrigerator, again and again. There were so many things that Kennedy would have loved to eat: left over spaghetti, sweet cereals that her father would never buy, cookies and chips and non-diet soda. She could have made herself a plate of spaghetti earlier, had chips on the side and cookies for desert. That would have been okay, but now it wasn't dinner time anymore and nothing had gone right. If she had put Alissa to bed nicely, she could have sat in front of the television and ate a nice bowl of cereal now. But Kennedy had ruined everything. She could still hear Alissa crying, maybe ever louder now. She told herself that she was a horrible person, that she wasn't allowed to eat because she didn't deserve anything from these people. She went so far as to scoop a bit of spaghetti sauce from the side of the bowl and hold it to her nose, but she wouldn't let herself lick it off. She washed her hands with soap and hot water.
On the counter next to the paper toweling, Kennedy found a note card that was propped up against the wall. On the top it said, Bryan Michael, and the name was surrounded by pastel soccer balls and little yellow sheep. On the top left corner of the note card there was a shiny picture of Bryan lying in his crib with a blue bear at his side. The note was dated November 1st, it had been written six months before. The handwriting was an adult's, disguised as a child's. *Dear Judy and Neil,* it said. *Thank you so much for the space-ship blanket. It's so soft and it helps me fall asleep. Mommy tells me you have a bun in the oven. If you have a boy, when we're older maybe we can go to Knicks games together. And if it's a girl, do you think I could take her to a movie some time? Anyway, I do love the blanket! Take care and thanks again, Bryan Michael.*

Kennedy held the note gently between her fingers, trying to resist the urge to crumple it in her palm. She hated the thought of Alissa going to a movie with this boy, she hated the idea of boys at basketball games. But then she didn't feel angry so much as sad. Because what if the baby had been a boy, and what if he had wanted to wear dresses and what if he had fallen in love with the normal basketball-loving boy named Bryan? And what if Alissa ended up like Kennedy, what if she was fat and crazy, would Bryan still want to take her to a movie?

Alissa wasn't crying anymore and Kennedy wished that she was. She wanted to go in there and comfort her.

Kennedy herself wanted to cry, and the urge felt like it was pushing at the organs inside her body. She'd tried to let it out, to cry as hard as she could, but she could only get a tiny tear to form and it didn’t fall but sat there burning her eye. The feeling just stuck in her throat and pushed at her lungs. Babies could let the feeling go so easily, cry
at any little thing until they felt better, exorcised from whatever was bothering them. Kennedy wondered if it got harder and harder to cry as you got older, if this feeling she had now would get more and more intense the better she got at holding it inside.

It was ridiculous to cry about a stupid note, anyway, she didn't even know why it bothered her so much. She felt lonely, is what she decided, that was all. Alissa was asleep now and she was all by herself in this big apartment.

She decided to eat just a little bit of the spaghetti, that would give her something to focus on, and it would be comforting in her stomach. She got a fork and ate right from the bowl, standing in the refrigerator door. The soft strands felt good between her teeth and against her tongue. She kept pulling them into her mouth, spinning more and more pieces around the fork at one time. When she had eaten almost half of the bowl she pushed the rest around until the looked like less had been removed. Then she replaced the saran wrap, she washed the fork and her hands and face.

As soon as she was clean and everything was back like it was, she felt lonely all over again. Kennedy decided she never wanted to come back. She felt as if she had committed some unforgivable crime, and she didn't want to get away with it.

She went back to the master bedroom. She would just go to sleep, that would make her feel better. But she couldn't just lie down with her street clothes on, she would dirty the sheets if she did that. And she wanted to be comfortable. Mrs. Macintyre's night-gown was tucked under her pillow so Kennedy took off all of her clothes and slipped into it. The fabric felt so good against her skin that Kennedy almost felt as if she were doing the right thing, as if the Macintyres intended for her to wear the night-gown and sleep in their bed.
But they would be horrified, Kennedy knew that. They would find her in their bed and they would know the truth, they would know that she was crazy, that she had no right taking care of an infant. She was just like her mother, crazy and untrustworthy.

And what Kennedy realized, lying there in that bed, was that she never should have been born. If her mother had no right having a baby, than Kennedy had no right to be alive.
Before You Get The Chance (It's Already Too Late)

This was entirely Chandler's idea-- a weekend retreat, although it was only for one day. Lucy wouldn't agree to do anything for more than a day, nothing recreational at least. Especially since Chandler's idea was a trip to an empty field. He called it a park but it wasn't a park, it didn't have swings or twisty slides or anywhere to hide.

As they were about to leave, Lucy asked Chandler to explain his definition of a park, and what exactly differentiated a park from plain old land, since this park was just trees and grass and didn't that exist everywhere? Wasn't that just the earth? "It's colonization," she told him. "You're colonizing the land itself, turning it into a park, using it for your own selfish purposes." She paused for a second, but he didn't say anything. "You're against that, aren't you?" she asked him. "You think you're all spiritual now and you think you're liberal, but really you're a republican colonizer of the land. I'm serious," she said. "What exactly is your definition of a park?"
"Time to go," Chandler said. He left the apartment without answering Lucy's question and without holding the door. By the time she made it out of the apartment he was already halfway down the hall. Following behind him made her feel like a puppy. Chandler trusted that she would come just because he told her to. "You never answer my questions anymore," she called at his back.

"Somehow," he said, waiting for her now, "Lately I don't feel like you really want to hear what I have to say. Somehow it's almost as if you're not actually asking a question at all."

Lucy and Chandler had been sleeping together for six months at this point and recently Chandler had started taking yoga classes. He would no longer spend entire days sitting on her couch with her, watching TV movies and laughing at terminal illness and retardation, cute little girls getting kidnapped or molested. He started spending all of his time in the Spirituality and New-Age sections of the bookstore where they both worked. Only during his break would he sneak into the basement with Lucy and kiss her in the stock room.

He was trying to enrich his life, and Lucy took this as a personal affront, a rejection.

The weekend retreat was intended to help her relax. Chandler decided one day that Lucy's problem all along was her inability to slow down her thoughts, and he wanted her to pay some attention to the outside world. But Lucy knew what this meant-- he found her depressing and self-absorbed. She was tiresome, and he no longer respected her way of thinking.

She agreed to go on the retreat if only to gage how crazy he had really become.
On the way to the park, Lucy smoked five cigarettes. She hadn't smoked in years, but ever since Chandler started yoga, she felt the need to counteract his change in attitude. "Am I supposed to worry about the fact that you're now chain-smoking?" he asked her. "I could start too," he suggested. "We could have a race. First one with a cancer cell has to be the other one's slave for the rest of his or her life."

"You should start," she said. "Because now, if we get cancer, all we'll have to do is perform an energy transfer or create our own positive thinking clinic. I'm sure the tumors will cower in the face of our natural powers."

Lucy promised herself, right there in the car, that she would stop making comments like this. These conversations were so easy to win they were no longer fun. She felt nothing but pity for him.

A week before she had arrived at work only to find him outside of the store, holding onto a flower in the garden that was there. His eyes were closed, his hand grasping the stem. She wasn't sure if he knew she was there watching him, if he was doing this on purpose just to look weird and annoy her. She stood there staring at him until he finally opened his eyes. "I rode over it with my bicycle," he told her. "It was an accident."

"And now?" she said.

"I'm trying to give it my energy," he said, but he laughed too, though Lucy wasn't sure if he really thought it was funny at all.

Two days later, the flower was in perfect condition, it was thriving, even Lucy had to admit that much. And Chandler said that he was tired, that for the past two days
he had felt sick and week and tired. She didn't care if he was partially joking or not, Lucy found the mere idea of this thought in his head disturbing.

"I've been feeling tired and week and sick, too," she told him, "and I haven't touched a flower in months. Do you think that someone is secretly stealing my energy? Should I inform anyone?"

On her way into the store, Lucy stomped on a flower. Not his flower, she wasn't that cruel. And that was when Chandler suggested the weekend retreat.

Lucy threw her cigarette out the window of the car, though she had only smoked half of it. She would be agreeable and kind, she could do that. It was easier to be nice, any moron could be bright and cheery.

When they got to the park, Chandler asked Lucy to take off her shoes. And she listened to him. She enjoyed his bossy side. The constant battling was getting tiresome, even Lucy could see that. It had gotten too complicated anyway, especially now that the winner was not necessarily the one in control-- because sometimes you could win by relinquishing control, couldn't you? Like now: she removed her shoes. She was cooperative. A good little girl.

"Socks too," Chandler said. "The whole idea is to feel the earth."

He was standing in front of her and all of a sudden he looked like a stranger, a stranger talking crazy. But if he really were a stranger, she would have run from him. She wouldn't even want to know his name.

She tried to take stock of his features, those of them that she liked. His hair was shaved to a buzz cut and she loved the feeling of the spiky hairs against her hand. She
had even grown to like the stubble on his face, the way a soft kiss from him still felt rough. And he had a smile like a girl's: sweet and pretty. It was this one particular smile which he used only on Lucy. But now they were in the park and he wasn't smiling and his feet, once he had removed his socks, were large and hairy. Neanderthal feet. He used to wax them, just for her, but he hadn't done that for weeks either. He was sitting down now, rubbing the hair on his big toe. Another affront to Lucy, another rejection.

Lucy was still standing, still in her socks. "Take them off," Chandler said again, and he started to pull at her toes.

The trees surrounding them were too large, they must have been growing there for hundreds of years, and it make Lucy feel more depressed. Their beauty made her nervous, as if now that she'd seen it, she somehow owed something to the world. She much preferred to be inside, where everything was contained and easy to negotiate. This park made her feel tiny and vulnerable and unlike herself.

And then there was Chandler, still pleading with her to remove her socks-- a crazy man slowly convincing her to strip. Under his jeans, under his boxers, he had a penis, hanging there as if it was just another limb-- she was extremely aware of this. Lucy knew the places to touch to make it hard, to make it jump up like the hand of an arrogant, insistent college student.

Lucy reminded herself that she didn't even like men.

"I'll wait," Chandler said. "As long as it takes. If it takes all night," he said, "it takes all night."

"What a wise statement," Lucy said. "Is the Buddha a real guy? I mean, is there an office that he holds? Because next term you might want to consider running."
Chandler just sat there, his legs in the lotus position. He didn't look amused or disappointed. Lucy felt sorry for him again, his inability to see his behavior for what it was-- pathetic and naïve, whether he was serious about this or not. She was glad that the park was empty, she didn't want anyone to see him and laugh.

She took off her socks and she sat down across from him. It was already getting dark. They had planned to leave the apartment at noon, but Lucy had decided that she wanted to master the hand-job before they left. It was her project for the day-- she had to accomplish something everyday or she couldn't sleep at night. And Chandler didn't really mind, especially since she rarely took much interest in his body parts. He didn't mind even though she only let him come once, trying each and every technique only for a few seconds, until he was about to come and then she'd stop. During the pauses she'd have him rate the technique, write a description of how it felt and then rate it on a scale from one to ten.

"Is your penis sore?" she asked him now. He was trying to arrange her legs in something that at least resembled the lotus position. "I'm sorry if I hurt you," she said. Though she wasn't really sorry. She liked thinking about his aching penis, feeling responsible for it. She liked that now he was hurting her, twisting her ankles and knees in awkward positions. Still, it felt good to apologize, it made everything feel simple.

"I forgive you," he said.

They sat with their knees touching, holding onto each other's hands. "Now just look at me," Chandler said. "My eyes," he clarified, "look at my eyes."

Lucy couldn't look for very long at all, it felt too ridiculous. She stared for a second, thinking she would really try, but then she was laughing (though it wasn't really
funny) and looking away. Chandler squeezed her hands, he didn't laugh. "Again," he said.

Chandler's eyes were wide open and they were all pupil, almost completely black. They looked evil, the eyes of a man who was only pretending to be kind but filled with a secret power to ravage those around him. Lucy wanted to dig her nails into his palms, but she had no nails-- they were bitten below the nail bed. She couldn't understand why he wouldn't laugh, how he could sit there looking so serious when they were acting crazy. If they could both laugh and look away then everything might have been okay. They always used to laugh at things, even when laughter wasn't the right response. Chandler learned this from her, he seemed to love it, but now he looked so serious she could barely recognize him. He looked like a stranger again and she felt shy and embarrassed and she wished she could erase all of his memories of her-- he was a stranger and he shouldn't know these things about her-- the expression on her face while she slept, how she kissed, what the inside of her body felt like. And everything else too, everything she had ever said to him, she wanted to take it all back.

"What's the point of this?" she asked finally. She let go of his hands and pulled a long hair from his foot. Then she handed it to him.

"Thank you," he said. He rolled the hair between his forefinger and his thumb.

"The point," he said, "is that we never do this. We never just look at each other."

"Chandler?" she said. "What do you like about me?"

"You're funny," he said.

"Is that your answer or just a comment on the question?"

"Both," he said.
She started ripping grass from the ground and he put his hand on hers to stop her from doing it. "That's it?" she said. "You like me because I'm funny? Roseanne Barr is funny, do you like her too?"

"Yes, I do." He lifted his hand and placed the hair on her shoulder.

"Before you," she said, "I only had sex with girls." This wasn't exactly what she had wanted to say.

"You've told me," he said. He took the hair from her shoulder and tossed it away.

"So I'm gay," she said. She made sure to look right at his eyes.

"I know," he said. "I like you anyway."

He knew that Lucy wasn't really gay, not entirely at least, and she hated that. Sitting there in the park she wished she could go back and erase all of the moments in which she showed desire for him, that was all she had to erase, really. He had stolen one of her greatest powers, the ability to reject half of the population. And as a result, he was the one with a great conquest, Lucy was simply weak.

She had turned him down a hundred times before they actually got together, hadn't she? But she knew the claim would sound less believable if she had explained, right then, how much she liked girls. It was true though-- often when she and Chandler were having sex, she would imagine that she was the boy, that she was touching and penetrating her own body.

For the next exercise, they sat with their eyes closed. Chandler sounded like a self-help tape, something to help a person quit smoking or fall asleep. "Concentrate on
feeling your weight against the earth," he said. "Feel the ground supporting you, holding you up."

Lucy tried to concentrate, she did feel the ground supporting her, but it only made her think about the first girl she ever kissed, whom she now hated. She and the girl--Jane--were sitting on the soccer field of their high-school, at night, and Jane leaned forward like she was going to whisper something in Lucy's ear but instead she put her lips to Lucy's and waited for Lucy to start kissing her. The last time they talked, Jane insisted that it was Lucy who initiated the kiss. "I don't even like girls," Lucy had told her, and then hung up the phone.

Chandler was still talking, slowly, the way he spoke in the morning or after they had sex. "You're supposed to breathe in with your nose," he was saying. "Feel the energy you're receiving from the atmosphere. Then you breathe out through your mouth and release all of the tension and negative energy in you body."

At first Lucy just listened to Chandler's breathing. It was much too loud--she hated that he was breathing that way in response to the earth, the atmosphere, whatever he had called it. Right before they kissed for the first time he was breathing like that. And she had loved it then, she loved the fact that he wanted to be with her that badly. He made it seem like he had to be with her or he'd die, like there was nothing either of them could do to keep it from happening. But now he was breathing that way every other day in his yoga classes, breathing that way with her but not because of her. And she hated knowing that she was probably responsible for the negative energy he was talking about, that he went to class after class, trying to breathe her out of his system. Maybe that's why he brought her with him, to finally rid himself of her negativity. He would leave her
there in the park, walk away and never look back. It was happening all over again, just like it did with Jane. People tired of her, they stopped finding her funny.

Lucy tried to breathe deeply too. She tried to visualize energy pellets in the air, pictured them struggling to resist the vacuumous pull of her nose. But her lungs hurt from smoking and she started to cough. She felt Chandler's hand on her leg then-- the last gesture of kindness, she thought. The last time he'll ever touch me. She couldn't decide if this made her feel happy or sad.

Through her mouth, she blew out all of the remaining air from her lungs. But she didn't feel any more relaxed. She imagined the energy pellets inside her body now, battling each other, poking at her insides, trying to get out. She wanted to tell Chandler that she hated him, that she hated herself even more and it was all his fault.

She opened her eyes and watched him breathe and concentrate. He looked familiar now, his old sweet self, but it made Lucy feel even worse. This is what people did, they stayed until they were familiar to her and then they left.

Even though it was dark, Lucy could still see the shadow of hair on his feet. She imagined another girl stroking those hairs and Chandler breathing more heavily than ever. She imagined them living in a tent, in the middle of the woods, naked all day and night. Sometimes they would talk about Lucy and they'd laugh. Or they'd pity her.

Lucy lit a cigarette. She blew smoke into Chandler's face. When he opened his eyes, he stared at her. And she stared back. It was easier to do now, now that it was completely dark out, now that she was sure she hated him and that whatever they had was over.
She put out her cigarette and then she got up onto her knees and grabbed his upper arms. "I'm stealing your energy," she said. "Watch out, I'm going to take all of it," she said. "God this feels good, I've never felt more alive."

"You're hurting me," he said. But Lucy just squeezed harder. She was laughing and squeezing as hard as she could.

She wanted him to start laughing too. Either that, or she wanted him to fight back, to throw her onto the ground and kick her until she couldn't breathe anymore. Then she would know that he cared, that he couldn't just walk away.

But he didn't do anything so she let go. She sat down again and she lit another cigarette. "Are you crying now?" he asked her. "Are you crying or are you still laughing? I've never seen you cry, are you really crying?"

"I'm laughing," she tried to say, but her voice cracked.

He leaned forward like he was going to touch or kiss her, but she pulled away. "Don't," she said. More than anything she wanted she wanted a hug, but she couldn't give in again. She'd be sorry later, once he was gone-- she couldn't forget that. She remembered her mother confessing that she was depressed because she made the same mistake her whole life and didn't have the strength to stop. Lucy wasn't sure if she had the strength either, and she didn't know what her mistake was anyway, trusting people or not trusting them.

Chandler, meanwhile, was looking at her as if she were an ugly puppy in the pound, or a mean, old woman with Alzheimer's. The yoga girl would assume the same expression when she and Chandler sat naked in their tent talking about Lucy. Eventually
though, they'd stop thinking about her. Lucy would still be pathetic but there would be nobody to pity her.

"Stop looking at me," she told him. "I never want you to look at me again. And don't laugh," she said. "This isn't funny. I'm not funny so stop laughing."

But then Lucy was laughing too, she was laughing and crying at the same time. "I suppose you think this means that the yoga worked," she said. "But I didn't even do it. I had my eyes open the whole time."

"No you didn't," he said.

"I did, I watched you the whole time thinking about how ridiculous you've become. And how hairy your feet have gotten."

She expected him to laugh, but he didn't. He put on his socks and his shoes and he didn't even look at her, he stood up and he said, "Come on, let's go."

But Lucy didn't get up, she just sat there. "I don't want to go," she said.

She thought about pulling him down to the ground, about grabbing him and kissing him, pulling off his shoes and his socks and kissing his hairy feet. She wanted to tell him that she was sorry, for everything, that she didn't want to be a bad person.

"Why do you treat me this way?" he asked her. "Do you not respect me? Not at all?"

"No," she said, "I guess I don't."
Of Human Residue

Two girls, Nora and her friend Abigail, sit cross-legged on the damp basement floor. They're barely twelve-years-old, their bodies skinny and swollen at the same time, in the middle of metamorphosis.

The girls sit in the middle of the empty room. In the corner is Abigail's old baby carriage, its canopy half-collapsed. There is a stack of records she listened to as a toddler, the sleeves brightly colored but faded and dingy; there is a trash bag filled with worn-out toys.

Otherwise, the room is empty. It smells like old, dusty books.

Nora can hear footsteps above them, Abigail's mother obliviously fixing dinner, thinking that Abigail and Nora are at the park.

On the floor between them is a pack of cigarettes, a pack of matches, and two tall glasses of lemonade which are sweating from the heat. On Abigail's chin there are three
small pimples, and Nora can't help but stare at them. The pimples are clustered together
as if commiserating, and they're red because Abigail won't stop rubbing them.

"You look scared," Abigail says, "Why are you scared?"

"I'm not," Nora says. She is scared though, she just can't explain it. Abigail's
pimples make her look like a stranger, someone older and intimidating. But she's not
scared of Abigail exactly, because she's not really any different than she ever was, she's
still Abigail. She still licks her lips before and after every sip of her drink, just like she
always has. She still speaks a little too quietly and mostly mumbles, so that Nora and
Abigail's mother are the only people who consistently understand what she's saying. And
Nora isn't afraid of smoking, and she's not scared of the basement-- it's something else,
something nebulous and bigger than any of those things.

Nora stretches her legs out in front of her. Even in the dim basement she can see
the hairs on her calves. Soon she'll have to do something about that, these hairs that get
darker and thicker by the day. She crosses her legs again, so she doesn't have to think
about it, but she can't get comfortable. Lately this is how she's been feeling: her body is
an unfamiliar space in which she is imprisoned, and it's her responsibility to decorate it,
to make it comfortable, but she doesn't know how. And it seems to get messier by the
day, growing wild like a garden, weeds sprouting, not because they've been planted, but
simply because the garden exists.

She stares at Abigail as if she might just disappear in front of her eyes.

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Nora’s sister Leah is seven years old. She’s spending the day at her Aunt’s house. Her cousin Billy, who is nine, is giving her a tour of their swimming pool. They’re not supposed to be in the pool without someone watching them, but Billy’s mother has been taking more and more naps lately—Leah’s mother calls this a *definite sign of depression*—and they couldn’t wait for her to wake up. It was too hot, even inside the house and the pool looked so inviting, glimmery blue in the sunlight.

Leah holds onto Billy’s back, wraps her legs around his hips, her arms around his shoulders—she’s not a very good swimmer yet and she has to hold on tight or she’ll float away, at least that’s what it feels like, especially when Billy pulls her into the deep end.

Billy’s head dips under water for what seems like minutes to Leah. She watches his hair cling to his head, and then as he slows down, it floats to the surface, its strands separating. When he pulls his head above the water, Leah listens to his heavy breathing and wonders what would happen if she pressed his head back under, cupped in her hand, if she held it there until he died. She thinks dead bodies must be quite heavy, especially Billy’s body which is big, everyone says, especially for a nine year old. She would hold onto to Billy’s dead body and they would sink. Aunt Rose would find them in a heap on the rough cement bottom of the pool. She pictures herself and Billy like sleeping kittens curled into each other. She wonders if Nora would cry as soon as she heard, if she’d feel sorry forever that she chose to be with her friend instead of Leah that afternoon. Nora always chooses Abigail over Leah, but if Leah were to die, Nora would probably wish she chose otherwise. Everyone would wish that they spent the day with her, that they saved her from dying. And maybe they would plant a tree in her school yard, a plaque
with her name at its base, just like they did for Jeremy Milks when he rode his bike into oncoming traffic.

Abigail takes two cigarettes from the pack on the floor and hands one to Nora. Neither of them has smoked before, and Nora feels clumsy as she clasps the tip between two fingers. She thinks about skinny high-school boys leaning against the school fence, cigarettes dangling from their lips as if forgotten. Nora will never feel that old, she knows this. Even when she's forty, she'll feel like an impostor, a child playing dress-up.

When Abigail lights the match it smells like a camp-fire, it smells like Christmas. This is the way Nora imagines that God would smell.

By the second cigarette, they learn how to pull the smoke into their lungs and hold it there, to let their lungs burn and do nothing about it.

"I feel dizzy," Abigail says. And then she puts out her cigarette and she lies back, her legs stretched out and her head resting on the floor. Nora doesn't know what to do, she wants to go home, to go back to the way it was when they were younger, unbadgered by their bodies. She can feel sweat dripping down her sides and her shirt clings to her body—she can feel her breasts growing, she's sure of it, making her shirt even more uncomfortable. She watches Abigail's chest rise and fall as she breathes and she imagines both of their bodies swelling until they fill the basement entirely, until they're not only dizzy but suffocating.
“Leah,” Billy is saying, “Leah, you’re heavy. Grab onto to board, the diving board, right there, just reach up.”

Leah wraps her fingers around the scratchy edge of the board and holds on tight. She forgets, for now, that she can swim, not very well, not as well as Billy, but she could float and swim to the edge or even the shallow end if she had too.

Her body feels long and light and she thinks she’d like to hang there forever until Billy grabs on too and the board begins to shake. “Don’t fall,” he says, laughing, “Don’t fall,” but he keeps shaking the board and Leah’s hands begin to hurt and slip. “Grab onto me,” he says. “Not on my back, my front this time.” Leah can see the muscles in Billy’s arms bulging under his skin and she thinks her own muscles must be burning up and shrinking under her skin, that’s what it feels like at least. But she’s afraid to touch Billy’s muscles, afraid that they’d go soft under her fingers. She’s afraid they’ll pop, his whole body deflating, loose and limp in the water, sinking in slow swirls to the bottom of the pool. But Billy says, “It’s okay, just grab on, like a hug,” and Leah wants a hug more than anything, she wants her arms and fingers to stop burning. So she reaches forward and wraps herself around her cousin. His body feels big and strong, more than enough to hold her.

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Nora leans over Abigail who’s still lying on the floor, to see if she’s okay. Nora can smell Abigail’s shampoo, the lemonade and cigarettes on her breath. She can see Abigail’s nipples, small and round and poking at her shirt. Abigail reaches out then, she
grabs onto Nora and pulls her into an awkward hug on the floor. Nora feels dizzy too, it feels like the blood in her brain and her stomach is bubbling, fizzy like soda.

Nora's head is on Abigail's shoulder and she can see the pimples up close now, the way they stretch Abigail's skin. And then, without having decided to do it, Nora is kissing the pimples, a little kiss for each pimple, as if, by doing this, she can make them disappear.

Abigail hugs her tighter then, she pulls Nora on top of her. They adjust their bodies so that their legs alternate against the floor: Abigail's then Nora's, Abigail's then Nora's.

They lie like that for minutes, their breathing loud. Nora can't imagine that she'll ever breathe normally again. And the more she tries to quiet her breathing, she doesn't want Abigail to hear it, the harder it is for her to breathe at all.

Nora can just make out the sound of a car going down the driveway, Abigail's mother driving away. She hears the engine and the rolling of tires against the pavement. It's a comforting sound, the sound of being carried away, long drives in the dark and then the sound is even louder, without the distraction of the sun revealing the trees and houses along the road.

A few seconds later and it's quiet again, it's just Abigail and Nora and their staticy breath in the basement. Abigail's hair is soft against Nora's cheek, the ends tickle her neck. Then Abigail moves her hips under Nora, she lifts them and lets them drop and she does this over and over again. And Nora, though she doesn't know what she's doing or why she's doing it, mimics Abigail's movements, and then Abigail's hand is between them, between their legs, and they keep moving like that. They're making sounds that
Nora doesn't recognize as theirs. They're adult sounds, or it sounds like they're in pain, although it doesn't feel like pain, not exactly.

And as they're doing this, Nora thinks about a story she heard of a woman who rubbed peanut butter between her legs and let her dog lick it off. Nora thinks maybe this is wrong like that's wrong, but it doesn't feel wrong, and besides it doesn't feel like they can stop now that they've started. And thinking about that woman with the peanut butter only makes her want to keep doing it even more.

But then Nora feels Abigail's body shivering and it terrifies her, because maybe all along Abigail has been in pain, maybe she's still dizzy and now she's dying. "I'm sorry," Nora says, and she stands up as quickly as she can. "Are you okay?" she asks. "Did I hurt you? I'm really sorry."

Abigail stands up too, and she looks at Nora for only a second, then she's running upstairs. She doesn't say anything and Nora's pretty sure she's not supposed to follow her, so she stays in the basement. She picks up the smoked cigarettes that lie on the floor and she puts them back in the box with the rest. She puts the box in her pocket, as deep as it will go. She moves the half-empty glasses of lemonade into the baby carriage in the corner. Then Nora sits down on the floor and she waits for something to happen.

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Leah and Billy make their way back to the shallow end. Leah swims the length of the pool herself and she's gasping once she gets there. A bit of water got into her nose and its burning her brain. She grabs onto the edge of the pool, her feet on the bottom, and she rests her head on the warm pavement. Billy splashes water at her back. She turns around
and watches him do flips in the water, his body curling up into itself and then stretching out again. He stands on his hands and Leah tickles his pink feet, she squeezes his toes, running her fingers along the edge of his toenails. She’s getting bored watching him, she wants his attention again, she wants him to hold her in the water so she can just relax, forget about balance and movement.

The tickling works—he comes to the surface smiling and looking at her. He takes her arm and guides her back to the edge of the pool. “The best part is now,” he says.

Leah will remember this phrase for a long time, and it will always scare her a little bit, thinking about time that way—now is the best, life will go on but this is the best part—and it will always make her excited too, a little bit comforted by this feeling of fear she can conjure whenever she wants. She’ll say it aloud in her head and it will make her feel like her life is a movie that she’s watching. The best part is now. Now, now, now. She’ll whisper it to herself as she walks to school, the rhythm of the words matching the rhythm of her steps.

Billy guides her hand along the wall of the pool until both of their hands are being pushed away by water that’s shooting fast and hard from a hole. The water is warmer from the hole than in the rest of the pool and Leah loves the way it moves their arms toward the center of the pool and then up to the water’s surface.

“It’s the cleanest water in the pool,” Billy says. “That’s the new water. If it stopped shooting, the pool would empty out because the water would evaporate.”

Leah knows about evaporation, her mother yelled at her just the other day when she left a bottle of nail polish remover open. Leah left it open and a few hours later the
bottle was empty. But that hole seems too little to fill the entire pool every few hours. She doesn’t question Billy though—she likes keeping the information a secret, knowing something he doesn’t.

They both try to cover the hole with their hands and Billy is better at this—Leah’s hand is pushed away so easily, like it has no strength or weight at all. Leah could do this for hours, she wants to keep doing it until she’s strong enough to hold her hand there for at least a minute, but Billy tells her to move away now, that he has something else to show her.

He arranges himself so that his feet and calves are on the pavement, over the edge of the pool, and his butt dips down into the water so that it must be pushed right up against the hole. Leah watches his face from above. His eyes are closed under the water and his lips look clenched like he’s angry or hurting. Little bubbles float up from his nose. Leah just waits as he does this, she wonders what the trick is, wonders if her whole body would be pushed away by the water, if Billy is only showing off his size and strength. She wants to be big like Billy, like Nora—she hates that she’s always clinging to someone else, always standing back and watching what they can do. And now she watches Billy move his hand to the front of his bathing suit and he holds it there for a second. Then he pulls his head above water, his legs down from the side of the pool.

~ ~ ~ ~

Twenty minutes after she left, Abigail comes back and she smells only like soap and shampoo, her skin is pink and her hair drips onto her shirt. "You're still here?" she says, mumbling more than usual.
"Did you want me to come upstairs?" Nora asks.

"I thought you left," Abigail says, and Nora thinks she hears some sort of sadness in Abigail's voice, like maybe Abigail is worried that Nora was the one deserting her.

"You should probably go," Abigail says. Then she turns her back to Nora but she doesn't leave. "Look," she says, and her voice is firm and clear and loud. She pulls up her shirt so that Abigail can see her skin. There's a series of red blotches lining her back, an imprint of her spine. "Do you see it?" Abigail says. "You really hurt me before, I'm not going to tell anyone, I just wanted you to see what you did."

Nora's stomach feels sick, it feels like she ate the cigarettes instead of smoking them. And she wants to touch the wounds, to make them disappear. She knows this isn't her fault, that, if anything, Abigail started it, but she feels guilty anyway. She remembers her own heavy body on top of Abigail, pushing against her-- all that time Abigail's back scraping against the hard floor and Nora just pushing and pushing.

When she moves closer to Abigail, not even to touch the bruises but just to see them better, Abigail pulls her shirt back down, she moves farther from her. And it's as if there's a cord between them and it tugs at Nora's stomach as Abigail moves away, even if she had her eyes closed she'd feel it.

Nora is sweating again, her skin feels itchy like it's being stretched, and she hates her body all over again, more than ever.

"You can't do that kind of thing," Abigail tells her. "You just can't. Didn't you feel me trying to push you away?"

"You didn't," Nora says, but as she says it she's not sure anymore. "I'm sorry," she tells her.
"I'm not asking you to apologize." Abigail stands with her hands on her hips, she's waiting for something, but Nora has no idea what that is. There are three dots of blood pooling where Abigail’s pimples had been.

Nora reaches in her pocket and pulls out a small pack of tissues. "Your chin is bleeding," she says, and she holds a tissue toward Abigail. "Your chin," she says again. But Abigail just squints her eyes into slits. Then she grabs the tissue from Nora and wipes at her skin with rough strokes.

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“Look,” Billy tells Leah, as soon as he catches his breath. “Look down,” he says.

Leah looks to the bottom of the pool but she doesn’t see anything, just the white surface covered in little bubbles like always. Billy looks annoyed and then he lifts himself out of the pool and sits on the edge with his feet dangling in the water. “This,” he says, and he points to his baiting suit. “It’s sticking up. See? The water hole makes my dick get hard.” Leah feels frozen there in the water, she feels all of her hairs stand up on her skin. She’s looking at something she shouldn’t be looking at, she feels like she’s being sneaky, like she’s doing something equally exciting and terribly wrong. Without planning on saying anything, she asks, “Can I touch it?”

“No way,” Billy says. “Are you crazy? You can’t touch my dick.”

“Stop calling it that,” Leah says, and she’s almost yelling, she’s splashing her arms around in the water. “Just stop talking to me,” she says. “I didn’t even mean that,” though she did mean it, she just wasn’t thinking. “Can I make the water shoot at me, like you did?”
“You don’t have a dick,” Billy says, talking to her like she’s a baby. “You have a vagina.”

“So what?” Leah says. “I don’t want some gross penis anyway. I can still do it.”

“Whatever,” Billy says. “But that water will just shoot up inside your body and you’ll puff out like crazy.”

“You don’t know anything,” Leah says, now determined. She knows she won’t be able to hang by her legs from the edge of the pool like Billy, she simply positions herself so that the water is hitting her stomach. Then she stands on her toes, she lifts herself into the air, hands flat on the side of the pool. The water runs between her legs, making that whole area, her thighs and in-between her thighs, begin to tingle. She focuses on the tingling, it’s surprising, it’s a nice feeling. She looks over at Billy and he’s staring at her, he pulls his hand away from the bulge in his baiting-suit. “You’re disgusting,” he says. “You’re like five years old.”

“Seven,” Leah says. “I’m seven. Some girls get pregnant at my age. In some countries at least.” She isn’t sure if it was some countries or some animals, but she figures Billy doesn’t know for sure either. She moves away from the water spout anyway, she’s had enough.

Leah stands in the pool staring at her feet distorted against the bottom. Billy gets up and then dives into the pool. He starts doing flips again, ignoring Leah completely. And as she watches him, she feels like there’s a bubble inside her, like water really has gotten inside her body. And she’s terrified by this, the thought of this bubble of water forever inside of her. “Billy,” she says, but he doesn’t respond. “Billy,” Leah says again,
“Billy, please, it hurts.” She sounds like a baby, but she doesn’t care—they’re in this together and she needs his help. “I think water got inside,” she tells him.

Billy just starts laughing, but then Leah’s eyes start burning and tearing—it’s the chlorine, the sun, everything. “Shit, don’t cry, Leah,” he says. He moves up close to her. “You being stupid, it can’t happen,” he tells her. “I was just kidding, Leah, I was only joking. You’re fine.”

“It hurts,” Leah says, and now she’s really crying even though she’s trying as hard as she can not to.

Billy wraps his arms around her and hugs her too tight, as if he’s trying to hurt her. “It’s okay,” he says. “You’re okay. Come on, please, Leah.” She’s trying to calm down but she feels like she won’t be able to breathe if she stops crying and she can feel Billy’s penis pushing against her stomach.

“Maybe some water is just trapped by your bathing-suit,” Billy says. “Maybe that’s why it hurts but it’ll come out.”

Leah imagines the bubble of water inside her again, staying in there for days until she’s at camp, during archery or dodge ball, it’ll come out and leave a big wet stain on the seat of her shorts. “I need to get it out now,” Leah says. “I need to.” The truth is, though, she doesn’t feel anything anymore, not pain, no bubbles.


Leah’s stomach is pressed up against the side of the pool and her hands curl around the edge. Billy stands behind her in the water. He has one hand on her lower back and he tells her to spread her legs. She thinks he’s going to simply tap her back
until the water pushes its way out, but then she feels his other hand between her legs. He
hooks his finger against the side of her bathing-suit, right against her thigh. Very slowly
he pushes the material to the side, from one thigh to the other. Leah can feel the water
right against the folds of her skin and it feels colder there, between her legs, than
anywhere else. And it’s not so bad, it’s sort of a nice feeling. The water will come out.
If there is any, she’s pretty sure it will just come out. “Here,” Billy says, and she feels his
finger poking at her. She feels a sharp pain, his finger pushing its way inside and she
jerks forward. She feels her nose hit the edge of the pool, a thump sound, but she feels no
pain, it’s just numb. Her whole face feels numb and she thinks she’s just in shock, she
hasn’t hurt herself. But when she lifts her head she sees little specks of light in the air
and it feels like her upper lip is very wet and warm. She puts her hand to her nose and
when she looks at her fingers they’re covered in blood.

Billy starts cursing, moving toward her and then moving back, like she’s too
much to touch now. Leah watches red drops fall from her face and hit the surface of the
water, staying drop-like for only a second and then spreading and turning the water pink.
“Get out of the pool,” Billy tells her. “We have to get out.” But Leah just wants to watch
the blood. Her nose is beginning to ache, but mostly it just seems interesting—her
insides dripping out of her body into the water. She’s never seen anything quite like it.

“Do you want your cigarettes back?” Nora asks. She wants to give something to Abigail,
it feels like she’s taken something without permission and she wants to return it,
whatever she can. “I don’t want anymore,” Nora says, “And you bought them.”
“They make me sick,” Abigail says. “You saw. Just throw them out or something.”

“Do you want me to leave?” Nora asks. “Should I?”

“I don’t know.”

Nora wants to hug Abigail, she wants also, to kiss her and it makes her stomach feel sick. She doesn’t want to feel anything like this. She doesn’t want their friendship to be ruined. She doesn’t want to be disgusting.

“Are you okay?” Abigail asks. “You look like you’re about to cry or something.”

Abigail used to love her. They used to be best-friends. “I’m just hot,” Nora tells her. “I hate the summer.” She pulls her shirt away from her body, it’s clinging to her chest and she can’t stand the feeling.

“You’re sweating,” Abigail says. “I can see it on your face.”


“Fine,” Abigail says. But it doesn’t feel fine, it feels like nothing will ever be the same again, Nora will be embarrassed for the rest of her life. “Let’s just go upstairs,” Abigail says. “It’s cooler up there, plus, it’s gross down here. It smells like cigarettes.”

Nora watches Abigail’s calf muscles grow and shrink as she follows her up the steps. She doesn’t understand why bodies are so delicate, why people have to have bodies at all. She decides she doesn’t have to love Abigail anymore, she doesn’t need her. She’ll be solitary and she won’t hurt anyone ever again. Her mouth tastes disgusting, like cigarettes and bitter and sticky from the lemonade. She wouldn’t want anyone kissing her anyway, not ever.
Nora’s about to say that she’s going to leave, she’ll just walk home, but the phone starts ringing and Abigail runs up the stairs, into the kitchen and over to the phone like this is a call she’s been waiting for all day. For a second Nora wonders if maybe Abigail has called someone else, to tell someone what happened, how disgusting Nora really is. She sits on the top step, she doesn’t want to be invading Abigail’s privacy.

But then Abigail’s calling her, calling her name like everything’s okay again, she wants Nora back. “It’s your mom,” Abigail says a second later. “Your father wants to come get you.”

Abigail must have called her before when she went upstairs. She must have told Nora’s mother that someone had to come and take her home. “Just tell her I’ll be waiting outside,” Nora says. She doesn’t want to talk to her mother. She doesn’t really want to see her either, she doesn’t want anyone to see her because she’s sweating and she’s disgusting and she’s sure everyone will notice. And mothers are supposed to be comforting, Nora’s supposed to be a good girl, a little girl, the kind a mother can love.

“Okay,” Abigail says. “He’ll be here in less than ten minutes.”

Abigail looks happy now, she looks relieved. “I’ll wait outside,” Nora tells her. But Abigail says, “It’s really hot out there. You should just wait in here.” She takes a few grapes from the kitchen counter and puts three in her mouth at once. “Do you want any?” she asks Nora, her mouth still full.

“No, thank you, I’m just going to go.” Abigail looks meaner somehow, now that she’s acting nice. There’s something sinister about the way she stands there, eating grapes like she’s just some innocent little girl who knows she’s more pure than anyone else, her body all fresh and clean.
Nora slips her feet into her sneakers without untying them. She opens the door and closes it behind her. She doesn’t say good-bye because she’s afraid that it would only make it harder to leave.

She sits on the sidewalk in front of Abigail’s house and she does her best to pull hairs from her legs but her fingers are slippery with sweat and by the time her father pulls up in front of her, she’s only removed five hairs.

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Leah’s sitting on a chair next to the pool now and her Aunt Rose is holding a towel up to her nose because they don’t have any tissues. They’re waiting for Billy to come back—he went inside to call Leah’s mother—and then they’re going to the emergency room because Aunt Rose thinks Leah’s nose might very well be broken. Leah hopes it is. Her nose really does hurt now, but Aunt Rose is sitting next to her and she’s rubbing the back of Leah’s head which feels very nice. She feels proud of the towels covered in her own blood, like it’s some kind of achievement.

Billy seems to be taking a long time inside and Aunt Rose keeps talking about that, repeating, Hurry up, Billy, in a stern, quiet tone, as if she thinks he will hear her just because they’re mother and son. Leah feels guilty that Billy got yelled at just because she got hurt, especially since it was her idea to go in the pool in the first place, but she also likes having Aunt Rose all to herself.

“Does it hurt a lot?” Aunt Rose asks. She lifts the towel away for a second and Leah can feel the blood dripping down to her lip again.

“It just hurts a little,” Leah says.
“Did Billy do this to you?” she asks, not for the first time. “I’ll kill him,” she says. “Like a wild animal, that kid is like a wild animal.”

“No,” Leah says, without really thinking. “He helped me,” she tells her aunt. She wants to be a wild animal too, she wants her and Billy to have a secret, something violent that they accomplished together. “I dove in where it was too shallow,” she tells Aunt Rose, “and I hit my nose on the bottom but Billy took care of me. He didn’t do anything wrong. He told me not to dive but I didn’t listen.”

She also wants to believe that this is the truth, that she did something brave and daring and now she’s injured and she deserves everyone’s attention. Her mother will probably be waiting for her at the emergency room, her father and Nora will be there. They’ll all be there just for her. And until then Aunt Rose will keep on rubbing her head and collecting her blood in towels; Billy will take over when they get in the car. Aunt Rose will keep apologizing for sleeping while Leah was there at her house.

“It’s hurting more now,” Leah says. And Aunt Rose pulls Leah onto her lap and wraps one arm around her waist, the other hand holding the towel. She keeps saying, Poor thing, You poor thing. Since her back is to her Aunt now and the towel is covering her face, Leah can smile without anyone knowing.

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Nora wasn’t planning on saying anything to her father in the car. She had planned to simply sit there silently, say she was tired if he tried to make her talk and when they got home she would go straight up to bed. She had pictured herself alone, tucked under her
blankets, the air-conditioner turned on high, her winter pajamas making her feel small and sleepy.

But her father says, “Leah hurt herself in the pool today.” He looks over at Nora as if he’s suspicious. “We have to go to the emergency room,” he tells her, like this is her punishment. “Your aunt was sleeping away the day and Leah and Billy decided to take a swim, apparently. She might have gone and broken her nose.”

Nora curls her toes tight in her shoes until she has a sharp cramp in her left foot. She’s angry and she knows she shouldn’t be but she just wants to go home, she can’t think about anything else.

She watches her father’s hands on the steering wheel and she wonders his fingers have ever touched something they shouldn’t. She pictures him grabbing a woman’s breast, uninvited, grasping a man’s penis in the shower at the gym. But then she thinks of little Leah with a broken nose and she feels sweat dripping on her neck and she watches the cars rush by and she just wants everything to stop. She doesn’t want a family right now. She doesn’t want anyone.

Leah looks tiny in the big white hospital bed, a bandage over her nose. Her lips and chin are stained with blood and a nurse is trying to wipe it clean. Aunt Rose and Billy stand at the side of the bed and watch. Nora’s father walks right over to Leah and rubs her shoulder. Her mother grabs onto Nora as soon as she sees her. She hugs her like she used to when Nora was little, and Nora wants to push her away. It’s cold in the hospital but she still feels way too hot and besides, she doesn’t want anyone touching her.

But she doesn’t want to talk to Leah either. All she can think about is her body on top of Abigail’s, the feeling of Abigail’s leg moving back and forth between her own, and
while she was doing that, Leah was breaking her nose. But she doesn’t really care, she
feels angry at Leah for making her think about this. If she had gone to Aunt Rose’s with
Leah, then they wouldn’t be in the emergency room and Nora could still love Abigail, or
she could keep her distance from her. But she went to Abigail’s and she left so quickly
when it almost seemed like Abigail wanted her to stay. They could have worked out
everything, but now the next time they talk, if they ever talk again, it’ll be so awkward, it
will be like they aren’t good friends at all.

When Nora finally walks over to the bed, Leah reaches out and hold onto Nora’s
sweaty hand. “We’re waiting for x-rays,” she says. “It’s probably broken.” Leah’s
breathing very heavily through her mouth, her nose closed off like it is. She sounds like
Abigail, the way she was breathing when she put her hand between their legs. “I did a
dive, though,” Leah’s saying, “I did a really good dive.”

“That’s good,” Nora says, but she’s still thinking about Abigail and how much
she really did like what they were doing. She enjoyed pushing her against the floor, she
couldn’t stop herself.

“I’m sorry this happened to you,” Nora tells Leah. And she is sorry, she’s sorry
that she had to leave Abigail’s house and come to the hospital. She’s sorry that she isn’t
sad about Leah’s nose, she’s just annoyed.

“I did a dive,” Leah says again. “A really good one. I might have to have
surgery, to fix the bones. I’m not scared though. I’m very tough,” she says.
When the doctor tells them that Leah’s nose isn’t broken, it was just a lot of blood, nothing that a bandage and a few days won’t heal, Leah feels like a baby. She made a big fuss about nothing. She doesn’t deserve a broken nose because she did this on purpose, she wanted it. The whole time she was in the car she just kept hoping that her nose was broken and of course her wish didn’t come true.

“I think you’re safe to go home,” the doctor says, and Leah almost tells him about the water spout and the possibility of water trapped inside her body. Or she could tell him about what she made Billy do, he might have really hurt her, it hurt at the time at least. But she doesn’t say anything because she’d only sound like a stupid child, she knows this now.

She should be the one who feels sorry, not Aunt Rose, not Nora.

Nora and Leah’s parents decide to take everyone out to a fancy dinner. They sit around a large table covered in a crisp white cloth—Nora and Leah, their parents, Billy and Rose. There are fresh flowers on the table, tall rose colored candles that make their faces glow just slightly.

The adults fill their glasses with wine; Billy, Nora, and Leah each have a Shirley Temple. Their father lifts his glass in the air, making a toast to intact bones, a quick exit from the hospital. They all clink their glasses together, except for Billy who simply begins to drink. Rose slaps him lightly on the back of his head but he just coughs and puts his glass down on the table. There are spots of blood on Rose’s sleeve, but in the dark restaurant they’re barely noticeable.
Leah rubs her fingers against her bandage and her mother looks over at her and then begins to rub her back. She calls her daughter sweetie.

Leah and Nora look at each other from across the table. They both smile, Leah's smile a little bit muted because of the bandage. Leah lifts her hand and waves her fingers at Nora, then touches her nose. The gesture could appear flirtatious or awkward and forced. Nora drops her head and continues staring at her lap, twisting her napkin between her fingers.

When the waiter comes back Leah's mother orders for her, French onion soup and mashed potatoes. Nora orders the same thing, without the cheese on the soup, without the potatoes. She smiles at the waiter, says please and thank you.

The food is beautiful when it comes, everything garnished colorfully, the plates and bowls a vibrant blue. Steam rises from their meals and disappears in the air.

Leah dips her spoon into her bowl and she is bringing the soup to her mouth when her mother grabs her wrist. But as soon as she lets go, Leah puts the steaming soup into her mouth, without blowing on it.

Rose pours herself another glass of wine and drinks it before she begins to eat. Her cheeks are turning pink now and she's smiling and talking quickly, telling stories about her ex-husband that make her and Billy laugh wildly. When she stops talking she looks over at Nora who is pushing the bread around and around in her soup. "You have a boy-friend?" Rose asks her.

"No," Nora tells her, "Not really."
“That’s no reason to be sad,” Rose says. “It’s just another reason to celebrate. Now eat your food. Is that all you’re having? You want some wine? You want to taste a sip?”

“No, thank you,” Nora says. Her parents look at her and smile.

When they finally leave the restaurant, the waiter removes all of their dishes from the table. Nora’s soup bowl is still mostly full and some of the liquid falls onto an Oriental rug in the center of the restaurant—it will go unnoticed until they turn on the lights after closing.
Chase and Sarah are searching for a headache cure. They're walking down Seventh Avenue and stopping in any store that might offer relief. They've been doing this for hours now, ever since Sarah told Chase that she had a headache and Chase realized his head hurt too. Of course Chase almost always has a headache, a constant dull pounding that flares up at the slightest suggestion of someone else’s suffering. A commercial for headache medicine featuring the afflicted can leave him tormented for hours.

In his defense, Chase's grandmother did die of a brain tumor. And as he and Sarah enter the mattress department of Macys, Chase imagines a lump of cells the size of a small potato sprouting in his head, bright green vines snaking their way through the grooves in his brain, penetrating the soft tissue and borrowing bullet-like holes from one side to the other. He worries that soon enough the green sprouts will weave their way out, reaching for light, out through his ears, his eye sockets, his nostrils.
Already he and Sarah have tried aspirin and ibuprofen, sinus and allergy medication which they sprayed up their noses, caffeine, sex, nicotine, and finally, Gatorade, to counteract their former failed attempts. Now they are pretending they're shopping for a mattress-- they rest flat on their backs in the air-conditioned store. It could be the heat, the persistent summer sun and humidity, it could be exhaustion.

"How would you characterize your pain?" Chase asks Sarah. "What color?" he says. "If you had to describe it as a color." Chase keeps a diary of his headaches, documents not only the location of the pain but it's likeness to particular smells, colors and sounds. He decides that now he can do the same for Sarah, it's something he can do for her, something to show that he cares.

"Blue," she says. "Midnight blue." The plastic on the mattress makes a slight suction noise as she rolls over to face the wall.

"Are you sure?" he asks her. "Blue? I mean, that's sort of a comforting color, don't you think? Are you sure it's not more like a purple?"

"Forget it, Chase," she says. "Please forget it."

"We should close our eyes," Chase suggests. "It could be the bright lights-- all that sun and now fluorescent bulbs-- they're both carcinogens you know."

Sarah doesn't respond and now that Chase has his eyes closed, he feels like he's all alone in that bed, a crazy man who's mistaken a department store for his own bedroom. On top of that he feels guilty for questioning Sarah's color choice. The headaches could have brought them closer together, it could have been something that they shared, experienced as one, but now he's ruined it. And his headache is sharpening, it's a bright pink and a bright green and the two colors are clashing inside his head. He's
sure he can feel the sprouts poking and then curling tightly around the back of his eyeballs.

Sarah drags Chase from the mattress department to women's dresses, and Chase uses this as an opportunity to locate the exact color of his headache in the myriad fabrics. "You know my grandmother died of a brain tumor," he tells Sarah.

"You know what," she says, "My headache is completely gone. Maybe if you stop thinking about it," she tells him. She's working her way through rows and rows of summer dresses, Chase following behind her like a small child or a pet.

When he grabs onto her pocketbook she stops and lifts a blue sun dress with small yellow flowers from the rack. "Do you like this?" she asks him. "You said blue is comforting, right?"

"It's nice," he tells her. "But isn't it a little big for you?"

"You know what your problem is," she tells him, "there's nothing else for you to focus on. Nothing is enough to distract you. So you focus on your god damned head all day long and of course with all that focusing you're bound to discover some slight discomfort in there. I've got an idea," she says. "Come to the dressing room with me."

Chase had let go of her pocketbook, but now Sarah takes his hand and wraps his fingers around the strap of her bag and turns her back to Chase and leads him. "Don't worry," she says, "I'm not going to get naked, I know that wouldn't help you."

The next thing he knows, Chase is sitting on a high stool in front of a make-up counter. He's wearing the sun dress and he's letting Sarah rub lipstick onto his lips. And then he's thinking about his grandmother again, but not her tumor this time, her
pocketbook— her enormous pocketbook— which smelled, he now realizes, exactly like lipstick.

When he closes his eyes, allowing Sarah to apply shadow, he images that he now inhabits his grandmother's body— he's an old woman, he's too sick and weak to put on his own make-up.

*Will you marry me?* his grandmother had asked him two days before she died. *I've been in love with you for years,* she told him. *I want you to be my wife, I don't want to waste another moment.* She had reached out for his hand but Chase, then ten years old, would not let his dying grandmother touch him. *Until death do we part,* she had said.

When Chase opens his eyes, Sarah is grinning at him, she looks as if she's about to laugh.

"So," she says, "are you feeling self-conscious? Are you thinking about it? Are you really giving it some thought?" She looks at him seriously now. "Everyone's staring at you, you know. Just because you're dressed like a woman, just that one little thing and now everyone thinks you're a freak, there are people who are looking at you and they're hating you. They want to kill you, Chase. They'd kill you quicker than any headache ever could. Now close your eyes," she tells him. "I'm not done yet."

He follows her orders, he sits still, he closes his eyes. And he loves the feeling of it. He loves that he's wearing a dress, that she bought it for him and he's wearing it and now she's protecting him, taking care of him. He can hear people talking and whispering, their footsteps rhythmic against the floor. He can hear objects being lifted up and then placed back where they belong. But these sounds do not bother him at all. Sarah's fingers are warm and soft against his skin and he thinks in that moment he feels more in love with her than he ever has before. And his headache, miraculously, is blue, it's the
color of his dress. He imagines that the fabric is inside his brain, smothering the sprouts and blanketing the tumor.
Who Could Blame Her

After months of listening to her girlfriend Laura list the various attributes of the men she had slept with and was currently sleeping with, Olivia decided to sleep with her friend Henry. She wasn't trying to punish Laura, to even the score or anything like that—Olivia simply wanted to know how it felt.

She had spent hours imagining it, imagining that she was Laura, her legs spread around a man's narrow hips, or simply leaning in for the first kiss. She would try to imagine the various ways in which Laura would override her feelings of guilt, her desire, as she always explained it, to be a good person, to do the right thing. Olivia pictured Laura thinking of her, Laura imagining Olivia's face hovering above the man she was about to kiss, and becoming filled with hatred for this woman, this lesbian, who was trying to stand in the way of her happiness. It was the last thing Olivia wanted to do. That's what made her so sad, not the fact that Laura was cheating on her, but the fact that she wanted it to stop. She saw it as a weakness in herself, a greed that must be overcome.
Henry was not, all things considered, the best man she could have chosen. Though Henry and Olivia had in the past professed a mutual attraction to one another, Henry was primarily gay and at this point their friendship had progressed to the point where sex would most likely be awkward. At the same time, she loved Henry. She trusted him and that was important, it would make the task easier. After all, she had sex with Laura on a regular basis and she hadn't trusted her for a long time now-- this was surely harder to overcome than a bit of sexual incompatibility.

Besides, Olivia and Henry were open about their fears and determined to overcome them. Olivia admitted that the mere idea of the male sexual organ disturbed her. She considered it a crude stick, its repertoire limited to poking and spraying only, its blood gorged state the least elegant or attractive thing she could imagine. And Henry, in turn, had confessed that, to him, the vagina was a dark, spooky cavern covered in slime. But when their faces were close to each other, they often felt the desire to press their lips together and had enjoyed doing so on a number of occasions, though not since Olivia had begun dating Laura.

She called Henry and invited herself to his apartment. "I think we should have sex," she said. "I'm going to come over and try to seduce you."

There was silence on the other line for only a moment. Then Henry began laughing. It was actually more of a giggle, and this pleased Olivia. She liked it when men giggled, the surprising high-pitched sound of it.

"I'm not joking," she said. She considered saying something sexy and dirty-- I want to feel you inside of me-- something to prove she wasn't taking things too seriously,
and at the same time she was willing to follow through with her suggestion. Instead she said, "I want to."

"Okay," Henry said. "If you're sure. You're sort of scaring me right now, I should say that, but it's getting me excited, I'll say that too."

Olivia pictured Henry's penis filling with blood all because of her. It was flattering. "Come over," Henry said. "I'll even shower and change my sheets."

Olivia thought this offer made the endeavor seem somewhat clinical, but his voice was gravely, and sexy, she thought, and she liked the idea of keeping things as clean as possible.

Olivia had spent most of day with Laura. They had rented a movie, a family drama centering around Christmas (this was Olivia's favorite type of movie, she loved the inevitable reconciliation at the end, the bitter-sweat ambiance of the season) but they didn't watch the movie because Olivia had been unable to control her jealousy. As soon as she walked into Laura's apartment it started-- first, she couldn't stop herself from counting the dishes in the sink, trying to calculate the number of people who might have used them. Then she saw an unfamiliar sweater on the bedroom floor-- Laura liked large clothing but this sweater seemed too large, it had to belong to Jake. Olivia couldn't help picturing Laura pulling the sweater from Jake's body in the heat of passion. When she thought about these things it felt like there was a surge of hot air pushing at her lungs. It wasn't a pleasant feeling.
"What's the matter?" Laura had asked. They were sitting on the couch, their legs almost touching.

Olivia told herself not to complain—obviously Laura wasn't satisfied by Olivia and it was pathetic ask for something that wasn't being offered. When they first got together Laura had been dating a man and Olivia hadn't minded it then, because Olivia was the chosen one, she was worth the risk. But now Jake was the special one in the equation--Laura had Olivia and then chose to be with Jake. (Before that Laura had an affair with her ex-boyfriend, whom she had left to be with Olivia, and then Victor, her old professor from college. Now it was Jake, her co-worker who looked remarkably like James Dean, though not nearly as attractive, Olivia thought.) Running these names through her head as she sat trying to decide what to say, Olivia reminded herself that the situation was complicated and if she started to explain how she was feeling she would seem depressed and pushy--two qualities that Laura detested. Besides, regardless of how much she worried about Laura's other relationships, they seemed to end rather quickly, as if there had really been nothing worth worrying about all along. Just the day before she had run into Laura's ex-boyfriend and his new girlfriend at the supermarket and they had a pleasant interaction, their past hostilities seemed humorous in fact, all of that worrying for nothing.

"You say nothing's bother you," Laura explained, "but you're acting really distant. Tell me what's the matter or you don't get to see your Christmas movie, your choice of which, by the way, I find rather disturbing. You're Jewish," she said. "And I think you have a Christmas fetish. It's out of hand," she said. Laura would never have used the word fetish when they first met, this was Olivia's influence and it was annoying to think
that she had made Laura more interesting. "Come on," Laura was saying, "talk to me."

She was using her flirtatious, teasing voice. Olivia loved this voice, but now she couldn't help wondering if Laura used it with Jake too.

Laura had her fingers on Olivia's knee. It made Olivia's skin tingle and she wanted to turn her head and look Laura in the eyes with the intensity of an actor in an old romantic movie. She felt that intensity, why couldn't she bring herself to show it? She wanted to prove herself as irresistible as Jake with his dark stubble and chiseled jaw. But more than that, she just wanted to kiss her, to be hugging and kissing her, to feel Laura's nipples rise under her fingertips. It didn't matter what Laura was doing when Olivia wasn't there, she could just enjoy the day.

"I feel uneasy," Olivia said. "I don't know why, I just do. I'm thinking too much, I'm thinking things that I don't want to be thinking."

"Like what, for example?" Laura moved her hand from Olivia's knee, she moved her whole body a few inches from her. Olivia felt the hot surge behind her lungs again and now, also, on her knee, rushing at her skin where Laura's hand had been.

"I'm thinking that, if I tell you what I'm thinking, you'll be annoyed. Because jealousy is petty but that's what I'm feeling, I'm feeling jealous and I don't want to be. I bet Jake doesn't get jealous. I bet he doesn't sit on this couch with you thinking about you sitting on this couch with me. And if he does, he's probably aroused by the thought. Like you said, he thinks it makes you interesting."

"He doesn't think it makes me interesting, that's not what I said."

"You said that's what he told you, that it makes you interesting. And I should say for the record that I find that statement offensive. Sexuality doesn't make someone
interesting, only someone really boring would think so." Olivia didn't really believe what she was saying. Often she too was impressed by people's sexualities, found them interesting, but she hated thinking of herself as a pawn with which Laura could now attract even more men.

"He actually thinks that I'm interesting, me," Laura said. "That's all I meant. And he doesn't find the idea of the two of us, you and me, that is, exciting at all. He doesn't want me to be with other people."

This made things more confusing. Laura didn't like to be pressured, but she did like it when people were forthright with their feelings. Now it seemed possible that Jake's jealousy was winning him points, while Olivia spent every moment trying to hide her own. She considered grabbing Laura and telling her how much she loved her, insisting that she be with Olivia only. After all, that is what she wanted, and maybe that's what Laura had been waiting for.

"Then why don't you stop seeing other people?" Olivia said instead. "Why don't you just be with Jake?"

"Because I love you." She said it like it was a fact. It wasn't the first time she had said this, but still it was startling. It made Olivia feel like crying, somehow it made her feel worse than if Laura had said okay. She wished, in fact, that Laura had simply said: I hate you, get out.

"But I'm not enough," Olivia said. Laura looked up at the ceiling, the skin on her neck was tight, she had not the littlest hint of a double chin. "I'm just trying to understand," Olivia said.
"If you were a guy," Laura said, "and I felt about you the way I do, I'd probably propose."

"Well I wish you were a man, too," Olivia said. She hadn't decided to say it, she just did.

Laura had her head down, she was staring at her hands, running her thumb nail along the lines of her palm. Maybe having sex with someone you actually loved was always a bad idea, Olivia thought. Maybe you could never feel close after that, unless you were actually touching. The simple fact of their thoughts being separate felt like a tragedy.

"Do you think we'd be better off if we could read each other's minds?" Olivia asked. "If there was nothing to be afraid of, because we'd just know."

Laura's skin was always pale, but now it looked practically white, the color of milk. The pink of her lips was startling against it. She had a really beautiful mouth, the shape people tried to recreate when they drew a face. They were too perfect—Olivia couldn't believe that she had ever kissed them. She wondered if Jake thought of her as some sort of prize, if he felt lucky just to be with her, if he ever secretly hated her for being this pretty.

Laura pushed her hair behind her ears, twisted the long strands behind her back as if aware of her perfect lips, trying to reveal them better, remove any possible distractions.

"If I'm with you, and only you," she said, her hands still in her hair, "then I'm gay. I know I was all for it at the beginning, but I don't think I really thought about it, I just wanted to be with you. Nobody thinks of me that way. I've never thought of myself that way. I thought I'd get married and have kids and a normal life— I know I shouldn't say
that, normal, but it's true. I still want those things," she said. "I know it's stupid. I just
don't know that I'm ready to be entirely gay."

Olivia was happy to hear this. Laura could get over this problem, people had to do it every day. And if she didn't, then that meant Olivia was actually the stronger of the two.

"There are people who stay married for years and years," Olivia said, "it doesn't make them straight." As soon as she said this it reminded her of something she had heard on the Christian radio station. A priest had said that going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than going to McDonalds makes you a hamburger. Olivia wanted to tell Laura about the priest, she wanted to talk about her Christmas fetish. People could spend their whole lives laughing if they just decided to do it.

"Maybe you should be with someone else," Laura said. "I don't want to be making you miserable."

"Maybe I like being miserable," Olivia said. It was possible, as a child she had wished for this kind of heartache. When she broke up with her first boyfriend in sixth grade she was hoping that he would push her to the ground and stomp on her fingers. She wanted bruises and puffy eyes that wouldn't stop tearing.

"Well I don't want to be miserable," Laura said, "I really don't. And when I hurt you it makes me miserable. I hate seeing you like this."

For a brief second, Olivia considered apologizing. But what would she say? I'm sorry that it hurts you when you hurt me? It was all too complicated, they could have been watching the movie, they could have been happy if she just hadn't said anything.
"This is ridiculous," she said. "You like having sex with men. I don't want to stop you from doing something you like."

"I like having sex with you too," Laura said. Olivia was staring ahead, not looking at Laura, but in the corner of her eye she saw Laura's hand reaching toward her and despite everything, it made Olivia feel like she couldn't breathe. But then Laura's hand was back in her own lap, she didn't touch her.

"If you like having sex with girls," Olivia said, "Maybe you should find some other girl to do it with. Someone like you, who doesn't want to be gay. Not that I want to be gay either, but you know, someone with more control. There are lots of girls out there," she said. "And lots of them are willing."

Laura's eyes were half-closed, her mouth half-open as if in mock surprise. Olivia could see her tongue, pink and wet behind her bottom teeth. "You think of me as a whore," Laura said. "Don't you?"

All her life Olivia had wanted to be a slut, she would be proud of herself if she could be. "You're not a whore," Olivia said. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean it like that." It was the truth. She didn't think Laura was a slut, she dated all of the people she slept with after all, and that was the problem.

Laura had tears in her eyes now, she was actually crying. "You think you're the only one who gets hurt," she said, "but you make me feel horrible about myself. You say some really horrible things sometimes."

Laura sat there hugging her knees to her chest. She looked like a little girl who had just been deemed fat by her classmates. And she wasn't fat at all, she was beautiful, of course everyone wanted to have sex with her. Olivia couldn't decide if she wanted to
punch Laura, or hug her and make her feel all better. She wondered what Jake would do in this situation. Probably he'd try to seduce her, like magic he'd make her forget all about it. And if he didn't, then Laura would tell Olivia about it. She'd say, Can you believe he said that, it made me so upset. And Olivia would comfort her, as if it were the normal thing to do in her position. "I'm sorry," she said again. "I didn't mean it that way."

The video was still sitting on the coffee table. It could have been in the VCR, spreading its holiday cheer.

"I was with Bryan for three years," Laura said, "and I was completely faithful."

"I know," Olivia said. She didn't ask if this was supposed to make her feel better.

"And I would never be with another girl," Laura said. "I don't want to be with any girls but you."

"How is it different?" Olivia asked, "Being with boys than being with other girls?" She hated when Laura said things like this. Beyond the fact that it was insulting, it seemed ignorant and homophobic.

"It just is different," Laura said. "It feels different."

This was aggravating more than anything. "What do you mean?" Olivia asked. She wanted details, specifics, theories.

"Well," she said, and she looked at Olivia as if she were the biggest idiot she had ever seen, "Jake has a penis, you don't."

"Why don't you just punch me instead," Olivia said, almost yelling now. "Why don't you just punch me and while you're doing it you can tell me how stupid I am. I think I know that Jake has a penis," she said, "though I do like to be reminded of it."
Maybe you could take some pictures and hang them on your walls, that way, whenever I'm here I can be reminded. *Jake's penis*— you could write in big letters above the picture, just for clarity's sake."

Sometimes this happened. Olivia would just start talking and she'd say something she never meant to say. And though she wished desperately that she could take it back, part of her was happy she had said it. And Laura, for some reason Olivia would never understand, actually looked pleased with Olivia in that moment. She didn't seem to find it humorous in any way, she wasn't laughing or even smiling, she just looked pleased.

"I'm sorry," Olivia said, though immediately afterward she regretting apologizing. She imagined herself caught in this-- I'm sorry I said I was sorry, I'm sorry I said I was sorry I was sorry. It could go on forever. Her life was turning into one long apology.

"I just want to understand," she said again. "I want to know why he's so irresistible. If we were friends you would tell me. We used to be friends, before any of this, and you would have told me then. I just want to know. Otherwise I feel like I don't really know you at all, like you have this secret life. If you explained, I think I'd feel better."

"We're not just friends," Laura said.

"Well maybe we should be, maybe we should just be friends and then you could tell me all about the boys and I wouldn't care. It would just be something interesting to talk about."

"You wouldn't care?" Laura seemed strangely insulted by this.

"I'd care," Olivia assured her, "of course I'd care, just not in the same way. I could be happy for you."
"I like that you care," Laura said. Her voice was soft and kind. Pleading in its own way. And Olivia felt like crying again. Laura had a way of saying the perfect thing, outright-- Olivia never allowed herself to do that, she couldn't. She wanted to hug Laura and say that this was enough, these things that Laura said to her. If Laura loved her, that was enough.

Olivia felt almost manic. "You don't like that I care," she said. "You don't. I'm annoying, I know that. I annoy myself."

Laura smiled. She looked at Olivia as if she were in love, and in that moment, Olivia allowed herself to believe it. "Sometimes I think I don't want to be with men at all," Laura said.

"And other times?" Olivia felt a small, ugly voice inside her head, yelling, *Tell me! Tell me!* Why did she always want to be told exactly what she didn't want to hear? Maybe she did covet misery and pain. Maybe she was turned on by it, no different than her friend Nathan who liked to hammer nails through his penis.

"When a man shows interest in me," Laura explained, "It just feels different. And it feels really nice," she said. "It's like they're taking over, it makes me feel small and cared for," she said. Olivia pictured Laura as a child, a little girl with her legs spread open, a large cowboy between them. She pictured Laura writhing with pleasure, unable to think about the implications. With Olivia, she was always thinking, they were always making decisions. "Maybe it's stupid," she continued, "needing that kind of validation from men, but sometimes I think I do need it."
Olivia didn't say anything, she just nodded. She thought about China, girl babies with rocks tied to their arms and legs, tossed into large bodies of water. She wanted Laura to keep talking.

"I don't know," Laura said. "Sometimes it's just nice to be held by someone who's really big."

Olivia knew plenty of women who were bigger than Jake. She felt guilty for being small and weak, not just her body but her personality too. She could have given Laura all of those things. "So it's men in general you find attractive?" she asked. Even in her own ears her voice sounded child-like and stupid.

"I do like Jake," Laura said. "I think he's a really awesome person."

It felt like each word out of Laura's mouth had attached itself to a different muscle in Olivia's body and drained its energy. If she had the strength, she'd like to take rocks and tie them the bodies of all the men in the world and toss them into the ocean. She pictured herself doing it, and that's when she thought about Henry. She wouldn't want to toss him into ocean.

"Are you angry at me?" Laura asked. "Are you going to say anything?"

"I'm not angry," Olivia said. "How could I be angry? That would be like getting angry at someone because they think you're ugly."

"What?" Laura said. "What are you talking about?"

"I think I should go." Laura looked angry now, and that made Olivia angry too. She thought about Henry sitting on his couch watching a movie. He was always willing to watch Christmas movies with Olivia, even though he did not personally enjoy them.
He thought it was funny that Olivia liked them so much. In general Henry seemed to think Olivia was funny.

Meanwhile, Laura’s face was filled with an expression of distaste. At that moment Olivia figured there was nothing she could say to please her. She pictured her sense of humor as a cluster of cells inside her brain. Every thought she had about Laura and these big strong men was like a hot, wet towel tossed on top of the cluster, smothering it. She wanted, more than anything, to walk out of there and get hit on the head with something heavy that would eradicate her memory of Laura and, with any luck, restore her sense of humor.

"You're not going to respond in any way?" Laura said.

"We should have just watched the movie," Olivia said. "That's all I wanted to do really. And you should have sex with whoever you want to have sex with," she said. She really did believe this. "I just wish I didn't care. And I'm working on it," she said. She wanted Laura to say again that Olivia was supposed to care, that she wanted her to. She willed Laura to confess that all of these affairs were just an attempt to get Olivia to care in the first place. It worked, after all-- if that was her motive then everything would be okay.

"Maybe we should just think about it for a while," Laura said. She had her head down, her hands on her own knees. She seemed very calm now, as if she were happy with the way things had gone, though not particularly happy with Olivia. "Maybe we should just stop talking about this, take a break for a while. You should go home." Now that she had said this, Olivia wanted to stay, she wanted to say the perfect thing to make
Laura love her again. They would take a break, and meanwhile, Laura would fall in love with Jake.

"Fine, good idea," Olivia said. If she were a child, she would have flung herself onto the ground, kicked her legs and beat her arms against the floor. Instead, she stood up, put on her jacket and zipped it up to her chin. "I wish it were still Christmas time," she said. "I wish the stores were still playing Christmas carols and there were lights on all of the buildings. Sometimes I think I'd be completely happy if it was Christmas all year round."

"Me too," Laura said. She stood up then, she wrapped her arms around Olivia and rested her chin on Olivia's shoulder, her tiny, bony shoulder, as if they hadn't had any conversation at all. "Of course that would mean that Jesus was born every day of the year."

Olivia couldn't decide if she felt like crying or laughing or maybe both. They were still hugging, their stomachs pressed together and Olivia had to stop herself from apologizing, from hugging tighter, slipping one of her legs between Laura's. If she wanted to, why shouldn't she? The goal was not to care, and right then she didn't. She loved being with her, she loved the feeling of their stomachs pressed together—that's all that mattered. Life, after, was just time spent with other people. If she could enjoy it, she should. "Didn't Jesus die and come back to life?" Olivia asked. "Then who's to say he couldn't be born every day, it's not that much stranger."

"Yeah, it sort of is," Laura said. She was laughing now, and pulling away from the hug at the same time. Olivia felt strangely relaxed, just listening to Laura laugh. It was fine, everything would be fine.
"Alright, good-bye," she said. "Merry Christmas."

She felt fine as she walked to the door and still fine as it shut behind her. Walking down the apartment steps she felt fine and halfway down the street too. But then she realized that if she was fine with the situation, then Laura once again got everything she wanted and Olivia got nothing at all. Maybe it was actually weaker to let Laura get away with this, she couldn't decide. She pictured Laura sitting on her couch, smiling now. She pictured her reaching for the phone and calling Jake. Inviting him over and watching the Christmas movie with him. She'd curl up in the crook of his arm, she'd feel safe and protected and not the least bit gay.

At the next pay phone she passed, Olivia called Henry, and that's when she invited herself to his apartment. On the way there, she stopped and picked up a Christmas movie for the two of them to watch after fornicating.

Henry never used the overhead lights in his apartment, only dim lamps and candles. Sometimes he would plug in the Christmas lights Olivia had hung around the woodwork. The apartment was small and cluttered, only one room, but Olivia found its dimness romantic. At the same time, it was comforting, like a child's bedroom lit by a night-light.

When she arrived there, Henry came to the door in a silk smoking jacket underneath which he wore a white tee-shirt and a pair of old tuxedo pants. Olivia found him very striking, if not sexy—if Olivia were a man, she would want to look like Henry.

His hair was still wet from the shower. Olivia was acutely aware of the fact that his penis hung inside those tuxedo pants. She wondered if he was thinking about her the
same way. Maybe most men and women always thought about each other this way, as a cluster of body parts. Maybe it was a good way to think about people, all possibility, here and now.

“We’re just going to hang out,” she told him, just barely inside the room. “Forget what I said before.” She just needed a friend, really, she just needed to think about something other than Laura. She felt better already, more relaxed. Henry had an apartment, a couch, a bed, Christmas lights, clothing in which he dressed himself. He lived his life without thinking about Laura, and Olivia could too.

When she thought about having sex with him now, it felt like Laura was pressuring her to do it. “We’re not going to have sex,” she said, just to be clear.

Henry shrugged. “Okay,” he said. He sat down on the couch and put his feet up on the coffee table. “So what should we do instead?” he asked.

“You know what I hate?” Olivia said. She sat down next to Henry, his hair smelled sweet, like almonds.

“What do you hate?” Henry asked.

“There are real problems in the world,” she said. “Right in this very moment someone’s mother is getting murdered, and some man is getting raped in a jail cell even though he didn’t even do what they said he did. Some woman is working her third job of the day just so she can buy food for her family now that her husband has died of AIDS. Girl babies,” she said, “getting killed, just because they have no penis.”

“You hate that? Really?”

“I hate that I have stupid problems that I spend all of my time worrying about. Do you know why I spend so much time worrying? Because I have so much time. I’m
spoiled. And now I’m complaining about that, which is way worse than just being spoiled. Is there any chance you have an STD? Maybe we should have sex. Maybe I should get myself an STD, maybe I deserve one.”

“Maybe. So what movie did you rent?”

“We can’t watch it,” she told him. “We have to do something productive. I feel lazy. I can’t just sit around like this all day.”

“It’s Saturday,” Henry said. He tried to take the movie from her hands and she realized she how tight she was holding onto it, her fingernails were white from the pressure. Then he saw the title. “You’re a Nazi,” he said. “Aren’t you? You’re a god-damned Nazi. Listen to yourself. Look at the movies you rent. If you don’t calm down, you’re going to have to leave. This is a peaceful house. It’s the Sabbath,” he said.

Henry’s shoulders weren’t very broad, but they were wider than Olivia’s, and his arms did look sort of strong, a little bit strong at least. She put her hand on his thigh. She leaned forward and kissed him once, quickly, on the lips.

“Are trying to make me insane?” he said.

“The sun went down,” Olivia said. “The Sabbath is over. And if you don’t want to kiss me, you should just say so.”

Henry put his hands on her shoulders. Then he was kissing her, he bit her lower lip and pressed his tongue hard against hers. He did take control, just like Laura had said. And his lips really did feel stronger than Laura’s, not as soft.

Olivia found herself hoping that he would keep kissing her like this-- she might even want to have sex with him. But then she realized that this must be the way Laura
felt when she was with Jake, this same feeling of desire. She tried to focus on the kiss only: lips, tongues, teeth, his breath loud in her ear.

She was able to concentrate. She was enjoying the kiss. But then she felt Henry reach out and put his hand on her breast. “Don’t,” she said. “You don’t have to touch that.” She hated the idea of him touching her breast and being disgusted by it. He too wanted a broad, strong and flat chest.

“Why not?” he said. “I like boobs. Everyone likes them, I swear.”

He had removed his hand but now he put it back. He ran the side of his thumb back and forth against her nipple. Olivia hated herself for liking this. Her breasts felt like nothing but a collection of strangely placed fat. It seemed completely wrong for this to feel good. “Please stop,” she said again.

Henry crossed his arms in front of his chest, he leaned back on the couch, away from Olivia. “This is a really strange way to seduce someone,” he said.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I just can’t. You’re a good kisser though.”

“Better than Laura?” he asked. “Just please tell me I’m better than Laura, lie if you have to.”

Often Olivia got the sense that Henry fabricated his jealousy of Laura, talked about it just to make her feel better. But she didn’t mind, it was nice of him to do it.

“Do you think that counts as cheating?” she asked.

“If you tell me that you feel bad about it,” Henry said, “I’ll kill you, I really will.”

“I do feel bad,” she said. “I feel really bad, but that actually makes me feel better. Everyone always takes my side, just because I’m the one who gets cheated on. I don’t want anyone taking my side. I really don’t deserve it and I’m not just saying that.”
“It’s not just that she cheats on you,” he told her. “She’s manipulative too.”

“So am I,” Olivia said. “I practically manipulate her into manipulating me.”

“Let’s watch the movie,” Henry said. “We’ll turn on the lights, the Christmas lights. I’ll bake cookies if you want me too, I’ll use green and red food coloring. We can even pray to Jesus if you want. Just please don’t say things like that.”

“I thought that if was with someone else, it wouldn’t seem like such a big deal if she was too. I thought it wouldn’t seem scary anymore because I’d know what it felt like.”

“Are you trying to say that you’re not in love with me?”

“I’m serious,” Olivia said.

“Why don’t you go back to thinking about the real problems in the world?” Henry suggested. “Think about how lazy you are.”

“I hate that there’re things I don’t know,” Olivia said. “I don’t know what she’s doing right now. I never know what she’s thinking. She could hate me and I wouldn’t know. Her whole relationship with me could be some big joke. Maybe she’s really a psychiatrist and she’s doing some sort of study. Maybe she just feels bad for me. That’s what I hate,” she said. “I hate not knowing things.”

“She’s actually a robot,” Henry said. “I didn’t want to tell you.”

“Can I sleep over?” Olivia asked.

Henry nodded, he was smiling now. He had a beautiful smile, he really did, but Olivia rarely took the time to notice it anymore. And when he reached for her, hugged her and pressed his chest against hers, she felt good, she felt small and cared for.
Henry held onto her, and over his shoulder Olivia could see out to the street through the window. There was a little girl in a red velvet dress and black fur coat. Walking next to her, holding her hand, was an old woman, her back sloped over. They walked slowly, the old woman limping just slightly. Tonight, Olivia thought, that woman could die, and as she’s dying, she might very well regret having spent her last evening with the little girl. But it wasn’t worth thinking about.

If you let yourself, you could be cared for. It was that simple.
Sophie's parents go away about once every four months— they travel to public health conferences all over the world. And although they go together, they fly separately in case of some problem— they don't want Sophie to be an orphan. But Sophie doesn't think she minds the idea so much. She'd have the apartment to herself and then Caroline could just move in. They could play house arrest all the time instead of once every four months.

Sophie knows that thirteen might be too old to be playing games like this, but mostly she and Caroline convince each other that of all their brilliant ideas this is their most brilliant and so that makes it okay. And they're pretty sure it's good practice for something, confining themselves to the apartment like they do, even if they're not sure what they're preparing for.

Sophie and Caroline have just the weekend this time but Caroline says it doesn't matter, even if it's only a couple of days they have to do it right. She comes to the door in a house coat, green and beige velour, and it's too long, street dirt and subway dirt on the
bottom seam. Sophie can't imagine how Caroline's brave enough to walk around New York City dressed like that, but she figures Caroline's pretty enough and knows she's prettier than almost anyone else, so she can get away with it. Even if it's August and it's way too hot to be wearing velour and Caroline's face gets covered in a film of sweat. Though it's nothing like the ugly drops that pop through Sophie's skin, especially on her nose, like pimples, no matter how much she wipes it. Caroline's sweat looks dignified somehow, like she's been draped with a shiny slip cover, like she's sweating on purpose.

"Mary Mother of God, it's hot," she says. Then she falls onto the couch and she unzips the house coat a bit (so that Sophie can almost see her breasts) just to let the cool air of the apartment in there.

Sophie's nervous when Caroline first comes over. More shy than ever, even though they've been friends for two years now. As soon as Caroline lies on the couch it's hers. Sophie can't imagine looking that comfortable or relaxed and as soon as she thinks that, the whole apartment belongs to Caroline. Sophie tries to remember sitting on the couch before Caroline got there. She tries to remember the time she spent a whole week sick on that couch, threw up right onto its blue cushions, but it looks like some other couch now that Caroline's there.

The whole apartment looks different, actually. Sophie tries to imagine the two of them living there alone. Maybe then it would seem like a fun place to live, like a vacation spot. Her mother's plants, which Sophie usually sees as a nuisance-- watering them just another annoying chore-- now look lush, like a jungle right there in her apartment. And she starts to plan their life, hers and Caroline's-- they would fill the bar with colorful liquors, sit on the stools smoking long cigarettes and drinking pink
beverages with the ice noisy in their glasses. They'd fill her parents' pristine bedroom entirely with mattresses, fluffy covers and multicolored pillows strewn about. They'd push that blue couch and the coffee table to the edge of the room, opening up a dance floor; or, on days when they didn't feel like acting so old, they'd play jacks on the wooden floor.

"Turn up the air, will you?" Caroline says, and it fits right into Sophie's fantasy. She watches Caroline lift her arm in the air and smell herself, under each arm as if one just might smell different from the other.

But Sophie says no to the air-conditioning. Switching easily from one fantasy to the next, she says that if they were really under house arrest they wouldn't be able to control the temperature. She says it's cool enough and anyway it's good if it's hot, they should be suffering. "You can have some cold lemonade," she says. "They left us lemonade this time."

"Yuck," Caroline says, and then she gets up, slowly, like she's been lying on that couch for hours and now she's stiff, needs to stretch. She walks to the kitchen and when she comes back she's holding a bottle of coke in her hand but the way she holds it makes it look more like a beer somehow. Sophie's still in the doorway, she hasn't moved since Caroline came over and she feels like maybe she can't move. She feels like she's a little kid and Caroline's the cool baby-sitter who doesn't really want to be there but needs the money. And she's waiting for Caroline to realize this, that Sophie's just a kid who doesn't really need deodorant yet, though she wears it. Men's deodorant, just like Caroline does.

Sophie wonders if this is the way she'll feel when she's older and married. She wonders if she'll feel nervous like this in the evenings when she and her husband first get
home from work, those first few minutes together after being apart, when the other person looks like a stranger all over again. Because she can't imagine loving anyone more than she loves Caroline, feeling closer to anyone, but there's always this fear-- like maybe something has happened to Caroline since she last saw her, maybe this thing will have changed her and nothing will be the same. She won't love Sophie anymore.

Caroline sits down on the couch again and this time she picks up one of Sophie's yearbooks that's sitting on the coffee table. Sophie thinks this is some sort of cue or invitation so she goes now and sits on the couch next to Caroline. And then everything feels normal: her apartment, the couch, Caroline, somehow, now, looking thirteen and knowable.

"Fifth grade?" Caroline asks.

It's a pre-Caroline yearbook. Sophie had looked at it earlier in the day, trying to locate some sort of profound difference in herself then as compared to now. Some sort of proof that she had actually been fine before Caroline, had existed just like she does now.

The first page Caroline turns to, there's Sophie, smiling, her arm wrapped around a girl named Lara who had moved to England in the middle of that school year. Sophie can't remember which part of England now, though she does remember that it seemed sad at the time. She even remembers looking at that picture when the yearbook first came out and thinking, Lara is dead now, not being able to think of it any other way.

Caroline asks, Who's your little friend? and points, easily covering Lara's entire face with her fingertip.

"Lara," Sophie says, "I told you about Lara." Caroline shrugs her shoulders and she nods a little. She's looking at Sophie now, like she's waiting for a story but also
slightly bored already. And Sophie wants to tell her that Lara just left, that she only told Sophie she was moving the day before she did. That Sophie would find her crying in the bathroom at school, but when she'd ask her what was wrong, Lara would laugh. She'd say, You know how sometimes you just start crying and you don't know why? She'd say something like that anyway, Sophie can't remember the way Lara talked, what her voice sounded like. She's trying to remember but Caroline's still staring at her, smirking now, this way she has of looking at Sophie like, What's wrong with you? even though she doesn't say anything.

"Lara saved every pair of shoes she ever wore on her feet," Sophie says. It's a more interesting story, more tangible, the kind of story Caroline tells about her life. And Sophie tries to sound excited like Caroline does when she's telling a story, tries to make the story surprising and crazy. "She had this display case," she says-- and then she adds details she doesn't actually remember-- "It was this huge glass case with gold shelves inside, little labels with the date she bought the shoes and the date she stopped wearing them. The case had room for an entire life's worth of shoes. She had every single pair of shoes she had ever worn and outgrown, her little white baby shoes sitting on the top left and then three more shelves worth. Can you imagine that? It was like a record of every step she had taken. It was really freaky."

Caroline's smiling now, not smirking, and Sophie thinks maybe she's told a good story for once, maybe Caroline will ask questions about it and Sophie can add more details, each one more surprising than the last.

"She left, right?" Caroline asks, and she's biting on her lower lip now, like she does when she's embarrassed. "Without telling you, right?"
Sophie feels her cheeks getting hot, the feeling of embarrassment, as always, making her more embarrassed. She can't believe she's told this story already, that again and again she's stupid enough to think she has secrets too.

"You're still sad about it?" Caroline asks, this voice that sounds younger and softer than her usual voice. And she puts down her soda, puts her hand on Sophie's sweaty back, her palm flat and her fingers moving slowly back and forth. It's nothing Sophie would have thought to do, to give physical comfort like that and she hates Caroline right then, for thinking of it first, for believing that Sophie is sad about Lara.

But then Caroline is squeezing Sophie's cheeks and saying, Poor little Sophie, aw, poor thing, and then Sophie's not resentful anymore, her cheeks hurt and she's laughing. Then Caroline says, "Lara's a big fat bitch with a foot fetish. That case must have stunk. Why didn't she just save her underwear while she was at it. Why didn't she save her shit, I mean that's a real record of your life."

This is what Sophie loves, this feeling like it's the two of them against everyone else.

She looks at Caroline's shoes now, dirty and faded Doc Martins that, in combination with the house coat, make Caroline look either eccentric and even cooler, or like she's homeless. Sophie imagines those shoes in some anonymous trash can on Eighth Street, outside of a shoe store where Caroline would buy a new pair and toss these without thinking. She imagines them surrounded by balled up tissues and food wrappers, ignored as just another piece of trash. And then she pictures Lara's old house in Brooklyn. She imagines that Lara really did die, that saying she was moving to England was just her way of protecting everyone. She pictures Lara's room just as it was in fifth
grade except that Lara's gone, the shoe case in the corner, untouched now for years. And then she pictures the case filled with shoes Sophie has never seen, fancy British shoes she can't even imagine. But even though she's thinking about all this, forcing herself to picture Lara's grave or Lara's new friends, she can't get herself to really feel sad.

Caroline, meanwhile, is still talking about shit, this idea of saving it. Sophie hears her saying something about the color variations, how a case of shit could actually be beautiful if you thought about it in the right way. "Why do we flush it away?" she's asking, "Why do we have to get rid of it so fast? After a while everything loses its smell, why are we so afraid of it? Why, Sophie? I mean cats use litter boxes, the shit sits in there for days and it's no biggie."

Sophie tries to give this matter all of her attention, as if its relative unimportance makes it the most important thing they've ever discussed. "Decomposition," she says finally. "Shit decomposes, and we can't handle that, Caroline. We've got to flush it away before it just decomposes because that shit was part of us, and to watch it disappear, well that would just be depressing. We'd have to start thinking about the fact that all of us is going to decompose some day, every last part, just like our shit. The earth doesn't care--shit, brain matter, what's the difference?"

"My god, you're right," Caroline says. And then she pretends she's crying, distraught at the mere thought of it. She's got her head in her hands and she's shaking her back and her shoulders. A second later she's sitting upright though, she's grabbing onto Sophie's shoulders, looking right at her, and she's saying, "Tell me Mr. Kennedy was at school in fifth grade. Tell me his picture is in this yearbook."
She doesn't wait for Sophie's answer though, she's holding the yearbook like it's made of glass and she's brushing her fingers against its cover like she can comfort it, the way you touch a baby's head, or a kitten. Then she's holding the book against her cheek, her eyes half-closed. "Mr. Kennedy," she whispers, "are you in here? Where are you, Mr. Kennedy, sweet love?"

Mr. Kennedy is the art teacher and he's got sandy blond hair that hangs in straight greasy strands down to his chin. On top of that he has pale skin and bright blue eyes (something Caroline talks about endlessly, Sophie hadn't noticed that they were blue, let alone practically clear and ponderously deep). He also has the body of a ten-year-old and everybody at school knows what he thinks of Caroline, that she's going to be a brilliant artist some day. Caroline, in turn, believes that Mr. Kennedy is the Messiah. All of the artistic girls love him, though Sophie thinks he's rude, ignoring the talentless like he does.

Caroline's frantically flipping through pages now, Sophie can hear her breathing over the sound of it and she thinks Caroline might rip the pages because she's being so careless. Sophie's about to tell her to calm down but then Caroline is still all of a sudden so Sophie can't complain. And there's Mr. Kennedy: his hair is shorter and he has a light beard, one step past stubble. He's outside the art building and he's looking up at the sky, some highly concerned expression on his face. Underneath his picture the caption reads, Somewhere Over the Rainbow.

"Oh my god, can I have this?" Caroline asks.

"It's part of my book," Sophie says. "You can't just rip it out, it's my yearbook. You didn't even go here in fifth grade," she says. But then she's grabbing the yearbook and she's tearing out the page and handing it to Caroline. She doesn't know why she's
doing it, especially since she's pretty neurotic about her books, likes to keep all of them in
perfect condition, but there she is handing it to Caroline. "Here," she says, "take it. But
can we please please do something else now." Sophie wants Caroline to be sorry, to have
that sick feeling that Sophie gets in her stomach when she's given a gift she doesn't
derserve, any gift really. But Caroline's happy and nothing else. She puts her arms
around Sophie and she hugs her to her chest, squeezes really hard, and then Sophie's the
one feeling sick.

Three hours later, they're in the pantry, trying to devise a meal, pulling cans and
jars and boxes from the shelves, each of them holding as many containers as possible,
placing selected items together on the floor and staring down in serious contemplation as
if it's an aesthetic endeavor-- colors and textures matter more than flavor.

"Let's make a casserole," Sophie suggests, though neither of them is hungry for
dinner yet, it's only three o'clock. But they're getting bored or Caroline seems bored and
cooking is something to do like anything else, it doesn't matter if they're hungry or not.

"Do you even know how to make a casserole?" Caroline asks. "Because I don't."

"You just have to use a casserole dish and crunch up potato chips on top, then it's
a casserole," Sophie's explaining, but she can tell Caroline's not listening. She's
inspecting her house coat now, pulling invisible pieces of lint off her sleeves. Then she
sits down, she hikes up the house coat and she sits legs-akimbo in the corner of the
pantry. Her knees jut out, the bones visible through her skin. Her legs are tan and
hairless, freshly shaved, and Sophie can't help it, she's flattered as she imagines Caroline
preparing for house arrest that morning, somehow deciding that this is important enough to warrant smooth legs.

Caroline looks indolent but content sitting the way she is—she's a stubborn little girl refusing to help with chores, imagining all sorts of exotic escapes. And Sophie's willing to give up on the casserole, she willing to forgo cooking all together, whatever Caroline wants to do, she'll do it. She thinks this is what house arrest is all about, compromise, effectively distracting one another and keeping each other happy. So she walks over to Caroline and she sits down next to her. She crosses her legs at the ankle and leans against the shelves behind her and she tries to look dramatic. She pretends that Caroline really is a little girl. "What's on your mind?" she asks, trying to imitate the balance of concern and emotional disinterest in her father's voice when he asks the same of Sophie.

But Caroline responds in a way Sophie would never dare (Sophie's response usually a dismissive "just stuff" or "nothing, Dad"), Caroline launches right into a story. "In the hotel," she says, her voice rising like a question, "we used to use the matches to melt chocolate from the mini-bar. The best combination is Snickers and Reees Cups. God those were good," she says, and she uses her hands for emphasis.

"The hotel with your dad?" Sophie asks.

"Yeah, well, Dad was in the next room. He was barely ever with us."

Of all of Caroline's stories, the hotel story is Sophie's favorite, though she feels guilty for liking it so much. She does know it's an awful story, really scary and sad, but still. She can't help being a little envious.
What Sophie knows of the story is this: Caroline's parents were divorced when she was really little, three or four, and when she was six her Dad and his girlfriend kidnapped her from her mother. (The details of how he actually took her are fuzzy, but Sophie imagines it like the after-school specials or the filmstrips she's seen in assembly---Caroline's dad picks her up after school, before her mother gets there, and he's dressed in a dark three piece suit and he smells like expensive cologne, like pine trees and sandalwood. He tells her he's going to whisk her away, that he and her mom have had this surprise planned for months.) This part, the capture, scares Sophie and she's not jealous when she thinks about it. But Caroline never tells this part of the story so Sophie doesn't think about it too much, she can't imagine it in the exciting and whimsical way Caroline, she's sure, would describe it, the way she's described the rest, the fancy hotel with the guard outside her door. Her father's girlfriend had a daughter named Lily and the two of them were held up in that room for a month, just the two of them in there. Lily was two years older than Caroline and she could leave pretty much whenever she wanted but mostly she didn't, she'd stay in the room with Caroline. And once a week Caroline was allowed to leave, not the hotel but the room, she'd get to go to the gift shop and she'd have fifty dollars to spend however she wanted. But other than that it was a month in that room before the police came barging in, before they arrested her father and returned Caroline to her mother. It was a month of movies on Spectravision and endless hours of TV, pillow fights and whatever they wanted from room-service, candle-lit dinners first thing in the morning or french fries and milkshakes in the middle of the night. There was no schedule, no homework. It didn't matter if they stayed up all night or slept all day.
Sophie often wishes that she was there with Caroline, that Caroline's father would come back--a shy handsome man with a wild streak, an unpredictable and terrifying charm which would sometimes turn abruptly into fits of irrational anger--and she and Caroline would be scared and excited together, protecting and entertaining each other, the way she always imagined it would be to have a sister.

"What did Lily look like?" Sophie asks. She's talking quietly now, like they're kids who are up past their bedtime.

"She was really small, shorter than me even though she was two years older, and she had really long blond hair. Down to her butt. She'd wash it all the time, like three times a day at least, so it was really dry and rough, sort of like hay. But it was extremely beautiful. And she was an amazing gymnast. She taught me how to do back-handsprings and flips on the beds--we'd make up these elaborate routines and put on performances."

"For your dad?"

"No. Mostly for each other."

"Have you seen her since then?" Sophie asks. She's determined to get the whole story this time, even though she believes it to be impossible. It feels like a choose your own adventure book, a million stories in one.

"Nope," Caroline says. She doesn't seem sad but then she drops her head and she's staring at her lap. "It's really weird that I haven't," she says. "I mean, we, did I ever tell you that we, Lily and I, we sort fooled around?"

Sophie feels like she's been punched, she's not sure if she feels like laughing or crying. "Nope, you didn't," she says, "You definitely didn't tell me that." She wants to tell Caroline she can't take it anymore, the way Caroline holds back information and then
surprises her, the fact that Caroline's entire life story feels like a big tease, a clown pulling more and more handkerchiefs from his throat. But more than anything she wants to hear the story, even if she knows there are a million more and she's not really getting anywhere, she still wants to hear it. "So what happened?" she says.

"Well, it wasn't exactly fooling around, we didn't kiss or anything. See Lily would take these long baths, bubble baths, more bubble than water, and I'd get bored so I'd go into the bathroom and sit with her."

"While she took a bath?" Sophie asks. "She didn't mind?"

"We lived together," Caroline says, "I mean, would your mom care if you came the room while she was taking a bath? Anyway, one day we were talking about masturbation and she was telling me about the clitoris because I didn't know about that, I thought it was all about the vagina."

Sophie can't get over the way Caroline uses those words. Except in health class she's never heard anyone say them aloud so casually. She wants to say them too, to say clitoris and vagina out loud, just to prove that she can. "So what happened then?" she asks instead. "A tree started growing out of the toilet? Did aliens land on the roof?"

"Shut up," Caroline says, "this isn't that weird. See, she was telling me about this-- she learned it all from her mother, who was a major slut-- and I guess she didn't think I believed her. She said I might as well look, if I was skeptical. And it felt like a dare, so I pulled down my pants and I tried to look but I just couldn't see anything. It's sort of a strange angle, you know?"

She looks at Sophie now, as if this isn't a rhetorical question. Sophie just shrugs her shoulders though, she does know, she's tried it too, but she's not about to admit
anything. She's not sure she could talk anyway, her stomach feeling like it does, like she's on a roller coaster going up a steep hill.

"So," Caroline continues finally, "she showed me hers. She wiped the bubbles away, sat down on the floor, and then spread her legs so that I could see. But I was six, what did I know? It just looked like skin and that's what I told her, I told her I couldn't see anything. She pointed to it, but I still wasn't sure I saw anything. And then she told me it grows if you touch it, like a penis, and I really didn't believe that. So we felt around a little, you know, did a bit of exploratory research."

"On yourselves or each other?" Sophie asks.

"Each other," she says, like it's obvious. "Lily said it works better that way, if you're trying to make them grow. It didn't really work, I mean, I could feel the bump there, but it didn't really grow. It does feel better though, having someone else touch it."

Sophie laughs at that, she figures that the story is over and if she laughs it'll be like some sort of closure and they can do something else. But she can't get the image out of her head, Caroline and Lily in the bathroom together like that. It's like watching a horror movie for two hours and then everything is scary: traffic and car horns, the street vendors and deserted apartment halls, elevators, closets, and pantries. Any second she thinks maybe Caroline's going to say, Do you want to try it, and it terrifies Sophie to imagine that, though she thinks maybe she wants it to happen, she wants a story like that too.

Caroline asks, So do you think I'm a big lesbo now? and all of a sudden Sophie is hyper-aware of the fact that they're alone together in the dim pantry, that no one is watching them and as far as the rest of the world is concerned Caroline and Sophie might
as well be invisible. She pictures her parents miles above the earth drinking tomato juice and eating peanuts, flying separately all because of Sophie. She wants them back right then, wants them in the next room, but she can't think about that because she knows she has to say something to Caroline.

Finally she says, "I think you should tell that story to Mr. Kennedy. I'm sure it would be a real turn-on."

Sophie knows it's a cruel thing to say but she says it anyway. And it's partially Caroline's fault, telling those disturbing stories like they're thrilling adventures, like they've had no effect on her.

But Sophie's sorry when Caroline gets all quiet and then starts gathering the food they set out. Caroline looks down at Sophie like maybe she's about to start yelling or at least getting angry, and Sophie's half-hoping that she will, but instead Caroline just says, Well, let's make a casserole, if that's what you want to do.

They finish preparing the casserole somehow, even though neither of them knows what they're doing exactly-- what temperature to set the oven or how to make all of the ingredients stick together-- but both of them sit at the dining room table and they eat it anyway. Sophie's still thinking about Lily, her long blond hair dripping onto the bathroom tiles while she's touching Caroline between the legs. She feels dumb for having talked about Lara, the stupid story about the shoe rack. And she hates all over again that Caroline had comforted her, that Caroline pretended to think it was a big deal that Lara left. The whole thing makes Sophie feel sick, or at least not very hungry-- especially when she pictures Caroline and Lily, which, no matter how hard she tries, she
can't help but do again and again. And everything feels strange because they're sitting at Sophie's dining room table, the same table where she eats dinner every night with her parents. But now all because of Caroline Sophie's having dirty thoughts and what if she thinks about these things when her parents are there, what if she can't stop thinking about them?

Caroline's just eating her food. She touches the silverware, Sophie's mother's silverware, with the same fingers she used to touch Lily. They're not talking and Sophie feels like maybe she should say something, something to let Caroline know that she doesn't think any differently of her now, except it would feel like a lie so she doesn't say anything. But she's worried that Caroline is going to think she's immature, and then she'll be sorry she told Sophie that story, which is the last thing Sophie wants.

But then everything feels better because they both catch each other looking at the casserole, these skeptical looks on each of their faces, and then they're laughing. "It's kind of disgusting," Caroline says, "but for some reason it tastes really good right now."

"No, I mean, I like it," Sophie says.

It's quiet for a while after that. Sophie figures they're both just tired, that they'll go to sleep after dinner and when they wake up they'll be normal again-- Caroline won't look so annoyed. And she's used to quiet dinners anyway, awkward conversations about the food that never seem to take hold or lead to anything more than silence. She realizes this must be what it's like to be mature, to hold back and not say every little thing that comes into your head. But she's not used to doing that with Caroline and she wants to tell her everything she's thinking, even if it's just some dumb thought. She doesn't say
anything though. It feels like they've challenged each other not to talk, so Sophie's
determined, even if it feels like she's trying to hold her breath under water.

"So after dinner," Caroline says finally, "I think I'm going to go home."

Sophie can't tell if Caroline is serious or not and either way she doesn't know why
Caroline would say this. She starts to feel sick, this feeling in her stomach that's sort of
like homesickness. Sophie wants to go home too, that's what she realizes, she doesn't feel
like she's at home and she wants to, more than anything. She wants her parents back, she
wants to sit at the table and listen to them talk about health care and not have to say
anything while she eats.

She tells Caroline, "You can't go home. You're under house arrest, you can't just
leave."

Caroline makes a sound that's somewhere between a sigh and a grunt. "It's a
game, Sophie," she says. "I can leave if I want to."

Sophie feels like she's five years old, or worse, like she's thirteen and she's acting
like she's five. "Right," she says. "It's a game. It's a stupid game."

"It's not that it's stupid," Caroline says, and then they both stare at each other.
Sophie doesn't know what to say, if it's her turn to talk or not. She wants to run to her
room, to hide, but she just sits there.

"Look," Caroline says, like she really is talking to a five year old, a ridiculous five
old, "It's just that I don't really feel like you want me here."

Sophie can feel her lips shaking, she can feel the pickles and cheese and potato
chips and tuna sitting in her stomach. She can't figure out why this is happening, why
Caroline hates her all of a sudden. She tries to think of something perfect to say,
something to make Caroline laugh, something that would make everything go back to normal. If she could she'd go back to that moment when Caroline first got there, she'd do everything differently so that they'd be happy at this point.

Caroline is still wearing the house coat and all of a sudden she looks tiny inside of it. Sophie wants to walk over there and touch her back, the way Caroline touched hers earlier, but she's afraid to do it. And what if she did? What if she walked over to Caroline and she put her hand on Caroline's back, what if she ran her hand over the soft velour and what if they hugged and what if while they were hugging Sophie put her hand between Caroline's legs. *I want to feel it too*, she imagines herself saying. *Do you love me as much as you loved Lily?*

Instead Sophie asks, "Do you want to go home?"

"I guess," Caroline says. "Yeah, I do."

Again there's that feeling like Sophie wants to say something but she shouldn't, she should let Caroline go home if that's what she wants to do. Very quietly, as if volume is some sort of compromise, she says, "Why? Why do you want to go home?"

Caroline makes this expression like, Isn't it obvious, and then she stands up and Sophie does too. "I told you," Caroline says, "you're not exactly acting like you want me here."

"I do," Sophie says, but she's too scared to try to convince her, it doesn't feel possible, and anyway Caroline's already putting on her shoes.

"I really think I should go," she says again, but she waits at the door once she gets there, she doesn't let herself out. She stays there for a second and then she looks back at Sophie who's just standing in the middle of the living room like she's lost, she doesn't
know where she is. It feels like Sophie's watching the two of them, somehow outside of herself now. "Well, bye," Sophie says.

She didn't mean for it to sound so rude, she's always recognizing these things once it's too late, and now Caroline's already opening the door. "Bye," she says. "I'll see you." And then she's closing the door behind her.

Sophie starts to feel dizzy, she feels like the sound of traffic outside isn't real, it's inside her head, some sound spinning around in there. She sits down on the couch, she's got tears in her eyes now, but she's not really crying, she won't let herself.

The yearbook is still on the coffee table so she picks it up, she doesn't want to think about what she did wrong, about what she would do differently if she could go back because she doesn't know, she can't figure it out. She holds the yearbook on her lap and she opens to that picture of Lara. But still there's nothing, she's sad about a million things now, but she's not sad about Lara.

And then she pictures herself two years older than she is. She imagines herself looking at a picture of Caroline and remembering the story about Lily and the Snickers and Reesee's combination. The house coat and the way Caroline rubbed her back. But she pictures herself feeling nothing. She'll try to make herself sad but she won't be able to, just like she can't now feel sad about Lara.

When she tries to imagine Caroline telling a story about her, she can't think of an experience they've had together that seems exciting enough to be in any of Caroline's stories.
And in this moment Sophie worries only about the two of them forgetting each other. She worries that she doesn't care enough. She let Caroline leave, she barely tried to stop her.

And when she notices the ragged edged picture of Mr. Kennedy on the floor, she's all of a sudden aware of the fact that she's all alone in a building with two hundred inhabitants, in a city of eight million people. She has the whole apartment to herself and she feels not the least bit of freedom.
Simon Says
Or When Lily Forgot to Fill Her Time

Lily had been married to Simon's father for six years of her life. When they married she was twenty-four; Pascal was forty-three, almost forty-four. The marriage lasted for six years, had been over now for six months. This was a way to time-line her life: Before, During, After, with small markers in-between.

Before Pascal had everything to do with during Pascal. It was preparation: a series of moments that resulted in conflicting insecurities and delusions of grandeur which, placed on the time-line, one following the next, served as adequate aphrodisiac. Pascal was the father she never had, the creatively abusive lover she had always secretly desired and felt she deserved. A man willing to hand her a life: a home with comfortable and already worn furniture, Simon-- a son already sixteen years old, a set of expectations on which to mold herself. Her feelings of insecurity and delusions of grandeur were no longer vague feelings but explicit and discernible reactions to his behavior-- and this was
comforting. Their divorce left her with a whole series of mistakes to consider and blame to be placed. Her entire life afterwards could be viewed as a reaction to Pascal, a built-in structure for her thoughts. The pain of this was comforting too—she felt closer and closer to understanding. If not understanding life exactly, then understanding what it was she was supposed to understand.

When Pascal informed her that he would soon be marrying Linda, his best-friend since childhood, an unreasonably tall woman with tiny pointed features, Lily made an appointment with a psychiatrist to help her decide what this meant to her and how she was to proceed.

She drafted the time-line a week before her appointment, highlighting important events she couldn't forget to mention.

The psychiatrist had a bright red couch in his office, though he did not ask Lily to lie down. Instead she sat on a chair opposite him. Before he said anything he looked at her, right into her eyes, as if initiating a staring contest. His eyes were so dark Lily couldn't make out the pupil. She wondered if he wore black contact lenses, if he had purposely transformed his eyes into black-holes, causing his patients to feel as if their souls were being drawn inexplicably into his mind, sucked inside like smoke to an air filter. Her soul would be returned altered and purified. "So Lily," he said finally, once she had broken eye contact. That was it, So Lily, that was all he said.

Lily took a quiet breath and began speaking, explaining the way each moment of her life had precipitated the next. And after she had persuasively articulated her story the psychiatrist looked at her and smiled. "But it's not just words," he said, "Is it, Lily?"
"Not just words?"

"How do you feel?" he asked. "About any of this. How have you been feeling?"

This time he didn't say her name.

"I don't know," she said. How could she possibly answer his question without putting it into words? She decided that the psychiatrist was trying to perpetuate her confusion so that she would have to come back to him again and again. She pictured his bank account growing as hers proportionately shrunk. If he told her it wasn't about words, then she'd have to sit there silently and he would profit without having to do a thing. After all, she was paying for words, wasn't she?

"Well, Lily," he said. He was smiling again. "I think you have a lot to talk about. Would you like to set up another appointment?"

Lily knew that he was humoring her. His smile was nothing more than customer service, and he wanted to service her because it would be so easy to do so. After all, in one session alone her problems had been clearly presented and almost simultaneously explained away. There would be no diagnoses, no explanations more clear than her own, no offer of a medication to calm her down and clarify her thoughts.

Lily told the doctor that she would think about it and call him later in the week. She handed him a check and when he took her hand in his, said thank you and good-bye, she realized that she had been hoping this doctor would somehow replace Pascal, provide a structure for her thoughts, something to react to. And once she acknowledged this, she knew that the one session was all that she needed.
Simon was also seeing a psychiatrist. In Poughkeepsie, during his tenth semester of college, where he was supposed to be writing his thesis, he went once a month to visit Dr. Tolin who refilled his prescriptions without Simon having to say anything at all.

"It was easy," Simon told Lily over the phone. "I just told her that I puke every morning, my resting pulse is ninety-nine, my palms are sweaty and I can't breathe. I told her I've maxed out all my credit cards because shopping comforts me and I'm not planning to live that much longer anyway. The gay thing helped too," he said, "she didn't want to hear about it. I have symptoms, Lily. I'm diagnosable. I'm not just doing this to fill my time." He must have laughed right into the receiver-- the sound made Lily's ear tingle unpleasantly, like an itch deep under the skin.

"Maybe if you actually did some work you wouldn't feel so nervous," she said. "I mean, how do you fill your time, Simon?"

"I'm not trying to fill my time," he said. His sincerity was aggravating.

"Good, great," Lily said. She couldn't remember why were they began talking about this in the first place. She could hear him breathing through the phone, loud and unapologetic.

"Lily?" he said finally. He said it quietly, slowly, like a pleading question. But Lily couldn't tell what he wanted—he was always trying to grab her attention like this, literally grab it, force thoughts into her head. "Mommy?" he said, "are you there?"

"Do you ever picture it?" she asked. "Your father and Linda, fucking like a couple of school kids?"

Again he laughed, quietly this time, as if he were trying not to. "School kids?"
"Whatever," she said, "Animals, porn stars. Thrusting away like he's trying to kill her."

"Why would he be trying to kill her?"

"You know what I mean," Lily said. "Do you realize what he told me, told me just last week? That he can't touch anyone without thinking about me. He pictures my body."

"I'm sure that's true," Simon said. Lily couldn't tell if he was being sarcastic or not.

"What do you mean?" Lily asked. "What are you trying to say, really?"

"It doesn't matter," Simon said. "He's still touching her, thrusting into her like a porn-star school kid. You do realize that if he wanted to be with you, he would." Simon paused, but Lily wouldn't say anything. "Why do you talk to me this way?" he asked. "Do you really think it's healthy for me to picture my father as a porn star? You're supposed to treat me like your son."

"It's snowing here," Lily said.

The flakes were large and awkward outside her window. She used to love snow, found it both comforting and refreshing, but now the fact of the snow made her angry and anxious. She had moved to the Berkshires when Pascal got a teaching position at Williams, now she was there for no reason at all. And Pascal told her, just recently, that he thinks about her whenever it snows, wonders if it's making her happy. So now, when the snow begins to make her happy, it ultimately makes her sad. But maybe that's better - when you're happy, that can be taken away, with sadness or anger or anxiety things can
only get better. After all, snow melts anyway, turns gray and surly, maybe it's better not to feel that loss.

"Are you listening?" Simon asked.

"Yes," she said. She was listening, he was talking about the lack of snow in Poughkeepsie that winter, the warmer than average weather which kept the birds in town, the fact that he hated the sound of birds chirping. She had been thinking and listening at the same time. But now that she realized this, his voice was just noise. All she could think about was whether or not she was listening, whether or not she could understand and compute what he was saying.

"I have to go," she told Simon.

"Do you still love me?" he asked. His voice was sweet and high-pitched.

"I mean it," she said. "I really have to go."

"Go where? Where are you always going? Talk to me," he said. "Tell me that you love me."

"I love you," she said, but it felt like a lie, as if she were only following his orders.

"I love you," she said again, but again it felt wrong, like it didn't match up with what she felt, not exactly.

"I love you, too," he said. This made her want to cry. It was too much. It didn't make any sense. And how could he ask for love like that? How could anyone be that brave?

"Can I go now?" she asked. Her voice didn't sound like it was trembling.

"Fine," he said, but he didn't say good-bye and he didn't hang up the phone.
“Fine,” she said. “Good-bye, then.” Lily hung up the phone but it didn’t feel satisfying, it didn’t feel like a relief. They had been fighting, that’s what it felt like, even if she couldn’t say what they had been fighting about. It’s just an unsettled feeling, as if she had done something wrong, something she’s too stupid or too confused to pin-point.

She wants to fix everything. She wants answers: why her life is like this and why she cares, why Simon loves her and Pascal doesn’t, not anymore, not as much as he could love anyone. She wants to escape the snow, it’s just falling and falling and she doesn’t know if she likes it, if she’s ever liked it, if she only liked it because Pascal liked the idea of her liking it. She feels, in this moment— if only in this moment, which only makes it worse, this knowledge, it’s only in moments—that it is, absolutely, possible to die of confusion. Your brain can swell, she feels it pushing at her skull, and it will swell so large her blood will no longer have room to circulate. She wished it were possible to photograph: the final, terminating swell of her brain.

It’s midnight, almost exactly, and Lily is standing on Simon’s doorstep. In her car for four hours and now she’s in Poughkeepsie, where there is no snow, and she’s standing in front of Simon’s door. The door is painted blue and the paint is chipping in places. You can see the brush strokes. His hand, at an earlier moment in time, held a brush covered in blue paint and with movements of his arm, up and down, the door changed from brown to blue. It’s something. His arm, a step-son, color, the door—the idea of all these things.

“I’m sorry,” she says, first thing when he opens the door. “Just showing up like this. I didn’t know what to do with myself. I don’t know what to do with myself.”
Simon looks younger than she expected somehow, like he’s gotten younger in the three months since she last saw him. He looks shy or maybe just frightened—of Lily, she’s frightening now, this is what she’s turned into.

“You answer the door without asking who it is?” She feels like she should be maternal. She almost reaches forward and pushes his long hair behind his ears. She wants to clean him up—she’d cut his hair if she could, the long disheveled strands that make him look too delicate, younger than he should, more gay than he has to. “You just open the door to anyone?” she asks, “In the middle of the night?”

“I ordered pizza,” he says. “I thought you were the pizza man.” He shrugs and then hugs her—a loose hug at first and then he pulls her closer. He’s wearing, she realizes, the same baby-blue pajama bottoms he wore during high-school, whenever he was at home. She’s washed those pajama bottoms, held them dirty between her fingertips. For all intents and purposes, she’s been his mother, she’s all that he has in this regard. This is the kind of hug you give your mother but she doesn’t feel like a mother and she doesn’t want to—she wants to keep on feeling lost, it’s indulgent but she doesn’t care.

“Are you going to come in?” he asks, because they’re still standing in the doorway. “If you’re looking for something to do, you could come in. Unless you’re just passing by.”

The inside of his apartment is in complete disarray. There are books scattered like confetti, food wrappers and clothes and packs and packs of cigarettes, cups and bowls converted into ashtrays, each one spilling over. In every corner, on every table, there are sophisticated pieces of electrical equipment, they shine like trophies. He must
work hard to keep them clean in all of the clutter. In one year Simon spent over twenty thousand dollars purely on entertaining devises and he’s still not sorry about it—you can tell just by the way they punctuate the room. He knows that Pascal will pay the bills if nothing else.

This apartment, to Lily, feels like an attack, like he’s trying, once again, to fill her brain until it explodes. But the walls are clean and freshly painted, alternating blue and white and she stares at the walls and doesn’t sit down because there’s no where to sit, every surface is covered. It smells like cigarettes and cologne, it smells just a little bit but too much like Pascal.

“So you don’t know what to do with yourself,” Simon says. “This is starting to become a pattern.”


“It’s great,” he says with complete sincerity, “Isn’t it? I couldn’t smoke before, it just made me anxious. Now I’m medicated and I’m up to a pack and a half a day— it actually comforts me.”

Simon takes two cigarettes from the coffee table, puts them both between his lips and lights them. Lily watches their tips turn orange as he inhales.

It feels like she’s entered an insane asylum and the feeling is comforting, like she’s come to the right place. She can give up, she doesn’t have to do anything. This is what Pascal has done to them, both of them, and they’re in this together.

Simon hands her one of the cigarettes and she sits down on the couch, on top of his clothes. In her mouth the cigarette feels wet with his saliva.
“What do people do with themselves?” she asks. “We’re born, and then we have to do something with ourselves until we die. It’s like some horrible test. Even if we’re doing nothing we’re doing something. It never stops.”

“And you find this troublesome,” Simon says. His smile is just like Pascal’s; Lily can never decide if it’s condescending or comforting or both.

“Not troublesome,” she says. “I just don’t know what to do. I think maybe I should be working, so I’ll have some independent purpose. You should get a job too. We should be producing something worthwhile. I know you think your father owes us in some way, or that we should just take his money because he’s offering, but I don’t know. I think we should be doing something.”

“I have something,” he says, “I have something for us to do.”

In the kitchen, which is really more of an extension to the living room, he takes a big sip of Listerine and then hands the bottle to Lily. She’s not sure what she’s supposed to do—he’s always known how to make strange drugs out of household products and she’s almost willing to try it, she’s about to swallow, but then Simon spits into the sink. She can see his spine pushing at the skin on his neck as he leans forward. “Spit,” he says. “Then smoke.”

When she inhales this time the smoke is sweet, like menthol but better. And her mouth tingles too, a sweet tingle all around her teeth. “See,” Simon says, “That was fun, wasn’t it? And it’ll last for a while, ten minutes at least.”

“I still don’t understand,” she says. Simon walks back to the living room and she follows him, watches his hair bounce against his back.
“No one understands it,” he says, “It’s chemical or something. The point is, it’s beautiful—most people don’t think to mix mouth wash and smoke. You’re lucky you know me.”

“I don’t just know you,” she says, “And that’s not what I don’t understand. You’re father,” she says, “Have you talked to him? Do you know what he’s thinking? Not about me, I mean, not specifically, just in general what he’s thinking.”

“You want to know?” Simon says. “You want to know what he’s thinking?” He puts out his cigarette and stretches his arms above his head. His tee-shirt is stained yellow under his arms. “I was just about to answer your question, but the pizza’s here. I’m going to go get the pizza. Can you hold on? Can you wait just two minutes?”

When he gets up Lily realizes that the television is on but muted. She watches two men kissing in a room filled with boxes, a stock room of some sort, exposed metal piping running like a maze all around them. She watches the one man’s tongue slip in and out of the other’s mouth. They grope and pull at each other’s belts until their pants are around their ankles and they’re grabbing onto each other.

Once, Lily made Pascal watch a gay porn with her, right after Simon came out to them. Pascal sat and watched as if it were the evening news, but Lily saw the bulge under his pants and it’s one of her favorite memories of him—he seemed defenseless, like a little boy dressed up in a suit, pretending to be brave. And she has Simon to thank.

She hears him talking to the pizza delivery guy and she wonders if he’s flirting. “Two more minutes and it would have been free,” she hears him say. “If I hadn’t come to the door for three minutes would that have counted?” Lily can’t hear the answer.

“You would have gotten a really big tip,” Simon says, and then Lily hears the door close.
She hopes that the delivery person was female, or unattractive. She hates the idea of standing in Simon’s way. She doesn’t want to be his mother.

“Oh, that,” he says when he comes back into the living room. “You don’t have to watch that if it makes you uncomfortable.” His face is red but he’s smiling. “I just keep it on in the background,” he says. “In New York they play porn on mute in clubs—good idea, don’t you think? I figure if I can’t go out, I can at least create a club-like atmosphere in my own home.”

Simon is proud of his agoraphobia, which makes Lily doubt that it’s really a problem. “I don’t mind porn,” she says.

“Well I don’t either,” Simon says. “I mean, if it bothered me, would I keep it on all the time?”

One man now has his hands around his ankles and the camera is focusing on his asshole which is pink and hairless and almost cute—it reminds Lily of a baby pig. She wonders what Pascal would say if he could see the two of them watching this; somehow she feels like he’d be impressed, maybe even jealous.

“Okay, enough,” he says. “Stop watching. I just don’t want you watching this.” He turns off the TV, places his hand on the top of the box as if he’s checking the temperature of the television. He takes a loud breath and stares at the screen for just a moment. Then he sits on the floor, legs akimbo, with the pizza box in his lap. He blows on a piece of pizza and then takes a big bite from the crust. Lily has always loved to watch Simon eat, she feels most like his mother in these moments, proud simply to see that he’s nourishing himself. She likes how he chews too, taking what seems like hundreds of tiny little bites inside his mouth before he swallows.
“Do you think he’s in love with Linda?” Lily asks. “Do you think he’s really in love or is she just comforting to him?”

“I can’t possibly answer that question,” Simon says. “Number one, I’m not sure if there’s really a difference between comfort and love, and number two, I don’t think you need to know.”

“Nobody needs to know anything,” she says. “I want to know. I’m not just saying that so don’t think you’re protecting me. I don’t want protection, in fact, it’s the exact opposite that I want. Exposure, that’s what I want. The truth. Does he talk about me? Does he even mention me anymore?”

“Yes,” Simon says. “He talks about you. Of course he talks about you.” He looks back at his pizza as if he’s disappointed, by her, by the fact that his meal has been ruined. “Do you feel better now?” he asks. “Does that make you feel better?”

“I suppose you don’t want to tell me what he says? What he’s thinking?”

“We can’t know what he’s thinking. I don’t know how to convince you of this.” Simon puts the pizza aside and stands up and Lily is all of a sudden frightened—she thinks for a moment that he’s going to do something horrible. He takes a couple of steps and then he’s standing right in front of her. He leans down and puts his hands on her shoulders. “Now listen,” he says. “Are you really listening? You can never know what another person is thinking. Okay? You can’t. So you can stop, you can stop worrying about it because you’ll never know. You never have known and you never will know.”

“You can figure it out,” she says. “You can have some idea. You spend six years with someone and you can know.”
Simon tightens his grip on her shoulders. “What?” he asks. “What do you know? What’s he thinking? What am I thinking? I’m standing right in front of you, Lily, what am I thinking?”

It feels like the room is getting smaller, all of the mess rushing at her eyes, and meanwhile her brain is swelling, it feels bigger than it ever has before. “Freedom of thought,” he says. “It’s a beautiful thing. You’ll never know,” he says. She can feel his breath against her forehead when he laughs.

“Then why do we have relationships?” she asks. “Why do we bother? If it’s one big web of manipulation and we can never tell anyone what we’re thinking, then why?”

“I could tell you what I’m thinking,” Simon says.

“But you could be lying.”

“So? What does it matter? You’ll never know so what difference does it make? Does it really matter if you know what I’m thinking? We can still smoke sweet cigarettes, I can rub your shoulders, we can enjoy each other’s company. So what does it matter if you know what I’m really thinking?”

“We’re not talking about you,” Lily says.

“That’s right,” Simon says. “In fact, if you’ll notice, we rarely ever talk about me anymore. And that’s the effect of your psychoses. You think you’re thinking about everyone else but really you’re thinking about yourself. You only care what everyone’s thinking about you. And you’ll never know, Lily. You’ll never never never know. And you know what, it doesn’t make a bit of difference.”

He loves her, she reminds herself. He loves her and that’s why he’s doing this. But she doesn’t want to know him anymore, she doesn’t want anyone to know her. Every
muscle in her body is tense, as if her body knows that he’s right even if she can’t make sense of it. Even if she sees no way out, her body is still functioning, tightening her muscles. If she could disappear, she would. Pascal always said she was self-effacing and she took this as a sort of compliment—she was humble, shy. But it’s not true—all of this is a way to make herself feel better and now that she realizes, it can’t work anymore.

“So what do I do?” Lily asks.

“I don’t know,” Simon says. “I, for one, am going to eat my pizza. And I’m going to love it.”

“I like watching you eat,” Lily says.

Simon is back on the floor with his pizza, as if they had been talking about nothing of any importance. “I do,” Lily says. “The idea of you putting that pizza in your stomach is nice. It’s a nice thought.”


But as soon as he says that it doesn’t feel okay anymore. She pictures the time-line that is still sitting on her desk. She feels so far away, like she’ll never get back home. This is a moment she’ll add to the time-line. It’s just a moment—it might actually change everything, but it’s just a moment. She could go back to the psychiatrist next week and tell him about the day she realized that she was self-absorbed, that every thought is selfish, that we’re all alone, no matter what we might tell ourselves.

She tries to explain this to Simon. She thinks that maybe she can redeem herself. But when she’s done talking he looks even more disappointed. “What are you trying to do?” he asks her. “You’re right back where you started, you realize. And do you know what’s most frightening, you know exactly what you’re doing. I haven’t told you
anything you didn’t know already. Your goddamn time-lines, I used to think it was just a joke.”

“Now I really don’t know what to do with myself,” she says. “I don’t know what to do with the fact that I don’t know what to do with myself. And it’s all ridiculous. I know it’s all ridiculous and it doesn’t change anything.”

“Again with the change,” Simon says. “Change, progress. There’s no progress, Lily. We progress toward death, that’s it. You might as well enjoy yourself in the mean time.”

“I can’t,” Lily says.

“Okay.” Simon wipes his mouth with a napkin, throws the napkin onto the floor and then crawls over to Lily. He crawls on hand and knee until he’s right in front of her and then wraps his arms around her legs. “Okay. I’m sorry,” he says. “I know it’s hard, I know you’re going through a lot.”

His being nice to her is not sad. But she feels like crying and she feels like apologizing too. She’s supposed to be his mother, not the other way around. She puts her hands on his shoulders, feels the bones under his skin.

“How about if we take a walk?” Simon suggests. “We can walk around campus. It’s really beautiful at night. We can take a walk and then we do something else, okay?”

Lily agrees to go, though she’d rather just sit there, Simon on the floor and his arms around her legs.

He takes her hand as they walk and it’s nice, like they’re young, they’re college students and they’re awake in the middle of the night because they don’t want to sleep, they don’t
want to miss anything. They walk through the quad and each building looks like a church, elegant and pristine and she likes the contrast, the idea of the depravity that’s inside, bodies wrapped around other bodies, hot in the overheated dorm rooms. Books on the floor and empty liquor bottles. And they cling to each other—this is how she pictures it: through the windows, on metal framed beds with thin mattresses, they cling and they’re desperate and they enjoy their desperation.

She wants Simon to stay quiet but he starts talking. “I really am sorry,” he tells her. She just wants to walk with him—she doesn’t want to think about what any of this means, what they are to each other. She’s exhausted and the feeling is comforting, like she’s just been running around for hours and now she gets to rest. She doesn’t want to wonder what he’s thinking. “I can’t even have a relationship,” he says. “I could never be with someone for six years. I can’t even have sex without feeling repulsive.”

“We didn’t have much sex,” Lily says.

“But you did, you had sex with someone, someone you loved.”

“I don’t want to talk about love,” Lily says.

Simon stops under one of the trees. “This campus is an arboretum,” he tells her. “This is a London Plane tree.” He looks up and Lily stares at his neck instead of the tree. He has a coat on over his tee-shirt, but he’s still wearing the pajama bottoms and she wonders if he’s cold. “That branch used to be the longest extended limb in the country,” Simon says, “but now they need a cord to hold it up. You can’t see the cord at night but it’s there. Without the cord that thing would fall right on our heads. Everyone was so upset when they had to secure it, like it was some great tragedy.”

“Why do you feel repulsive?” Lily asks. “When you have sex, I mean.”
“I just do,” Simon says. He lets go of her hand and starts walking again. This is the way she remembers him, before the medication, when he was in high-school and he lived with them, when he would visit afterwards, like he was angry and scared at the same time, angry at himself for being scared. Lily always thought he was angry at her, that his introversion had everything to do with her and Pascal. Any little thing would make him retreat, hide in his room, yell, break things. Everything was always unfair and hopeless. Pascal would say that Simon was just spoiled, feeling sorry for himself all the time. And Lily could never decide which one of them to side with. Now she doesn’t have a choice—Simon’s sided with her and she has to side with him.

“I don’t even care,” he says. “I don’t even want to have sex. If I really wanted to, then I would.”

Lily’s walking behind Simon and from this angle, in the dark, he could easily be a girl, tall and thin like a model. Lily begins to picture him having sex—after all, if she’s going to be of any help, if she’s going to try to understand, then she has to really consider what it is that they’re talking about. She pictures him with his hands on his ankles like the man in the movie. And Pascal is standing behind him, the same pants he wore the day they watched the porno together, the same bulge at the zipper.

“Does it make you feel guilty?” she asks him.

“No,” Simon says. “I don’t think it’s wrong or anything. It just feels disgusting when I do it.”

“But constant muted pornography isn’t disgusting?”

“It’s not disgusting when other people do it.”
"But I thought you don’t care," Lily says. "I thought you’re just supposed to enjoy yourself until you die."

Simon turns around and faces her, he looks like he’s trying not to smile. "I was talking about you," he says. "And I’m tired of walking. This is the most exercise I’ve gotten in weeks."

He sits down on the grass between two trees. He pats the ground at his side, motions for Lily to come sit next to him. But she feels too old all of a sudden—she’s thirty years old, she doesn’t belong on a college campus in the middle of the night. She’s too old to sit on the grass like a child. "I can’t sit down," she tells him. "I don’t want to sit down."

"If you sit down, I’ll tell you what I’m thinking," Simon says. "I’ll tell you what I’m thinking and I won’t lie. I promise."

"You don’t have to tell me what you’re thinking," she says, but she sits down anyway.

Simon stares ahead, he doesn’t look at her. "I used to have a crush on you," he says.

Lily’s sure that he’s lying, that he’s still teasing her. "Please stop," she tells him. "It’s not funny, not at all, Simon."

"No, it’s not funny," he says. "It was actually rather confusing."

Lily feels stuck to the ground, like she’ll never be able to get up. She felt this way when Pascal told her he was leaving, that he loved her but he was leaving. She still thinks Simon’s lying, he’s playing some kind of horrible game with her mind, or it’s just
a stupid joke, but she feels like it’s Pascal sitting next to her, in the dark in the middle of
the night and he’s going to hurt her.

“Are you going to say anything?” Simon’s looking at her now.

“No,” she tells him. “I’m not going to say anything.”

She can hear him breathing. She watches her own breath turn white in the air. “I
have to go,” she tells him. “I have to go home.”

“We’re going to die,” Simon says, and then he leans over a kisses her neck. It’s a
clumsy kiss, his lips are wet and not entirely pressed against her skin. “We’re only filling
time,” he says. Lily’s already explaining this to herself in her head, when he starts
kissing her on the lips and she’s kissing back, she’s planning what she’s going to say to
him when it stops, how she can explain any of it. But she keeps kissing—she lets herself
imagine that he’s Pascal, she lets herself remember that it’s Simon. She reaches down
and touches between his legs. His penis is hard and she feels relieved. She feels as if
she’s produced this, his hard penis, and it’s something at least.
Rough In Comparison

Five Kisses:

1. On the couch in her parents' living room. The couch is mauve and it's suede and Zoe, somehow, has her hand on his knee. Poor little calf, Zoe says, and she pets the couch. Your mommy loved you, she says. She leans her head against the cushions and she kisses the couch, a slow kiss, and when she sits up he says, Can I kiss you? before he loses his nerve. She says, Go for it, Colin, and then they're kissing. He can feel the spaces between her teeth with his tongue and he's thinking her mouth has got to be abnormally soft, his must seem rough in comparison, and he thinks he must be doing everything wrong because she doesn't make any noise. There's no loud breathing, no little moans from deep in her throat. Zoe keeps poking her tongue at his as if she's trying to push it away, as if she's annoyed to find it in her mouth again and again and again-- all of this last for just a minute because he forgets to breathe. Once he remembers, if he were to
start breathing, he'd be panting so he pulls away, which is the right thing to do because he was beginning to hate her. They've been friends for one year at this point, he's a sophomore and she's a junior and after this kiss, they don't talk for one week.

2. In the balcony during assembly. They're not supposed to be in the balcony, it's off limits, but they hide between the benches all morning and they skip their classes. This is November, three months after the couch kiss. She's sixteen and he's fifteen and now the room below is filled and no one knows they're up there. Zoe's feeling devious already so she says, *Oh my god, we should totally make out,* and he gets the sense it's sort of a joke, it's sort of a dare, so he says, *Really? Are you serious?* and then she's kissing him hard on the mouth, she bites at his lips and his tongue and he doesn't know how to respond, it sort of hurts and it feels out of control. Her tongue moves so fast he feels like he's spending the whole time trying to catch it.

3. In the car, the day before she leaves to spend the summer in Europe. It's dark outside and they've spent the whole evening driving, going nowhere, and now they're outside of his house which is small and decrepit and embarrassing. He's thinking, don't look at my house, and he's thinking that she's leaving him to get cultured and when she comes back she won't be the same and they won't be the same, whatever they are. And he feels for the first time his heart and his lungs inside his chest, heavy and swollen like wads of chewed up gum behind his ribs. I'm dying for real this time, he thinks, so he says, *Can I kiss you you can say no.* One sentence. She nods, but he only touches his lips to hers and then pulls away.
4. In front of the biggest house on her street. It’s Thanksgiving, three month into hisjunior year and her senior year. They meet outside of her house at eight in the evening and she’s tipsy on wine, her lips and teeth stained purple. They walk up and down thestreets of her neighborhood, fancy cars line the sidewalks and the leaves on the trees arespooky and yellow in the street lights. In front of houses that are lit on the inside theystop and they stare through unshaded windows. Every house looks more comforting thanmine, she says. And he says, Every house is more comforting than mine. It’s cold outsideand he gives her his jacket— in his head she’s his girlfriend and she loves him but she’sshy. They’re both sad, they’re both lonely, so they belong together and he forces himself to believe this until he works up his courage and says, Let’s stop walking for a second,and then he says, Let’s kiss for a second. It’s been a half a year and she kisses differentlynow, she does tricks with her tongue and she’s pressing hard against him— a movie kiss.But then she pulls back and she looks at him. I’m sorry, she says, It just feels weird. Canwe go home? I think we should just go home.

5. Behind the big rock next to the Elementary school. It’s Zoe’s graduation from high-school, and this is the rock where the kids used to play kissing games but she neverplayed and she’s sad about that. I should have played, she tells him, What was wrong with me? Why was I so shy and ridiculous? I’ve missed out on the best years of my life, do you realize that? She kicks the rock and then they look at each other and then they’re kissing, long kisses this time, her hands on his face and his arms just hanging at his sides,
he can't touch her, he can't take that chance, and her mouth tastes like champagne. He spends the whole time wondering when it's going to stop, and then it does.

One More Kiss?

August, one week before Zoe had to leave for college. Colin sat in the waiting room of her dentist's office and pictured Zoe lying on a chair, her head thrown back and her mouth wide open. Colin was supposed to be at work, a paid internship with a Philadelphia based pharmaceutical company. His high-school counselor had told him that if he did a good job with this internship he'd basically be guaranteed a scholarship to MIT the following year. But Zoe had a dentist appointment and she wanted him to take her.

The waiting room was gray and black, sophisticated and sanitized with spotless glass tables and leather couches instead of the folding metal chairs at his dentist. Instead of magazines there were art books, instead of radio music there was Mozart.

Colin's tee-shirt felt wet and cold under his arms. His hair felt itchy against his head and his neck. He was sure that the man sitting across from him, who was wearing a perfect and wrinkle-free gray suit, who seemed to be part of the decor, could tell that his head was itchy, his arm pits wet.

Colin imagined himself as a respectable, sweatless dentist. Without suspicion, girls like Zoe would walk into his office, lie back and open their mouths. He imagined himself lying on top of Zoe in the chair, her mouth open and his fingers inside, scraping
her teeth with his fingernails. He'd rub against her; they'd grope in the locked sanitized room.

This man in the gray suit, on top of everything else, had hair as silky and straight as rabbit's fur. Baby hair, but thick. Colin's father had hair like that, but his father was fat and he drove a taxi and he smelled like cheap cigars—though his father didn't smoke cigars, he didn't smoke anything but marijuana. Colin had his mother's hair, super-tight curls as rough as rope in chaos around his head.

Colin stared at the man in the gray suit. He wanted to tell him that in a year he'd be going to MIT, that wanting straight silky hair was nothing but racism, but the man in the gray suit was just sitting there looking at an art book. Colin couldn't stand the way this man was focusing on the book, the way other people can focus but he never can.

He wanted to rip out his own hair, every disgusting strand. It felt itchy and it felt suffocating and he wanted to rip it from his head. Then he'd tear out the silky strands from the man's head and replace it with his own hair. He'd rub his rough curly hair in this man's face, stuff it in his mouth. And he could hit this man, punch him and kick him, beat him so badly he'd lose control of his perfectly controlled bodily functions. He could walk over there and attack this man until he didn't smell like cologne but sweat and blood and shit.

Nobody deserves to be that clean, nobody.

The man crossed his legs, his shiny black shoe resting against his calf. Breakable legs, Colin thought, and then he thought about his parents, their legs too fat to cross. He pictured his father, the way he just barely fits into his taxi cab, his passengers in the back seat thinking, I would die if I looked like that. But his father wouldn't care if they
thought it, Colin knew that much, his father had a balance of pride and insecurity that left him calm and settled. Every night Colin’s mom would yell at his father, Get off the couch you lazy pig, she’d say. Every night she said this. She’d curse and yell and Colin’s father would just sit there. Colin could hear her yelling no matter where he was in the house, it felt like she was yelling at him too, even when he was upstairs in his room, even when he was too young to get yelled at like that. But if he felt guilty when his mother yelled, he felt that way because he pitied her. When he loved his mom, that was the reason, when he hated her, that was the reason.

Colin tried to imagine his mother yelling at the man in the gray suit, her fat body shaking as she pushed the words out of her mouth. And everyone would know that she was yelling because she was fat and because she was poor. Maybe that’s why she was so polite and quiet in public, never yelled or said much at all, not even to Colin, no matter what he did. Maybe she knew they would pity her and she didn’t want them to laugh any harder than they already were. Colin would be like that some day too. He knew he’d be fat and angry and old, despite MIT, despite the fact that he had kissed Zoe Prizer five times on the lips.

And that thought-- Zoe-- like the jabbing pain of a headache you had temporarily forgotten, reminded him of the dentist with his fingers inside of Zoe's mouth. Colin could never be a dentist, he saw that now, he would hurt people, he wouldn’t be able to help himself.

Zoe at the reception desk was an optical illusion: his eyes wide open she was a rich girl, only slightly rebellious with her purple hair and raggedy red corduroys cut into
shorts. She knew how to talk to the receptionist about insurance, she was confident in that way only rich people can be. But when he squinted his eyes she was scared and insecure, as out of place and uncomfortable as he was. Her body a bit dirty, alluringly so. He wanted to walk up to her, like a boyfriend, and put his arm around her shoulder, right in front of the receptionist lick her teeth to check if the dentist had done a good job.

He sat on the couch and waited. He waited until she walked over to him, her arms swinging loosely at her sides like a little girl. She sat down next to him as if they were strangers and then she leaned in close and whispered in his ear. "You waiting for someone?" she asked. "You lookin' to pick up?"

In the car Zoe sat with her bare feet on the dash board of his mother's dirty, beat-up and dark brown Dodge. She chain-smoked cigarettes out the window.

The streets in Zoe's neighborhood were lined with manicured bushes, the grass cartoon green, the trees forming a canopy of shade. Behind them, Colin imagined a street cleaner obsessively sweeping cigarette ash and butts, disinfecting the air which his mother's car couldn't help but pollute.

But it was too much to think about, the complicated world wide class system, those who dirty the earth and those who clean it and those who pay to have it cleaned. What he wanted was anarchy, survival of the least fit, the most angry. No weapons or money, just bodies verses bodies. Even language he could do without. He could reach over and touch Zoe, he could kiss her and she wouldn't think about it and he wouldn't think about it, they'd just respond.
The wind blew her hair toward him and it touched his shoulder like a hand. "Do you think you'll have sex in college?" he asked her.

"I hope so," she said. "But only with lab rats."

"I'm serious," he said.

"I don't know, Colin. I probably won't. I don't know. I don't know and it's depressing and I don't want to talk about it."

He pictured Zoe at college, miles away from him, artistic boys spreading her legs and knowing things he didn't know, the exact color of her nipples, the way she'd move her hips, what she'd say afterwards.

"We should have sex together before you leave," he decided to say. "We need to get the first time over with." He tried to say it casually, as if it didn't matter either way, as if sex was just sex.

"It's not something you just do to get over with," she said. "I hate the way you think about these things."

"I don't. I don't think about it that way, I don't even think about it, okay?"

"Just stop," she said.

"It's too fucking hot outside," he said. "This car is disgusting. And I never want to have sex, okay? Never, with anyone. I just want some god damn air-conditioning."

She blew smoke into his face. "You're funny," she said.

"You too," he said. "Beautifully funny. I mean beautiful, in general."

Zoe didn't say anything in response and Colin felt like the compliment hung in the air, echoing again and again. He wanted to suck it back inside himself-- she always seemed annoyed when he complimented her but he couldn't help it. Each time it felt like
one more compliment would make the difference-- she'd realize he was the only one who saw how beautiful she really was.

At a stop light he looked over at Zoe. She had her chin to her chest, purple strands of hair hanging in her face. She was concentrating on her cigarette, starting at it as if she didn't know how it got into her hand, as if this cigarette was mysterious, the most interesting thing in the car.

She touched the orange, lit end to her leg and then quickly pulled it away. "What are you doing?" he asked, his voice too loud, the tone and volume controlled by some paternal instinct he didn't know he had. Again she pushed the cigarette to her leg, holding it there a little bit longer this time. "Stop it," he said. He was begging, a whining little boy who didn't understand. "Stop it, stop it," he said. "Stop, stop, stop."

"It doesn't hurt," she said. "It feels good."

"Then burn my leg," he told her. "If you have to burn something, burn me."

"Light's green," she said.

It was as if she had built a barrier between them-- somehow, without warning, turned into an indignant stranger.

And he told himself not to say anything. He could be distant too. He could let her think about whatever she was thinking about, without needing to know what it was. But it felt like he was addicted to her thoughts, had to know what they were or he'd die.

"What are you thinking?" he asked, but he didn't look at her. He kept his eyes on the road.

"Nothing," she said. "I'm not thinking about anything."

"So you thoughtlessly burnt your leg? Nothing's bothering you."
"Okay," she said, and he could hear her take a breath. "I was thinking about Mr. Ruskin."

Mr. Ruskin was the photography teacher and Zoe had been obsessed with him ever since Colin met her. The man was rock-star skinny with hair that was too long for his age. He had a following of shy and awkward boys and girls at the school, and Colin thought Zoe's crush was embarrassing. Everyone liked Mr. Ruskin, the choice was too obvious. "Why would that make you burn your leg?" he asked.

He looked at her now and she was staring at him, a disgusted expression on her face. "What?" he said. "You miss him, or something? You wish you didn't graduate so you could stay here with him? You wish I was him?"

"Forget it," she said. "I'm not having this conversation."

"I'm sorry," he told her. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to say it like that."

"I know," she said. "You're selfish, you can't help yourself."

"I know," he said. "I know, I'm sorry."

She lit another cigarette and sat with her head facing the window. He wanted to touch her hair, keep his hand against her head as he drove. Or on her leg or between her legs.

They sat on the swinging bench outside of her house. Zoe's house was large and aristocratic, the roof lined with red slates, the exterior walls white and flawless, none of which Zoe seemed to acknowledge. Her parents were never home, at least when Colin was around. They worked all of the time, he realized, that's why Colin got to go to private school-- because people like the Prizers worked hard at respectable jobs and paid
so much for their childrens' education that it was enough to support the poor kids too. It made Colin feel like a stray dog, part of the family in some way. But he liked it better when he and Zoe stayed inside, when he could pretend that whatever room they were in was the only room.

Zoe had her knees pulled to her chest and she was still quiet-- he felt like he had sat down next to her uninvited. The backyard, its gardens and trees and cobbled brick paths, looked like a movie set. The two of them on the bench were characters he didn't understand.

He didn't care if she was quiet, though. He didn't care as long as he could sit there and witness it, whatever she decided to do. He didn't care if they sat there all day without saying a word. He just wanted her body there next to him, something he could touch like he could touch anything else, but he wouldn't.

"Do you want to see what I learned yesterday?" she said. She stood up from the bench and walked onto the grass. "Ready?" she said.

It was the first thing she had said since they got to her house. Being with her was like riding a roller coaster with his eyes closed, no way to predict what was coming next. He thought she might do a strip dance or recite a poem, or just as easily, set her hair on fire.

Instead, she raised her arms in the air and then did a slow, awkward cartwheel. He saw her stomach for just a second, her hair on the grass, her thighs. She landed on her butt and she laughed. Her hair was in her face and her clothes twisted around her body and she was a little girl playing in the grass, his little girl.
He wanted to have sex with her. He wanted to be at his house with her, where everything was small and unintimidating, where she wouldn't be a rich girl, but just a girl. He wanted to have sex with her in his bed and he wanted her to bleed onto his blanket and his sheets. He wouldn't wash the sheets and then he could have at least that, something.

"Colin," she said, "I have something to tell you."

"You're going to the Olympics," he said.

"No. Colin, I'm serious. You're not going to like this."

She was picking at her cuticles, staring down at her fingers. She wasn't even looking at him.

But she did this all the time. She'd say, I have something to tell you, and then she'd say she might be in love with her sister or that she was thinking about moving to Iceland.

"Then, what?" he asked.

Zoe bit on her upper lip. He could see her bottom teeth.

"I've been having an affair with Andrew Ruskin for about a year," she said. "But it's over now."

She didn't smile. She wasn't joking, he knew she wasn't. Andrew Ruskin. Andrew, not Mr. Ruskin anymore. It felt like gravity got stronger all of a sudden, like he couldn't possibly move. So he sat there and tried to imagine it: Zoe, who does cartwheels in the grass, who's kissed him but that's it, who told Colin he's the smartest person she knows, who said she loved him, like a brother, but still. Who has had an affair with her teacher.
"Say something," she said. But she was twenty feet away from him. She was sitting on the grass and he was up on the bench and the space between them felt enormous. The world, actually, felt enormous. It felt as if she had lifted a screen from the surface of the earth, as if this were the first time he was seeing anything.

She had moved onto the grass and done that cartwheel just so she could tell him this. This is why she wanted to spend the day with him.

"Please," she said. "Please, say something."

But he didn't know what to say. He wanted to say that he hated her, because he did, he hated her. But he had no right to be angry, he knew that, and only made him angrier.

"What am I supposed to say?" he asked. He actually wanted an answer, he wanted her to tell him exactly what to say. But she just looked at him and she smiled, like this was the most she had ever pitied someone. "It's your life," he said. "I don't really have anything to say."

He watched as Zoe lifted her hair in her hands and started twisting it into a bun. It spun around again and again and then she tucked it into itself, and he felt the shock all over again. There was her face, all that year he had been looking at it and still he didn't know. And he had always loved to watch her play with her hair, pull it back. All of her features seemed so defined once her hair was out of her face. But now her face looked different, older. He wondered if there was any remnant of Mr. Ruskin on her hair-- sweat or saliva or cum. He was glad the hair was out of her face. He wished she would cut it off entirely.
He watched her stand up and brush leaves and grass from her clothes. He still loved her, the way she moved, staccato-like, as if every movement were separate. But how could he still feel that way when he hated her so much? He didn't even know her.

When she starting walking toward him he felt like he couldn't breathe, and it felt so awful now because she could breathe, she was perfectly fine. But if Colin were Mr. Ruskin, sitting on that bench, then Zoe would be out of breath too.

She sat down on the bench and her corduroys were touching his leg. And then she put her hand on his back. But her comfort did nothing except make him feel stupid. Her hand on his back and she might as well have said, This isn't about you. I'm pretending that I feel bad for you only to make it completely obvious that this is not about you.

Her hand on his back and her hand has been on Mr. Ruskin's back, his naked back. And that's what this was about-- Zoe and Mr. Ruskin.

He was supposed to be at his internship right then. He didn't even call to say he wasn't coming and now they'd probably fire him. He'd lose everything because of Zoe, because of Mr. Ruskin.

"Do you want to ask me anything?" she kept saying. "Are you okay, say something, what do you want to know?"

He wanted to know everything. He wanted to know why his parents were fat and why everyone thought he was so smart when really, obviously, he was an idiot. He wanted to know why she was touching him at that moment, what she ever wanted from him. And most of all, he wanted to know every detail of sex they had, every kiss. He
wanted her to make lists and graphs, to track everything that she ever felt. He wanted her to count the number of time she wished that he were Mr. Ruskin.

"Why did you tell me?" he asked.

"Because his wife found out and she left him and he told me he's lost everything he's ever loved and that we can't ever talk again."

A few pieces of her hair were falling against her face now. Her cheeks looked red against the purple strands. He knew he was supposed to feel bad for her. He was supposed to feel relieved because it was over. But he didn't want it to be over and he didn't want to feel bad for her, he only wanted to feel bad for himself. He wanted her to admit that he meant nothing to her. He wanted her to say that she too had lost everything she ever loved. If she hated him, he'd feel better. If she could just tell him that, tell him to go away because she didn't need him, just like she hadn't needed him in the past. He wanted to know for sure that she was using him, that she was only doing this because he was all that she has left.

An hour later they're in her bedroom and he feels nostalgic, like he's visiting the room of someone who died. Under her desk is a shrine to Tori Amos, CDs and posters and candles, all of which is just slightly a joke. But now it's funny and sad at the same time. Zoe's right there but he's thinking about all of this like it's a memory. Zoe and her shrine to Tori Amos, he imagines telling someone about it like it was something he never managed to appreciate about her.

"If you had to choose between Mr. Ruskin and Tori Amos," he asks, "who would you choose?" He's joking now, the way people joke at funerals.
"Tori," she says. "Definitely." Colin's happy to hear this until he realizes that it just means he's knocked down a notch. Tori Amos, Andrew Ruskin, Colin. Maybe. If he's lucky.

He wants to ask her the real order, he wants her to rank everyone in her life. If you were stuck on a desert island, if there was a flood and you had a raft and room for only one other person, if Mr. Ruskin and I were inside a burning building, if we were both dying and needed your extra kidney, if I were the last man on earth.

"I wish I was a girl," he tells her. "I wish we were girlfriends. Not gay ones, I didn't mean it like that."

"I'm leaving in a week," she says.

They're sitting on her bed and she's touching the burn on her leg. He wants to comfort her, to hug her and tell her it's going to be okay, all of it. And he wants to tell her not to go, to stay with him, even if all they'll do is stay near each other and be miserable. But he can't, because he'd feel too stupid, he'd feel like a push-over. All he can think about is her graduation, the way Mr. Ruskin gave her a hug and held on a bit too long. And he didn't even care, he watched and he didn't care, because he thought he and Zoe were the ones with a secret that day, the kiss behind the rock, which was a joke, which was nothing.

"Are you in love with him?" Colin asks.

"You really want to know?"

"Yes," he says. "I mean, no. I don't care."

"I feel better, though," she says, and she smiles at him like she's in love, like she's just now realizing how wonderful he is. But it's too late, this feels even worse, and she
doesn't seem to notice. "I'm glad you're here," she says, "and that I told you and everything."

"Just stop," he says. "I haven't done anything. I barely said anything."

"I know," she says. She looks down at her leg and she touches the burn again and she looks happy, she looks smug. He wishes he had a lit cigarette, that he could make a burn on his own leg that's worse than hers. Or he'd press the fire to her face, he'd hurt her, just like Mr. Ruskin did. And then he'd be on equal footing.

"Do you want some tea?" she asks, full of energy now. "You look really uncomfortable, I can make you some tea."

It's as if she's given him a horrible disease, but now that he's sick she's completely better.

"I'll have some tea," he tells her. "You can make me tea if you want to." He'll take the tea and pour it onto his legs. She wouldn't let him comfort her all this time, this whole year, and he's not going to let her comfort him now.

She smiles and he hates that she's smiling. Her smile is evil, everything about her is evil.

She leans toward him and wraps her arms around him. And it's the worst feeling he's ever experienced. It feels like her body is covered in pins and they're pricking his skin. But his penis is getting hard, he can feel it pushing at his pants. And he thinks in that moment he would do anything to make it soft again, anything to stop feeling like he wants her. So he starts pushing himself against her, he wraps his legs around her hips and he pushes against her like it's a confession, time for his confession now.
She tells him to stop but she doesn't move away so he keeps doing it. He's pushing harder now, and she's breathing harder—finally he's gotten her to breath hard like this.

But he's not just thinking about Zoe, he's thinking about his disgusting parents and their disgusting car, this big pristine house he's in, the scholarship to MIT which he'll lose now, because of Zoe. And he's still pushing against her and it feels really good, it feels like everything he's ever wanted and everything he's ever hated at the same time. He's got his hands pushing at her back now, pulling her closer, and he thinks he can hear her crying but he doesn't care. He's going to come soon, if he can just come he'll leave and they can hate each other forever. He can go home and just start eating until he's fat like his parents.

He won't let himself stop. He pushes harder and harder and then finally he's moaning, he can't help it, and he's pulling at her hair. His stomach is warm and it's wet and he's ruined everything. Finally, he's ruined everything.