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Middle of everything big [Short stories]

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The Middle
of
Everything Big

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I killed my cat this afternoon, backed over the poor thing with my mother’s Buick. It was a mess, an unqualified disaster, but the worst part about it was the sound. There were two sounds, really: the noise that the cat made and the noise that the car made on top of the cat. I heard a scream, or a yelp, or whatever it is that cats do when they’re run over, and then another, much faster, series of pops. I mean, imagine a Buick backing over an eight-pound cat.

“It might just be the tail,” said my mother, but she’d heard it too. She climbed from the car and circled around to the back, one slow foot right after the next.

I didn’t need to follow, there wasn’t any use. I closed my eyes and pressed my head against the wheel. Under the circumstances, it was the best that I could manage.

“It’s the cat,” said my mother, returning. “The whole cat.” She reached her hand through the open window, and I flinched. She didn’t touch me on the arm though, or stroke the hair from my face. She pushed me back against the seat and jerked the car into reverse. “Back up a little,” she said. “You’re parked on top of the cat.”

It is just about midnight and the lights in the house are out. I am wandering the second floor hallway, brushing my teeth, foaming at the mouth. For a moment, by my parents’ bedroom door, I am quiet, and I can hear the tiny bubbles exploding.

After a minute, there is a noise from inside the bedroom: a scrape and then a bump. I straighten up, a full-body cringe. My father keeps his rubbers in the nightstand, and the push and pull of the drawer can mean only one thing.
I am seventeen years old, and the closest I have come to sex is hearing it through my parents' bedroom door. This isn't a big deal, though, at least it isn't as big as you'd think. My mother isn't really my mother. My real mom—my biological mom—died a long time ago, back when I was small. Only "died" isn't quite the right word. She was killed, and it was all my fault.

My new mother's name is Claudia, and at this point, she isn't even new. I'm used to her by now; she's been with my father for the past eight years. She isn't my real mom, though, and that's important. No matter how much my father loves her, she'll always be a Claudia.

"Not tonight," I hear. That's her, that's Claudia, and from the sound of her voice, there isn't any use in arguing. My father hears it too.

"It's only a cat," he protests.

"It's not the cat, Arthur. I think Max is upset." That's me, I'm Max, and I am definitely not upset. Not yet, at least. Right now I want sex—not even sex, just something—so badly that for a moment, I consider opening the door and announcing my perfect state of mental health. "Hello," I would say. "I'm fine. Carry on." I wonder if they would.

"He's a teenager," says my father. "He's upset about a lot of things. He gets upset when I compliment him or when I tell him he isn't short."

"This is different," says Claudia. "Max killed his cat this afternoon." She is quiet for a moment and then she continues. "I wasn't a very good mother today. I didn't even hug him. I didn't know how to."

Oh, that's what this is about.
"Is that what this is about?" My father’s voice has lost its edge. The nightstand drawer slides open and then closed, again. He has given up on sex.

I jam my toothbrush inside my mouth and then I make my way to the bathroom. I spit and I rinse and I spit and I spit.

Claudia’s a decent woman, she is. She doesn’t yell at me or make me do my laundry or warn me not to drink on the weekends. And if she doesn’t know how to hug me just right, then at least she feels guilty about it. At least she feels something.

I stop at my sister’s door before returning to my room. Her lights are out, but I can tell she’s on the phone. My sister, Katie, is predictable and uninteresting. She is fifteen years old and just getting started on the first of her big eating disorders. Sometimes, when she’s throwing up in the bathroom, I’ll knock real loud and pretend like I have to get in. Katie knows I don’t need to, but what can she do? She gets this gritty, guilty, I-just-puked-in-the-toilet voice and then she asks as nice as she can for me to leave her the hell alone. I love her, so I usually do. I respect my sister’s need to empty out her insides.

I return to my room, alone and let down, scraping at the carpet with the heels of my feet. When I open the door, I am surprised by how cold it is. I’ve left the window cracked, and I can feel the autumn air rushing in. It’s late September in New England, and the temperature at night tends to plummet. I often forget how cold it can become, the same way I lose track of when the leaves begin to change. I’m stupid like that, forgetful. My father likes to tell me that I don’t pay attention, but that’s only a part of it. The problem with me is that I just don’t care.

********
It is a quarter past six on a Tuesday morning, and I am already behind on my day. For three-and-a-half years, I have delivered the Boston Globe to forty-two neighborhood homes. I hate this job, I hate it more than anything. I calculated, last month, that in the time I’ve had my route, I’ve lost 668 hours of sleep. That’s twenty-seven days, almost a full calendar month. At this point, there’s only one reason that I still have the route: it’s easier than quitting. This way, with my eyes half shut and my fingers soiled daily with newsprint, there is no one to let down but myself.

Mrs. Brody is up and waiting, and she waves as I pedal my bike up her driveway. Mrs. Brody is fat, and I assume that she always has been. She has two large moles on the left-hand side of her neck which have folded over on top of each other and touch when she talks.

“It’s chilly,” she says, as I coast to a stop. “It’s getting colder by the day.”

“I think it’s sort of nice,” I say. “It’s refreshing.” Mrs. Brody is the very best tipper on my route, so yes, it’s refreshing.

She leans her bulk against the house, settling in for a conversation. “You’re lucky you’re so young,” she says. “You’re lucky you can ride that bike around the neighborhood.” I nod my head and stare through her. She continues. “I used to ride my bike all over the place. I used to ride my bike to school and also to the park. We used to have competitions. We used to race around the block for soda pop.” Soda pop. Gosh.

Mrs. Brody sighs, and I look at my watch. She smiles at me, and I smile right back.

“You’re a senior in high school?” she asks. She knows I’m a senior. Last year I was a junior, and the year before that, I was a sophomore. That’s the way it works
around here. Besides, her daughter, Samantha, is in my class. We used to be best friends.

“It’s good to be a senior,” says Mrs. Brody. “You’ve got your whole life ahead of you. Everything is fresh.”

“Fresh,” I repeat, but I am losing my patience.

“You’re in Sam’s physics class, aren’t you? You’ve got Mr. Pompanelli.”

“Look,” I say, suddenly. “I ran over my cat last night. I really need to go.” I don’t even wait for Mrs. Brody’s reaction. I wheel my bike around and pedal furiously down the driveway. I slow myself before the gravel turns to pavement, but my legs keep churning.

Lights are flickering on around the neighborhood. I see faces in windows, my customers are waiting. I am ruining routines. My legs won’t quit, though; they’re taking me home.

I find a small gray stain near the top of my driveway, and I push myself to remember if it had been there before. Was that my cat? I stand over the smear for a couple of minutes, trying to remember the good times. There aren’t too many good times with a cat, though, so inevitably, my mind begins to drift.

I am attempting to stuff all five of my fingers into the thumb of my glove when Mr. Cohen pulls up in his bright blue Volvo. He throws up his hands and then rolls down his window. He wants his paper. I walk to my bike and grab him one off the stack. When I hand it to him, he begins to lecture.

“This is becoming a habit,” he says. “A regular thing.”
Mr. Cohen sets the paper on the passenger seat and waits for my response. All that I can do is stare back at him. He rolls up his window, shaking his head, then he backs into the street a little too quickly, hopping the curb.

When he is gone, I search the driveway for other stains, for a few more reminders of my twelve-year-old cat. When I can’t seem to find any, I close the garage and head inside the house for breakfast. I leave the undelivered papers in a pile at the end of the driveway, with a sign taped to the top.

_Sorry_, it reads. _Take one_. I’ve used the sign before, only this time, at the bottom, I write, _My cat died._
Streaks

For three weeks in September, I’ve been driving my sister to school. That all ends this morning. “I think it would be best,” my father tells me at breakfast, “if for just a little while, I took over the driving.”

“Why?” I demand. It’s obvious to everyone, but I’m required to protest.

“Because you killed the family cat, big brother.” My sister feels little remorse; she’s allergic to cats, and she’s also a bit of a bitch.

I turn to Katie for just a short moment, and then allow my head to drop. “It was my cat,” I say.

Claudia sets a plate by my face, and I sigh, loudly enough for everyone to hear.

After three-and-a-half minutes of egg whites and toast, we are on our way. The fight in the car is predictable and half-hearted; my sister wants rock, and my father wants news. They’ve fought so many times about the radio in the past two years that neither one of them cares anymore. They don’t even go through the motions of flipping stations, but just agree to be mad at each other from the moment the doors slam shut. At the very least, it’s a comfortable routine, and it means that they don’t have to talk.

I am jealous of Katie this morning—my father won’t leave me alone. I’m in the passenger seat, searching frantically for anything I can find in my book bag, pretending not to hear him.

“I think we ought to do something this weekend,” he says. “Something outdoors.”

“We’ll see,” I say. Is he talking about yard work?
“Do you think it’s too early for pumpkins?” he says. “Remember how we used to pick pumpkins from the pumpkin patch in Sudbury?”

“Gay.” That’s my beautiful sister in the backseat. She’s right, though, picking pumpkins is awfully gay.

“Picking pumpkins isn’t gay,” says my father, but he isn’t entirely certain. He hates that word, because he isn’t quite sure what it means. He turns to me for reassurance, but I am rifling through my backpack again. Where is that thing?

“Anyway, it was just a suggestion.”

We’re close to the high school now, but my father has something he wants to tell me. “Your mother— she feels bad about yesterday. About the way she handled things.”

“Okay.”

“She wants you to know that she’s sorry about your cat.”

I shrug. I’ve been trying not to think about it.

“There’s more,” says my father, “and it’s important to your mother, so listen. She wants me to give you a hug.” That’s right, a hug. We’re stopped in front of the high school now, and Lord up above, you can take me right now. Just pluck me from the earth, and I won’t even fuss. I won’t make a sound.

“Here?” I say.

Katie is laughing as she slides from the car. She doesn’t even bother with goodbye, though really it’s tough to blame her. Don’t look back, little sister, just keep on walking.

My father puts the car into park and unclips his seatbelt. I am staring out the window, my mouth hanging open.
Two Mississippi, three Mississippi, four Mississippi, five...

At this point, my father has processed his mistake, but it’s a little too late to back down. He’s got to get what he came for.

“Dad,” I say. “Let’s pick some pumpkins this weekend.”

“Oh.” He didn’t see that one coming. “Great.”

I stick out my hand, and he does the same. We give each other the heartiest handshake ever, then how-do-you-do, I’m off to school.

People have streaks, personal records. There are years between confessions and years between sex. There’s a girl in my class, Nancy Bravender, who hasn’t missed a day of school since the second grade. My father hasn’t puked since he was thirty-three, and the way he tells it, even that was an accident.

I haven’t cried since I was twelve. That’s my streak. I didn’t cry when Jacob Lipshitz’s brother fell dead in the mall, and I didn’t cry when I failed my first driver’s test.

So I’m sitting in English class with my eyes welling up, and all I can think about is the streak. Well, that and my cat.

Tara Summers has sensed that something is wrong. She won’t stop swiveling around to look. On her fourth or fifth turn, she whispers, “Are you crying?”

“No,” I tell her. Not yet. I’m greasy, though, and that’s a bad sign. Any time I’m nervous, my forehead secretes a slick, shimmery sheen. I’m not just seventeen, I’m the king of seventeen.


Max, I know it is.”
Tara is too pretty to argue with, and, besides, she’s right. Her best friend, Fiona, turns around and gives me this look, like she’s crushed. She must have been practicing her expression for a couple of minutes because she’s got it just right. I mean, she’s really nailed it. “Don’t cry,” she says and then she pushes her face a little further, the boundaries of human emotion. This girl is good.

What I want to say is, “Listen. I haven’t cried since I was twelve, and I’m certainly not about to start now. Not in the middle of English. Not in front of you.” I am, though, and here I go. I guess that all I needed was an audience.

I press at my eyes with the back of my sleeve, but I can feel it building up, expanding inside of me. After a couple of choked breaths, I rest my head against my arm and breathe into the desk. The world around me grows dim, and for just a little while, I am on my own, the thick, wet air pulled hot into my throat.

After a minute has passed, I lift my head. Tara and Fiona are still staring.

With a boldness that can only be drawn from panic and insecurity, I stand up at my desk and stumble towards the door. I am gone.

This is a big deal, you’re not supposed to do this in high school. When you’re seventeen, just going to the bathroom requires a hall pass. Standing up and leaving—leaving without permission—isn’t done. Period.

Still, here I am in the hallway, taking a left and then a right, heading towards the first floor cafeteria. As I am pounding down the stairs, it occurs to me that I am no longer crying. I realize, then, that I had only shed a couple of tears and that my streak hadn’t actually been broken, but just a little dented. I push at my eyes with the back of my shirt and wipe at my forehead.
What now?

I wait at the bottom of the stairs as a couple of freshmen pass by. They’re both girls, and they’re both tall. I hate that. It’s not that I’m so short, but even children look down on me.

“There he is!” It’s Tara and Fiona at the top of the stairwell. Fiona is pointing. “Max,” she says. “Honey.”

Tara joins in. “Something’s wrong with Max.”

“We couldn’t just leave you.”

“We had to make sure you were happy.”

I am not a part of this equation; they are talking to each other.

“I’m fine,” I say. “No need to panic.” They’re bouncing down the stairs, though, and at this point, the best that I can hope for is a hug. And that’s what I get, one right after the next. Fiona leans away so I can’t feel her chest, but Tara dives in with abandon. She owes me, I suppose. I’ve written her last two English papers.

As Tara lets me go, she sees that I’ve stopped crying. “Max is being stoic,” she says. We learned that word in English last week. She exhales, visibly disappointed in my lack of emotion.

I think as hard as I possibly can about my cat, about all the dead people I’ve known and forgotten, but I can’t seem to conjure any tears. Still, Tara is pleased by my efforts, and she rewards me with another hug, a full-body embrace. With her arms around me, she lingers, her hands rubbing circles against my back. I wonder if she wants to have sex. How many papers would it take? ******
A block is English, and B block is calculus. What happens after B block doesn’t matter, it’s the math that I’m after. Calculus is by far my favorite class, though it has nothing to do with the subject. I have a thing for my teacher. Better still, I think she might want me back.

I remember the first time I saw her; it was just about instantaneous. She was leaning against the desk at the front of the class, flipping through the lesson plan, or the seating chart, or Nazi propaganda. Whatever it was, it didn’t matter to me. I was staring at her legs. Everyone was. She was wearing a sheer blue top and a short summer skirt – too short for a teacher, too short for anyone, really. We didn’t care, though. We loved it. Her hair was blond and bouncy, and all things considered, how many teachers have you had with bouncy hair? So maybe she was skinny. Skinny’s all right, I’m skinny too.

On that very first day, I mistook her for a student. So did Mark and Round House and Scotty Peters in the back row. We thought she had transferred. I don’t remember what the girls in the class thought, because it never occurred to me to ask. I don’t talk to many girls. She wasn’t a student, though, she was Ms. Mandy Pope, three months removed from her senior year of college.

It was a long time ago.

She doesn’t look up this morning, as I take my front row seat. She is correcting homework assignments at her desk, her hair pulled back from her face.

“Good morning,” I say. You are beautiful and sweet, and I think that we ought to start dating.

Ms. Mandy Pope looks up—looks past me, really—and smiles. When she drops her head, her smile disappears.
I know I'm the only one that a crush like this will ever matter to, but a look like that can make or break a day. I take a seat at my desk and stare as best as I can.

The second bell rings, and Ms. Mandy Pope straightens her papers. She stands. She is about to make an announcement when she catches my eye and sees that I've been crying. “Are you all right?” she says. The first three rows turn to look.

Tara stands up from her desk and steps to the front of the class. “Max has been crying,” she says. In front of everyone. Things could be worse, but only if clowns or my parents were involved.

“Please sit down, Tara.”

“But Ms. P, don’t you want to know what happened?”

“I'm certain it's something personal, Tara. Please have a seat.”

Tara stops as she's returning to her desk. “There’s been a death,” she says, her hand reaching out for my shoulder. I am patted twice, and with that, Tara sits.

Ms. P is staring at me, and I can tell she feels bad. She mouths something quickly, just for me, but I can't read her lips. And just like that, I am gone, transported to a world beyond death. That’s all it took. For the rest of the hour I imagine what it was she might have whispered: sweet, sweet words, love-filled nothings.

When the bell rings, Ms. Mandy Pope is standing right beside me, and as the students begin to stir, she touches me on the back, holding me in my seat. “Pages forty-two and forty-three,” she reminds us. “And I’ll say it again, show your work.” She turns and walks back to blackboard, where she watches the class file past.
When the last student has left, Ms. P closes the door. The rush and clatter in the hallway is cut off, and we give each other a look—one of those way-down-deep looks that you don’t see every day.


“Did you mean to?”

“Of course not.”

“Did you bring him to the vet?”

I pause. “We didn’t have to.”

Ms. Mandy Pope leans in, gets closer than she’s ever been. I can smell her unwashed hair. “Have you been crying?” she says.

I shrug.

She pulls away.

“Were you close with your cat?”

“Not really. He didn’t sleep in my room, if that’s what you mean. I didn’t feed him or give him water. My stepmom did that.” Ms. Pope turns away. She is waiting for something more. “It’s just that—”

“Yes?”

“He was my mom’s, that’s all.”

“All right.”

“From a long time ago. The other mother.” The real one. “He was a birthday present.”
Ms. Mandy Pope stands and begins to straighten the desks. "Give me a hand," she says, and I do as I'm told.

"So what happened with the cat?" This is something that hasn't occurred to me. Maybe the crows got to him, but more than likely my father buried him in the back yard. He buries everything back there.

"There was a ceremony." A bold-faced lie. A terrible untruth. "With candles. We buried him with his toys and his litter box." That last part came out wrong, but now it's out there.

"His litter box?"

"Not the box, not the plastic part, just the litter inside. He always enjoyed his litter."

All the while I am moving, adjusting and positioning the five long rows of desks until I've gotten them just right; they are as straight as they will ever be. I could do this for a living.

"Well, I'm sorry about your cat, Max, but you seem like you're doing all right. You seem to be handling it well."

"I am," I say, but I'm not so sure that I mean it.

Sam catches up with me on the walk home from school. Her backpack has broken and she is carrying her books in her hands. When she arrives at my side, she is out of breath.

"Why didn't you wait for me?" she says.
“I didn’t see you.” I’ve been lying an awful lot today, and there isn’t any reason to stop.

Samantha is the daughter of the obese Mrs. Brody, whose paper I never delivered this morning. Samantha is not fat and she does not have moles on her neck that touch when she talks. With a little bit of makeup, I might even call her pretty.

“I heard about your cat,” she says, and we walk for a while without speaking. “I remember when your mother brought him home. You wouldn’t let anyone touch him for a month. You wouldn’t let anyone near him.”

“It was a week,” I say. At five years old, this made incredible sense: people have germs and germs kill cats. Of course, what I have come to discover is that germs don’t kill cats, Buicks do.

“I’m sorry,” says Samantha, which stops me in my tracks. No one has said this today and meant this but Sam. She’s the most serious seventeen year-old that I have ever met, but sometimes she gets it right. Sometimes it’s just what you need.

“Thank you,” I say, and we walk for a while staring out straight ahead. I am listening to my feet on top of leaves on top of earth. Not even earth, just a worn down strip of sidewalk, overgrown with weeds.

We are past the center of town now, and I reach for Sam’s books. She’s been holding them in her arms for the past half mile, and I wish I that had taken them sooner. There was a time when I would have done anything for Sam, anything in the world, but now she’s just another girl that makes me nervous.

“Are you all right?” says Samantha.

“Yes.” Maybe. In some small way, that must have been convincing.
“Would it help if we held hands?” This without warning, without even a shot across the bow. “It might make you feel just a little better.” Samantha reaches out to me, stretching for my hand.

My hand: in two-and-a-half seconds, my hand has not only become frigid and disconnected, but sweaty. Sweaty isn’t even the right word. My hand is now wet, as though it has just been licked.

Sam doesn’t care. She takes my skinny fingers into her own and sets off down the street, dragging me behind. For a while, I’m embarrassed, but soon our arms begin to swing to a steady, empty rhythm and I am suddenly bold. I will hold Samantha’s hand, and I might just even enjoy it.

We are just about home now, about a quarter of a mile away. Sam and I live on Gilbert Street, where we have for the whole of our lives. I’m number three Gilbert, she’s seventeen. It’s a twenty-two second sprint between houses, at least it was when I was nine.

I give Sam’s hand a squeeze because I can—because I’ve known her that long—and she squeezes my hand right back. As we are crossing the street, I steal a glance. Sam looks nice today, with her long blonde hair let down over her shoulders. And even if she isn’t quite smiling, I am certain that she’s content. With Sam, I could always tell.

Mrs. Brody, who has never worked, was once my everyday babysitter. Sam and I were rarely far apart. There wasn’t anything we didn’t do together. We took trips, we threw snowballs, we caught frogs. And then we kissed. We changed everything.
It shouldn’t have ever happened, though I suppose it was inevitable. It wasn’t even bad—it wasn’t even once—but we were fourteen years old, and we didn’t know what to do with ourselves. When the kissing was through, we didn’t know how to act. We forgot. So we began to avoid each other in the hallways and around the neighborhood until it became routine. And then, after a while, we weren’t anything to each other. It was just that easy. This happens to everyone, I know, and it isn’t a big deal. But it happened to me and it happened to Sam.

As we approach the end of Gilbert Street, I am beginning to wonder what it is that Sam wants from me. There has got to be more to this book-carrying, this hand-holding, than my cat. Then, suddenly, it occurs to me. She wants to kiss again. Yes, of course she does. She wants to take me upstairs to her room, slip on some soft music, and make sure that the shades are tightly in place. Maybe she wants to have sex.

We turn left onto Gilbert Street, and I build up my nerve in short, quick breaths. I say, “Do you have any beer at your place?” Sam shrugs, so I ask her again, “Do you have any beer?”

“Well do you want beer?”

“I’ve heard it makes it easier.”

“What are you talking about, Max? Makes what easier?” Samantha pulls free from my hand, leaving it dangling and disconnected.

“I don’t know,” I say, staring down at my feet. “Whatever.”

Samantha is shaking her head now, and my body is beginning to tingle. It occurs to me then, like a distant, dull light at the end of a very long hallway, how badly I have botched this.
Samantha turns away, and I watch her. She won’t take her eyes off the half-empty pile of newspapers still sitting at the end of my driveway. “It’s been too long,” she says. “Don’t let me down again.”

“I’m different,” I say.

“Than what?”

For this, I have no answer. “Just different,” I say, and Samantha walks away.
“It’s a girl,” my father whispers, his hand half covering the receiver. He does this every time, like it’s some sort of shock. But then again, it probably is.

I stand there with my hands on my hips, just glaring at him. He’s got this ridiculous grin on his face, like it’s the best damn taste in the world, and it’s all I can do not to scream. “Just give it,” I say. He nods and hands me the telephone. “Now leave,” I demand, and he does.

He thinks I’m gay. I’m not kidding, my father thinks I’m gay. I’ve known this for a while now; it’s been sitting on a shelf in my head, building dust. This fantastic misunderstanding started somewhat naturally, the way every parent questions the creeping, lingering wants of their children. He thought I was gay because I hadn’t shown an interest in girls. It was as simple as that. At least it used to be. At one point. A very long time ago.

When I was thirteen years old, two months before I first kissed Samantha on the lips, my father left an illustrated book about how babies are made on my bed. The characters in the book were grotesque, drawn with big, bubbly heads and overly hairy privates. They had no facial features. Two days later, as we were driving to the doctor’s for my annual physical, my father said, “Did you have a look at the book that I left you?”

I nod, but my father is watching the road; he is staring it down, as though the pavement might disappear. When he speaks, it is straight ahead. “Is that a yes or a no?”

“It’s a ‘yes’.”

“Did everything make sense?”

“Kind of,” I mumble. “Most of it.”
We drive through the center of town, hard rock on the radio. “No news,” my father says, laughing too loudly. “You pick em, I play em.” I change the station a couple of times, because I can, and then I settle on a song that I know he won’t like.

“I thought it was a pretty good book,” says my father, as though it has only just occurred to him. “It shows what happens when and a man and a woman love each other.”

I shrug—a half a shiver—and quickly change the station.

“So what parts don’t you understand?” This is my father. He’s trying his best, he really is.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“What do you mean by ‘it’?”

“Everything, Dad.”

This is when it started, I think, when he first began to suspect that I was gay. In that one contrived moment of revelation, my father mistook my embarrassment, my evasiveness, for a certain sign of my interest in boys.

He didn’t say another word until we pulled into the parking lot. Before I had a chance to unbuckle, my father reached down and turned the air conditioning up all the way: the suburban interrogation. “Why don’t you talk to Dr. Fortman?” he said. “If you have any questions about your body—about the way it’s changing—then Dr. Fortman is your man.”

What happened next I will always remember, if not for the sentiment, than at least for the searing awkwardness of the moment. My father put his hand on my shoulder and said, so softly that I thought he might cry, “It’s okay to be who you are. I—” Silence.

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“We—” Nothing. A very long pause. “It’s okay to be who you are.” Now, I don’t think my father actually meant this, but there it was, out in the open, and that was the way it would stay. He kept his hand on my shoulder for what seemed like a half an hour, trapped in his own painful thoughts. His eyes were straight ahead out the windshield, staring at the chain link fence. Just staring. I suppose that by that point, he was already assigning blame, marveling at how badly he had ruined my perfect insides.

“Dad,” I say, and he pulled his arm away. I could feel the hand-shaped wetness on my shoulder.

“Ok,” says my father, forcing a smile. “Let’s go.”

Three years have passed since that drive to the doctor’s, and I still haven’t had a long-term relationship. For my father, the deal has been sealed: his only son kisses boys. He seems to have convinced himself that I haven’t been dating on purpose, like it’s some sort of decision I’ve made. As though I’m biding my time, just waiting to come out.

The truth of it is, the deep-down-and-dirty, is that my luck has been pretty bad. I haven’t been on a date since the tenth grade. I went out with three girls that year and was able to dump two of them before they could end things with me. That’s the best you can hope for at that age. One of the girls, Joan Bidwell, let me touch her through her shirt. Thank God for Joan Bidwell. I think of her often.

I’m not entirely certain what my problem is. I haven’t so much as kissed a girl since the summer before last, and even that was on a truth or dare. It’s not as though I’m ugly, I don’t think, and it isn’t because I’m short, though there isn’t any doubt about that. I think that girls don’t want to date me because I’m quiet. Or maybe it’s my nose. Or maybe I just dress a little funny. Really, I have no idea. If I knew, I’d have a girlfriend.
So now it's tonight, and yes, the phone is in my hands, it is, in fact, a girl, and we are all just a little bit surprised. I can hear my father squealing at the bottom of the stairs.

I take a deep breath. And then another. “Hello?”

“It’s me, Max.” Me: Ms. Mandy Pope, whom I can only imagine in a short, short skirt.


“Funny,” says Ms. Pope, but she doesn’t even give me a giggle. “We need to talk.” About love, babies, what clothes we might wear on a picnic. Another popping sound.

“Right now?”

“Right now, Max. You need to stop harassing me at home.”

Pause. Pop. “I don’t.”

“You’ve been calling my apartment.”

“I haven’t.” A lie. She’s in the directory, that isn’t my fault.

“You have. Seven times this afternoon.”

“I like your message.”

“It needs to stop.”

“When?” I say.

“Now. Immediately.”

“For permanent?”
There is a click on the line; it's my sister, Katie. "Max, I need to use the phone. I've got a very important call to make."

"Katie, get off now or you're dead."

Katie screams for my father, who rushes to the bottom of the stairs. "Dad, Max is on the phone, and he has threatened to physically assault me. I cannot persist to exist in this type of environment."

"For God's sake," shouts my father, up the stairs. "It's a girl." My sister hesitates. When she returns to the line, her voice is composed. She is a model of reserve, a bottomless ocean of poise.

"Max, I've got a very important phone call to make regarding my plans for this evening. Will you kindly inform me when you're off the line?"

"He will, Katie." That's Ms. Pope. I scan my room, but there aren't any razor blades. Suicide will have to wait.

It takes a second, but... "Ms. P?"

"Katie, your brother and I were having a conversation."

I sit up on my bed and stare out the window. A two-story drop might do the trick, but I can't be sure. What I really need is a certain, uncompromising death. I lay back down and close my eyes.

"Okay, Ms. Pope. I'll get off." There's a pause, a good three seconds of silence, before my sister says, "Why are you talking to Max?"

Maybe if I jumped head first?

"That's none of your business, Katie. Max, are you still there?"
I gurgle, a half a cough.

"Max, would you ask your sister to get off the line?" I don't have to, though. There is a thump and then a click, and just like that, Katie is gone.

"Are you there, Max?"

I—"

"Don't call my apartment again, Max." Pop.

I've been aware of the strange looks for a week now, and there isn't any doubt that my sister is behind them. Katie is younger than I am by two years, but the high school isn't big enough for separate lives. Not even close. I see my sister every day, and her friends see me, and my friends see her friends (the cute ones, at least). We're not just a community, we're one big spoiled family. The problem with that—the problem with families all over—is that everyone knows your business. Like when your teacher calls your house.

With one small phone conversation, Ms. Mandy Pope has forever altered my high school existence. My sister told everyone. Everyone. The dorks know. The jocks know. The French Club knows. Even the retards in A House know, and they don't know anything.

I spot my sister at lunch, eating with her friends in the cafeteria. "We need to talk," I say. All business.

"Can't this wait until a better time? A time when you won't embarrass me in front of my peers?"
"We're talking NOW," I say. I shout. I am not quite sure what it is that I want to
tell her, but I know that I'm upset. Sometimes that's enough.

"Go away," says Katie.

"Please leave," says Mary Pierce, my sister's best friend and unflappable
advocate.

I don't, though, I can't. I stand there, hovering over my sister's table, as she
finishes her lunch. Two minutes pass and then three. Four minutes... Five. By this
point, Katie isn't trying to ignore me anymore, she has genuinely forgotten that I am
there. When the bell rings, she stands, and with a start, says, "Christ, what is it? What do
you want?"

"Why'd you tell your friends that she called?"

"Because she did."

"That's my business, not yours. Don't you respect my privacy?" That's right, I
just asked my little sister if she respected my privacy. This is the line that should not
have been crossed. I have stood outside the bathroom a few too many times while Katie
was vomiting breakfast to have posed so bold a question.

So she yells it, loud, clear, and at the top of her lungs. "IT'S NOT MY FAULT
YOU'RE IN LOVE WITH YOUR MATH TEACHER!"

Katie doesn't mean this—not in the way it came out—but lord, oh lord, is it out
there. Even the lunch lady has stopped and turned to stare.

In that split second of bone-crunching humiliation, I contemplate the punishments
for knocking my sister's block off. I can see it in her face, though, she didn't mean to
injure, only embarrass. She understands what she’s done—I think a part of her is still glad that she did it—but she didn’t mean to hurt me so badly.

“I’m not in love,” I say, quietly.

Katie wants to help now. After all, my reputation affects her reputation, and my reputation just took an awfully steep dive. “HE DOESN’T LOVE HER,” she says too loudly. “HE’S ONLY HAVING SEX WITH HER.” With that, she walks away, her half-eaten lunch left to rot at the table.

The hallway has been empty for over an hour. Class is through for the day, and I arrive at Ms. Mandy Pope’s door. It is closed. She is sitting at her desk, correcting homework assignments, and I watch from the hallway as her pen slides over the papers. For a moment, at least, my wandering doubts and fears fall away, and I am lost in a Mandy Pope fog.

My forehead is pressed to the thin sliver of glass when Ms. Pope looks up from her stack of papers. She gives a disappointed squint and then she shakes her pretty head. I take one last look down the hallway, then slip through the old wooden door. It swings quietly shut behind me, clicking into place, and then it’s just the two of us.

“Can I help you?” she says. At some point during the day, she has applied a new coating of lipstick. It is red, my new favorite color.

“I wanted to talk,” I say.

“It’s an hour after school, Max. What is it you’d like to talk about?” She is back at her papers now, scribbling cursive notes about perfect right angles.

“I don’t know,” I say. Stuff. “Have you heard anything?”
Another paper off the stack. "Let's not turn this into guessing game."

"People have been talking," I say. "About us. And I don't think it's so ridiculous, what they're saying."

Ms. Mandy Pope sighs, and at last she looks up at me. "What have they been saying," she says. "...about 'us'?"

"You shouldn't have talked to my sister on the phone."

"But that isn't the issue, is it?" she says.

"My sister—"

"Look, Max, you shouldn't be calling my apartment. It's creepy."

"It isn't that often."

"Don't call me anymore."

"Do you mean that?" And then a moment later, "I'm not a creep."

Ms. Mandy Pope stands and walks to the window. She crosses her arms against her chest, and I notice that her nylons have been torn at the heel. The rest of her looks good, though: fit, composed, relaxed. And of course there is the lipstick, that deep, dark passionate red.

"You got your hair cut," I say.

"Last week, Max." Ms. Mandy Pope pulls back her hair and ties it off. She turns back to me and say, "So what have people been saying? About us. Should I be worried?"

"Maybe not worried, but you should definitely be concerned."

"Isn't that the same thing?"

I think for a moment. "No, they're different."
“Well then why should I be concerned?”

“This is dangerous.”

“Max,” she says, “there isn’t one single thing we could do together that’s dangerous.”
A Thursday Drive

I take the long way home, looping around the center of town and passing the Fender’s greenhouse. I throw a rock at one of the oblong foggy windows and it bounces back at me. The sidewalk that runs along Grant Street is under construction, torn up for a quarter mile, so I follow the bike path that empties out onto the far end of Gilbert Street—Samantha’s end. My head is down as I pass the Brodys’ house. It is cold outside, and I am wearing a hat. I pull that down too. I’ve got my gloves on and a thick wool scarf that Claudia knitted me for Hanukah last year. We don’t celebrate her holidays, those December twenty-fifths. I stuff my fists deep down in my pockets.

The landscaping truck is still parked at the end of our driveway, and I stare at the manicured lawn as I pass the men with rakes. One of them tries to tell me something, waving with his hands, but his accent is thick and he is easy to ignore.

Claudia is in the kitchen with Katie, setting the table for dinner. There is a roast in the oven and the room is broiling hot.

“It’s duck,” says Claudia. “And fresh baked bread.”


Katie scowls at me, but she doesn’t say a word. We’ve got a long way to go before we’re even.

I climb the stairs, shaking the house with each step. Before I reach the second floor, my sister calls up to me. “Max,” she says, “Mom wants asparagus. Will you drive to the store and get some?”

“Tell Claudia to ask me herself.”

“Max,” says my sister, but my back is already turned.
I feel unclean. The bathroom door is open, and I root through the rows of emulsions, exfoliates, and rinses that belong to my sister. When the water begins to steam, I lather up my face and scrub the grit away. I rinse. I brush my teeth.

A creep.

I am standing in front of the mirror, brushing my teeth for a second time. If I can help it, I won’t stare at my reflection any longer than I absolutely have to. It makes me think too hard. Sometimes, even brushing is a struggle—I need to walk around. I need my space.

I pace back and forth down the length of the upstairs hallway. The rug is beneath my feet, there is a door on my left, there is a door on my right. A door at the end of the hall. I will not think. I refuse to.

I rinse, I spit. A creep.

I retreat to the shelter of my room and shut the door behind me. I lock it. Clothes are everywhere, and books and junk and grime. There are dishes on my nightstand that haven’t been washed in weeks. I toss my backpack on the bed and sit down at my desk, overlooking the driveway. A man with a leaf-blower is frisking the rhododendron.

Inside my desk is a manila folder marked *World Civilizations: Grade 9*. Between the covers of this freshman year artifact rest my only three pieces of pornography: a *Playboy* from November of 1991, the last three pages of a *National Geographic*, date unknown, and best of all, a *Hustler* magazine from June of 2004. I stole it myself.

For a moment, the house quivers, as the garage door is raised.

I set the *Hustler* on my desk, and stare at its well-worn cover. June must have been a special month at the Hustler Corporation, because not one, but two extremely sexy
girls appear on the magazine’s cover. Both blondes. And as the caption quite accurately predicts, they are naked, inside, and extremely nasty.

In a matter of seconds the world has slipped away from me. There is no more five-foot-five and no more rejection. I am nobody’s creep, nobody’s Max-with-a-sigh. This place—in my head and in my hand—is the only peace and quiet that I have ever really known. Which is all the more reason I should never have looked up from my seat.

I do, though, pulled back to my reality by some faraway instinct. From my second story window, with a hand down my pants, I witness the impossible: the landscaper, tattoos down his arms, swinging his portable leaf-blower in a looping, never-to-be-completed arc. The newly-installed sprinkler system, springing to life. Water, water, everywhere. Claudia, not bothering to check behind her, jamming the Buick into reverse.

I stand halfway up at my desk as the car begins to roll, and then accelerates. “Imp,” I get out, because really, it’s as good as anything else. Then I watch in disbelief as Claudia backs the Buick over a Mexican.

There is a shout and then a crunch, as though a stout cord of wood has been split into two. In an instant, the man is under the tire, and just like that, the big, beige Buick is past him. Over him.

I stand there staring with my pants around my ankles. It isn’t ha-ha funny, like you’d see on TV, but it isn’t entirely tragic. The man begins to scream, “Ayyyyyeeeee, ayyyyeeeee,” because that’s what Mexicans say. Claudia spills out of the Buick, a hand over her mouth. The door is left open wide. The rest of the crew comes running, rakes in
hand, surprise, surprise, ready to attack. And the sprinklers just kept on spinning, and everyone gets wet.

I pass my sister in the kitchen as I run through the house, stumbling over my feet. “She hit him!” I yell, as I race out the door. “She hit him with the car!”

Claudia, who had once been a nurse, stays with the man outside, while Katie calls an ambulance. No one is going to die. Things are broken, that is all: a leaf blower, a bone below the knee.

After the panic has passed, Claudia asks the two uninjured landscapers to come inside the house. Only one of them accepts. I sit with him at the edge of the kitchen table, because I don’t want to leave him alone. He sips on a Coca-Cola with extra ice, and nods more than once at the open garage door.

“Es tu brother?” I ask. I point at my chest and then at his. When he doesn’t respond, I speak a little louder. “Es tu brother?”

“My name is Miguel.”


The man only grins at me, looking down at his drink, his uneven teeth reflecting the overhead light.

Everyone went to the hospital. Only one of the Mexicans was allowed in the ambulance, so the other two rode in the Buick. Miguel sat in the front next to Claudia, looking ill. I wondered if the government would send him back down south. The other man was sandwiched between me and my sister, and he smelled like fresh-cut grass. Katie and I kept our legs and arms tucked. We didn’t say a word.
Claudia, driving too fast and forgetting to signal, kept mumbling to herself in Hebrew. For the past two years, she’s been telling my father that she wants to convert, and I think that she actually means it; she’s a better Jew than I am. She takes classes at night, nine months out of the year, and she hasn’t missed a Saturday morning service since February. Only now, in her time of need, her Judaism seems to have escaped her. She kept repeating the Friday night blessing for wine, and she wasn’t even getting it right.

It was a good three quarters of an hour before my father finds the note on the refrigerator and meets us at the hospital. There is plenty of time to reflect before he gets there. There is too much time. We skulk around the waiting room, staring at the floor. Nobody speaks, not even a peep.

The landscaper’s family arrives at the hospital in panicked bursts. There are brothers and aunts and cousins and grandparents, and they glare at Claudia, whispering and shaking their heads. They don’t wail or moan like you would have figured, and the children do not have accents. I recognized a girl from my gym class.

When Claudia starts to cry, I put my arm around her shoulder. “It’s not so bad,” I say, but that only makes her cry harder.

I hate that when I hug people, my arm isn’t long enough to reach the whole way around; I have to grasp at the other shoulder with the tips of my fingers. It’s embarrassing. Still, I need to do something. I know how Claudia feels, I really do. It has only been three weeks since that other unfortunate incident with the Buick, the “Fate Maker,” my father would one day call it.
With Claudia on my shoulder, I lean in close and whisper. “It’s OK,” I say. “I know how you feel, Mom.” I gave her a “mom.” She’s earned it.

Claudia stops crying for a moment and pulls back her head.

“I know how you feel,” I say again. Now I’m nodding, almost grinning, and patting her on the back. “I’ve been there,” I say. “I’ve been there with—the car.”

Claudia stiffens. “No,” she says. “You don’t have any idea.”

“I do, I do. The Buick,” I remind her.

“How can you say that? You ran over a cat, Max. I ran over a human being.”

I let my arm fall from her shoulder, and it slaps against the back of the plastic hospital chair. “Right, but it’s not like he died. My cat is dead.”

“I hardly—”

“Stop it,” says Katie, and we turn with a start. My spindly younger sister is standing right above us with her hands on her narrow waist. “They’re watching,” she says, through tightly clenched teeth. Lord, are they ever. The man’s whole family is staring at us, their mouths hanging open.

Claudia and I settle back in our seats. We compose our expressions and wait patiently for the doctor, smoldering in our private thoughts.

My memories of hospitals are syrupy thick, and the sterilized waiting room air brings me back. With my eyes half shut, I remember my mother, the one who died when I was seven. I had been brought to the hospital many times that summer to see her, but that last time I knew it was different. There wasn’t any rush on that hot August morning, our movements were paced and deliberate. My father had dressed me up in my only
serious clothes and told me to bring my stuffed animals. “More than one,” I remember him saying.

I remember the car ride, windows down, and I remember the chocolate ice cream cone that someone allowed me for lunch. There were jimmies on top. I remember the minister, waiting outside of my mother’s room, and I remember my father swearing. “We’re Jewish,” he told the man. “We’re God damned Jews.” It is the very last time that I have heard him raise his voice.

I remember my mother, surrounded by equipment, and the nurses who wouldn’t stop touching me. I remember the grime in the corner of the private room and that my dark red shoelaces never once came undone. I remember feeling responsible, even then. I knew it was all my fault.

What I can’t quite recall is the dying or the pain that went along with it. I don’t remember holding my little sister in the hallway or patting her hand when my father came to get us, to lead us away from my mother for the very last time. My Aunt Rose says I cried, but I don’t remember that either.

When my father comes dragging through the waiting room doors, he is carrying flowers, an overflowing bouquet that’s just a little too festive. His face is pale, his eyes bleary, and even after he sees us, he looks from side to side. Hospitals confuse him, I think; he seems lost within their busy, fluorescent hallways.

Claudia rushes to greet him, and then alone he turns face the landscaper’s family. His Spanish comes stuttering back to him in fractured bits and pieces, before they switch to
English. They talk for ten minutes. A deal of some sort has been brokered: everyone is
nodding. Thank you’s are exchanged and then handshakes.

I watch my father return, and I can see that the confusion is creeping back into him.
He is awkward on his feet, taking slurred half-steps, holding his elbows with his hands.

Claudia stands. “That looked like it went all right.”

“It went as well as it could have.”

“Did you apologize?”

“More than once, yes.”

I can’t stand it any more, I jump to my feet. “It wasn’t me this time,” I say. “Claudia
hit the Mexican, not me.”

“He’s Colombian,” says my father. His voice is barely audible. “They all are.”

Claudia begins to cry, and my father stands there watching. She moves towards
him, almost falling, and holds on to the front of his shirt. At last, my father hugs her, his
arms wrapping easily around her.

I am ready to leave—my father has already offered—but Claudia insists that we
stay. “The kids were there when it happened,” she says. “They ought to show a little
support, a little respect.”

Katie is fine with this. For the first time in weeks, she has been able to skip a
meal without notice. Well, I’ve noticed, but I don’t really count.

I’ve got a math test tomorrow, and I’m about to protest, when a whale of a woman
appears in the emergency room doorway. The moles on her neck stare out me, and I
swear that one of them blinks. It’s our neighbor, Mrs. Brody, in a dark, gray sweatsuit.
By her side is a super incredibly good looking girl, maybe sixteen years old. She is not to be believed. You name it, this girl has got it: hips, tits, curves, and a shirt that doesn’t quite cover her belly. Even my father is staring. This is the girl that will change my life.

Mrs. Brody spots our family and lumbers over. My father stands to hug her, and is nearly knocked back down. He catches himself, blushing, and apologizes over and over again. Mrs. Brody doesn’t notice.

“Samantha has broken her foot,” she says. “It’s not such a terrible break, but it’s going to require a cast. I’ll bet you’re the first to sign it, Max.” A pause. My sister and I are nodding, but we can’t look away from the beautiful stranger. “Max?”

Right, that’s me. “Yes, yes, yes.”

My father puts his hand on my shoulder and gives the slightest of shoves. I come to my feet and wave at the empty chair. Mrs. Brody sits, relieved, and asks my father what’s going on. An explanation is produced. Heads are shaken. All the while, I am staring at the girl. She is not staring back.

At last, Mrs. Brody comes around. She says, “Max, have you met Samantha’s cousin?”

I am calm. I am composed. “I haven’t,” I say. “I’m Max.” I extend my hand and then immediately retract it; the wetness has returned. I wipe my palm against my pants, and then offer up my hand for a second go-round.

The girl just shakes her head, and then she laughs, so I laugh too. Isn’t this funny?

Samantha has been taken for additional X-rays, and my family decides to wait. Everyone, even Claudia, wants to talk with the beautiful girl. Her name is Jane.
In the excitement over Jane’s hair and her perfect cheekbones, the Colombian contingent has all but been forgotten. The man’s injury isn’t as serious as it had first appeared, and all non-essential family have dispersed. There are more of Us now, than there are Them. Balance has been restored.

During this time, Mrs. Brody has somehow switched seats, placing her massive self in the way of the beautiful girl. Jane. My view has been eclipsed. I have tried to talk around her a few times, but nothing, not even words, get around Mrs. Brody. I can hear my father on the other side, asking Jane about college. She lives in Belmont, Dad, she hasn’t ever traveled to Morocco, and no, she doesn’t want your recommendation to MIT.

My sister has disappeared, and with little hope of talking to Jane, I set off in search of Katie. I check the bathroom first, waiting by the door, listening, but my sister does not emerge. I wander down the sharp, white hallway and stop in front of the elevator. I stare at the words that I have heard of, but never understood—Oncology, Urology, Orthopedics—and decide on Pediatrics.

The ward is well-kept, with painted blue walls and lots of little-people furniture. I find my sister in front of a big glass panel, staring at the newborn babies. She turns to me and smiles, as though I have been expected.

“I want to have babies some day,” she says.

I am staring at her skinny frame—her not-quite-developed body—and I just can’t picture it. Her hips, her tiny wrists, she’s just a girl.

I look her in the eye, though, and there’s a softness that I have all but forgotten exists. It’s been an awfully long time since we’ve cared about each other.
I say, "I think you’ll make a pretty great mom someday.” I mean this and Katie knows it. She takes me by the arm and turns again to the babies behind the glass.

“That last one doesn’t have a name, yet,” she says. “I think it looks like an Albert.” Flat nose, big ears, it’s a definite Albert. I laugh, and my sister laughs too.

Katie touches the glass with her hand. “I worry about Dad sometimes.”

“Why’s that?”

“You know why,” says Katie. “Hospitals. He’s had a rough time.”

“We’ve all had a rough time. That’s an excuse.”

“It might be, but that doesn’t make it any less true. I feel bad for him.”

“I feel bad for myself.”

“I know you do, Max.”

There is a buzzing on the intercom, followed by a smart parade of doctors and nurses. They are rushing. There’s been a life, or perhaps a death.

I say, “Were you worried about Dad tonight?”

“I was,” says Katie. “I always do.”

“You shouldn’t have been tonight. I wasn’t. He’s great with other people’s problems.”

Katie looks up at me. “How’s Sam?” she says.

“She’s all right. Still broken.”

“Do they know how she did it?”

“Jane says she fell. She was climbing a tree for her photography class, and the branch broke.”
We stare out at the babies in their clear plastic cribs, watching them shift and fidget. One of them starts to cry, and then another.

“Jane is pretty,” says Katie. “She’s out of my league.”

“You’re pretty, too,” I say. “And you’re starting to grow boobs. That’s going to help.” Katie is embarrassed and so am I. We stand next to each other in silence, watching as a nurse attends to the newborn babies. There are five of them all together, not yet broken, perfectly fresh.

“We ought to get moving,” says my sister. “People will start to worry.”

“That’s doubtful,” I say, and we turn for the elevator, our arms still together.
On Feeling So Much Younger

Tara finds me after lunch, enveloping me in the folds of her popular wandering entourage: Fiona and Nicole, Tracy and Katherine Scott. It is a murderer’s row of dirty looks and bright pink snapping bubble gum. We are advancing down the hallway in formation, and people are taking notice. For a moment, at least, I am royalty, the inimitable Prince of G-House.

The subject of our conversation is World War II, and the role that I will play in developing Tara’s thesis. It is assumed that my part will not end there, that I will write a first draft of academic worth, and perhaps even a second; the unspeakable atrocities of a desperate high school senior.

This much must be said: I am being used. There isn’t any doubt about it. Tara knows this, I know this, we are both the very same page. Neither one of us seems to mind a great deal. I put in sturdy B work for this girl, and in return there are moments like this, strolling down the hallway on display for all to see. And possibly more.

A week and a half ago, having sex with Tara Summers was an absolute impossibility of nature, but then something special occurred and I happened to be there to see it: Graham Taylor put his hand on Laura Rudnick’s tit. Over the shirt. After school. In the break room at the Student Activities Center.

Tara saw it too. She took me by the hand and we ran off down the hallway. We hid. She confessed. She loved him, he didn’t love her, the earth has seven moons, and I really wasn’t listening. Tara rambled on. She wouldn’t stop. She said that no one understood her and I said that I understood her and we huddled together in the janitor’s second floor closet and she cried and we hugged and I made “shhh, shhhhing” noises.
while running my hand across her back. She told me that I was different from all the rest of the boys, and I told her that I was different, that in fact, I was a man, and she agreed with me and we hugged and hugged and hugged.

Now we are trusted allies, which is a great deal more than just classmates who cheat. And I’ll continue to write Tara’s papers, because at some point down the road, when polar icecaps melt and life is discovered on Mars, we might just end up in that closet again. And we might just do it.

There is a car in the Brodys’ driveway: an old, white Cadillac that I can’t quite seem to place. I ring the buzzer twice, and then knock on the wooden front door. There is a get-well card that is hidden behind my back. I made it myself, of glitter and tape and colored scraps of paper, love, Max. Sam and I haven’t spoken since her fall, the other week, though really, I suppose it’s been longer than that. We haven’t spoken since my cat died, and that was more than a month ago.

Mrs. Brody appears in the doorway, allowing me inside with a wave of her heavy arm. There is the smell of something baking, a chocolate cake perhaps, or an oven full of cookies.

“Come have a seat,” she says, pulling me into the living room. “Don’t mind the company.”

The company: an older, dark haired woman who is sipping from her teacup, smiling politely to herself. She is sitting upright on the edge of the leather sofa, as though afraid to leave an impression.

"Mrs. Dunn," croaks Mrs. Dunn. Her eyes are faraway. She might as well be ordering curtains.

Mr. Brody returns, carrying brownies on a gleaming silver tray. "Just in case," she says.

I am summarily introduced as the neighbor, the paperboy, and finally as Max, "the boy that used to want to marry Samantha."

The sister nods and nods, but her attention is somewhere else. Really, it's tough to blame her. She is crossing and uncrossing her legs, making these groaning, prickly sounds. All I want to do is sign Samantha's cast and then escape, but Mrs. Brody insists on polite conversation.

We talk for three and a half minutes, and then this: "You met Gina's daughter the other week at the hospital. Remember Jane?"

Jane. This changes everything. "She was delightful!" I say. Yes, delightful. And sometimes in the late afternoon I snack on crumpets with slices of tomato.

"Delightful," repeats Mrs. Dunn. "Everyone seems to think so."

Mrs. Brody shakes her head. "Jane is a handful."

Jane is more than a handful, she is a dirty, dirty girl. In nine short days, she has unequivocally replaced the Hustler magazine in my desk as my ritual bedtime fodder.

"Is Jane here?" I say. My heart begins to race, like a trapped baby rabbit's.

"She's upstairs in the bedroom with Samantha." Making out. It's possible. I'd pay to see it happen.
“I’d like to see them, I think.”

“Well, don’t let us stop you.”

“I won’t then.” I give a bow and an elaborate wave, something dramatic that might possibly hint at my extraordinary social standing.

The door to Samantha’s room is open and I breeze on through without warning. I am strong. I am Max. “Knock, knock,” I announce, but what I mean is, “Ta-dah!”

Jane is by the window in an oversized chair, thumbing through a glossy magazine. Samantha is on the bed with a physics book and a highlighter, her broken leg propped up on a stack of pillows.

I hold out my card for everyone to see, waving it in the air. “For you,” I say, handing it over.

Samantha sets it on her nightstand without interest, and I am suddenly embarrassed. I move to the center of the room, my hands moving up to my mouth. Nobody says a word as I fumble with my expression—first too smiley, then too serious. I turn to Jane and then Samantha. “I heard you were at school today.”

“I was.”

“Me too.” My body is beginning to perspire.

Samantha returns her attention to the physics book and I am frozen in the center of the room like a storefront mannequin.

“So what happened?” I say.

“Nothing.”

“How did you fall, I mean?”

“I know what you mean,” says Samantha.
“Max,” says Jane, and Sam and I turn to look.

“Yes.”

“I remember your name.” That’s it, that’s all, but it’s something, that’s for sure.

Samantha makes a fuss of getting off the bed. “You’ve known his name for years,” she says. “There is only one Max.”

Jane smiles. “You two have quite a history,” she say, as Samantha hobbles off towards the bathroom on her crutches, clump, clump...clump, clump.

So here it is, I have been left alone with the girl of my dreams and all that I am capable of is a frantic, exaggerated nodding of the head. My chin rocks up and down and up and down and up and down, and I can’t seem to stop it.

Jane laughs. She laughs like a horse, hard and sharp. An icebreaker.

“So what happened?” I say.

“Samantha fell out of the tree, like an apple. Bump.”

“Did you see it?” I ask. Jane is quiet. “Where were you?”

“Right next to Sam.”

There is movement in the hallway, and in a moment—clump, clump...clump, clump—Samantha returns. She is carrying another book, pressed against her crutch.

“Jane pushed me,” she says. The words come out so casually that I am certain Samantha is joking.

“I didn’t push you,” says Jane.

“Just about.”
Mrs. Brody calls up from the bottom of the stairs. Even with a broken leg, it is easier for Samantha to come down the stairs than it is for Mrs. Brody to come up. I am left alone with Jane. Again.

“I didn’t push Samantha,” she says, “I just stepped out onto the branch.”

“Did you mean to?”

Jane shrugs: two pretty shoulders and a dimly raised lip.

“Why’d you do it?”

“Because I wanted to see what would happen.”

“Do you hate her?”

“Samantha’s all right. She’s better than my other cousins.”

“Did you know that she was going to fall?”


“But she fell.”

“Bump, like an apple.”

And it doesn’t even matter.

I am halfway down Gilbert Street, whistling into the stiff October wind. The sun is beginning to set, and the horizon is shimmering pink for as far as I can see. Jane’s words are careening around in the back of my cluttered mind. She wanted to see what would happen. Of course she did. Who wouldn’t? Everyone wouldn’t. Well, everyone but Jane.

Visible from the driveway of my house is the tail end of a pickup truck; the landscaping crew is back on the job, and all is right with the world. I give the men my
best thumbs up, holding my hand above my head until I’m safely inside the house, locked inside of my room.

And still, there it is, knocking around in my head like a pair of soggy sneakers in the dryer: she wanted to see what would happen. To a boy who is afraid of most everything, this is a genuinely startling sentiment.

There is a small but meaningful bundle lying on my pillow: two college admissions essays with more than seventeen Post-it notes attached at various, deliberate points. The handwriting is neat and efficient, my father’s. I take the essays—a third and a fourth draft—and set them on my desk. I close my eyes.

There have been very few moments in my life when my father has become My Father. Since my mother’s death ten years ago he has grown steadily, perhaps even comfortably, into the role of a rudderless authoritarian. He is hopeless.

At seven years old, even before I posed a threat to household disobedience, my parents, it seemed, had divided the responsibilities of raising a son between them: my mother would handle the discipline and my father would play the part of a confederate and confidant. When my mother died, her job died with her.

My father has a difficult time just getting upset with me. And when he does—when his eyes push out from his lids and his cheeks fill up with hot breath—he pulls it back inside and begins to apologize. He always blames himself, like I never have anything to do with it. I wish, sometimes that he would yell just a little or pull me aside and spank me as hard as he could. Even now.

Still, through guilt and unintended consequence, my father has maintained a thin line of order. It’s fragile, but it exists. I do not act out, I do not disobey, and incredibly,
impossibly, I have managed to skirt these seventeen years without expulsion, dismemberment, or even arrest. This is—*I am*—a testament to the greater powers of misplaced intentions and a whole lot of luck.

Which is why, of course, this short stack of essays, lying face down on my desk, is so important. This is perhaps the only significant request that my father has ever asked of me. I have been charged with gaining admission to eight of the more prestigious private colleges on the Eastern seaboard. Every test, every homework assignment during my high school career has led up to this moment.

The list of colleges is specific, undoubtedly put together by some outrageous statistical formula. My father is a numbers whiz, an engineer to the seventeenth power. It's a wonder that it wasn't passed on.

I couldn't really guess where I'll end up, and to perfectly honest, I can't say that I care. That's a decision that I'll leave for my father.

I open my eyes and lean back in my chair, intent on reviewing my father’s corrections. Something is different, though, and I raise my head with a start. The changes occur to me in sputtering bits and pieces. The clothes have been folded, the heaps cut down. My sheets have been tucked and the carpet, once barely visible, has been vacuumed. There is no more food on the nightstand. Everything is neat, if not completely rearranged.

My desk has been compromised. I reach for the drawer, jarring it open. The folders have been straightened and alphabetized. *World Civilizations: Grade 9* has been handled; it has been moved to the back of the stack.
My heart is racing, *clickity-clack*, and I wheel around, as though the culprit will be standing there, grinning. I am flooded with those jumping, stabbing conclusions that can only be roused by panic. They will have me arrested, a minor in possession of pornography. The smut will be used against me in a court of law, holding me back from spring breaks in Florida and a potential career as an astronaut.

In the midst of this settling gloom, there is a knock on my bedroom door. My father. If I had had more time to ponder it, I would have marveled at this man's innate ability to make a bad situation one hundred—no, one *thousand*—times more dreadful. This must be something you're born with.

"What is it?" I say.

"Please unlock the door."

I stare at the clock on my wall. In seven seconds, the very worst moment of my life will officially commence. I am equally horrified and astounded that I'll be able to pinpoint the exact time and place. This is a rare and special occasion; a moment to be remembered on wedding days and at family reunions.

I am sliding the desk drawer shut, as my father begins to push against the door. I stand and unlock it.

"How are you?" says my father, peeking inside my room.

"Just come in," I say. "Don't stand there in the doorway like you're spying." I have taken the offensive.

"I would never spy," says my father. He is savagely picking at his two front teeth, as though dislodging a fixed banana. My father fidgets with his teeth when he is
nervous—a genuinely repulsive habit—and at the moment, a telling sign of my impending doom.

The air is flushed from my lungs. “Come in,” I say softly, resigned to my fate.

He steps to the bed and sits cautiously down. When he has settled himself, his hands flash back to his mouth. He is staring at me and I am staring right back. This isn’t a challenge, this is utter and complete helplessness, a typical moment between my father and his son.

Ok, Ok. Think, Max. Think. I wonder if important people—presidents and movie stars—have these moments? Think, think.

I think: Teeth. Fingers. Shame. Mouth. I’m straight, that’s something. Shame. Fingers. Lie. Yes. Lie. I will lie and I will lie and I will lie a little more. Because, no, Dad. Those pornographic magazines that you found in my desk drawer aren’t mine. They’re someone else’s—a friend’s, yes, a friend’s—whose name I will not divulge, not even under the threat of torture. They’re a friend’s, I say, and that’s the God’s honest truth. I will swear it on anything, even my dear, dead mother.

Don’t be disappointed, I am capable of worse.

At last, it begins. “I just got back from Dr. Fortman’s office. That’s why I’m home early.” My father stops and bunches his brow. “Your room looks great,” he says.

“What do you want, Dad?” I mean, for Christ’s sake.

“Well. Have you noticed anything about Katie, lately?”

“Katie?”

“Yes. About her eating habits.”

“My sister?”
"I don’t think she’s eating enough.” His hands fall back to his face.

I am stunned, too stunned to lie, and what slips from my mouth is the uncensored truth. “She throws up all the time.”

“Come again?”

“Almost every day.”

“Don’t talk about your sister like that.”

“All right.”

“I—” My father stops himself. He is shifting in his seat, and I watch his shadow fidget against the wall. “She throws up?”

“Yes.”

“Why does Katie throw up?”

This one gets a big, blank stare.

“I don’t believe it,” says my father. “She throws up? Is it— Is it because of the food?”

“Yes, Dad, it is because of the food.”

My father sighs, a deep, unsettled breath. His shoulders drop and his head shakes slowly from side to side. “I didn’t know she...threw up. On purpose, I mean. I thought she missed a meal or two, that’s all.”

“Yeah, well. What can you do?”

“How long has this been going on?”

It has suddenly occurred to me that I have that ruined my sister’s reputation on Gilbert Street. Sorry, Katie. I mean, I feel genuine remorse over this. I have screwed
my sister. This is her business, not mine, and as long as I’m not involved, then Katie is on her own.

“Who knows?” I say. “Not too long, I don’t think. It isn’t very serious.”

“Of course it’s serious. This is extremely serious. People die from— from making themselves throw up.” He can barely say it.

“No one has ever died from throwing up, Dad. They’ve only gotten skinny.”

My father isn’t listening, though. He has withdrawn into his own private place. There is nothing I can do but wait this moment out. For the better part of a minute, I contemplate the pattern of my father’s thinning hair. His smooth, white scalp is beginning to show.

When at last my father looks up, his eyes are red and puffy. My face knots up, and turn to study the wall. If he wants to cry, he’d better not do it in here. We’re not that kind of family.

Dinner is a messy affair. The food is served, quiet and rushed. Claudia begins to eat before my father has even sat down. Pork chops wrapped in bacon, a virtual shrine to Jesus H. Christ. Something is wrong.

My father, so completely oblivious, is tapping his fork against the side of his plate. He is staring at my sister and the uneaten food in front of her. To watch him is a slow and exquisite ache. He is hanging on every pea and every carrot that Katie slips inside of her mouth. He is willing her through each bite, and praying that she holds it down; that she doesn’t throw it up at the table.
Embarrassed by the extra attention, Katie is eating less than she normally does. Twice, she stands up from her seat, and my father winces both times.

Without conversation, so routinely and regretfully forced upon us at dinner, my thoughts are free to wander. I am waiting for Claudia to let slip my pornographic desk-drawer secret. That’s why she’s upset, of course. It is all my fault. When she dabs at her mouth with her white linen napkin, clearing her throat, I am prepared for the worst. “The house looks nice, don’t you think?” No one responds and the question is asked again. “Doesn’t the house look nice?”

I nod my head in agreement, but Katie is more bold. “You shouldn’t go into my room,” she says. “I’ve got things in there, personal affects. I appreciate the vacuuming—I thought that was a nice touch—but next time I’ll insist that you ask first. There is such a thing as private property, you know.”

At five feet and nine inches tall, Claudia rises from the table, a model of reserve. She folds her arms across her chest. Here it comes.

Only, it doesn’t come. It never will.

“I agree,” she says to Katie. “You won’t find any argument here.”

My father, pulled abruptly from his calorie-counting misery, says, “I’m sorry. I’ll accept the blame.”

“Don’t apologize to me, Arthur. Apologize to the children.”

“I’m sorry, Katie. I’m sorry, Max. It was Camilla who cleaned your rooms. She cleaned all of our rooms.”

“Thoroughly,” says my sister.
“I’ve been offended!” I announce, filling the room with my voice. The family turns to stare. I melt back into my seat. “I’ve been violated.” Yes, violated.

Claudia nods. “Camilla is married to the man that I ran over last week. The Colombian,” she adds, as though there might be some confusion. “She works for us now.”

“What does she do? Do we pay her to violate us?” I’ve found a theme and I’m sticking to it. The power of my suggestion runs through me, filling my limbs with a throbbing heat.

“She cleans,” says Claudia, tapping a knife against the palm of her hand. “And she doesn’t seem to stop. She’s coming again on Tuesday, Max, and then the Thursday after that. She works two days a week for us now. Your father arranged the whole thing at the hospital. He did it without consulting the family. And I have no doubt that when the cleaning is done—and there isn’t much left to do—Camilla and I will sit down on the couch and we’ll watch the afternoon soaps together. It ought to be splendid.”

“Now, Claudia—” says my father, but he isn’t allowed to finish.

“You see, Max, I’ve been replaced. I wasn’t adequate, so your father hired someone who was.”

“That isn’t true,” says my father. “I felt guilty. This has nothing to do with you, Claudia.”

“Well, apparently, it does.”

I am breathing heavily, my nostrils are flaring, but I seem to have lost my edge. Claudia is angry enough for the both us. “Ok,” I say. “I just wanted to say, well, that I was upset, I guess. That’s it, that’s all. I thought that I’d been violated.”
I turn over in bed and stare at the clock. It’s 12:17 in the morning—my alarm goes off in less than six hours.

The portable phone is on my nightstand, and I reach for the receiver, cradling the plastic against my belly. I take a breath, and then a deeper one, allowing my thoughts to settle before dialing. It is a number I know by heart.

“Hello?” She is awake.

As the seconds fall away, I am aware of how intensely different the world sounds enveloped by darkness. There is a comfort to it, a calm, that I have never been aware of until just this moment.

“Hello?” The voice on the other end is far away, disconnected from my pitch-black bedroom. I ought to hang up. There is nothing to say.

“Max?”

I’ve done this before, so, yes, it’s me. It always is. Without a word, I replace the receiver on the nightstand and imagine the possibilities.

It is seven full hours later, and I am pedaling up the driveway, finished with my route—late again, but this time not by much. My customers no longer call in to complain, I have earned their grudging acceptance; by this point in my career, they are accustomed to my new and not-entirely-improved schedule.

Unfortunately, my family is not. Breakfast has been served and eaten, and I have missed it. My father is reading the paper, fidgeting with his hands, cracking each knuckle
individually. I shake off my boots and sit at the table. There is the distant sound of
running water, my sister in the shower.

“How was work?” says my father, and then without even pausing to hear what I
have to say, he continues. “You’ve had your license for several months now. I’m
surprised you don’t use the car.”

“I like riding my bike.”

Claudia comes sauntering into the kitchen, and opens the door to the oven.

“You could save yourself so much time,” says my father. “Dragging those papers
around on the back of your bike is terribly inefficient.”

“Without my bike, I couldn’t stop on the bridge.”

The gears in my father’s head are grinding away. Surely, he thinks, there is
something more to this impractical, illogical blemish. He says, “You’ve had your new
car for over a week.”

“It isn’t new, it is used. A safe foreign model that I can crash into whatever it is
that I please. And just because this new-old car might be faster than using my bike,
doesn’t mean that it’s better.”

My father keeps talking, like he didn’t even hear me. “If you could save yourself
just five minutes a day over the next ten months—”

“Would it be all right if you just stopped talking to me? If you would go away
and leave me alone forever?”

As he’s considering his options, Claudia approaches with eggs and buttered toast.
She says, “I kept them warm for you.”

“How?”
"I covered them up with aluminum foil."

I push the plate away. "It leaves a taste," I say.

Claudia turns to my father, who turns back to the paper.

He says, "It's just so inefficient," and the sadness in his voice disgustingly real.

The new-used car is humming towards the high school. I am driving my sister to school again, and I am driving Samantha as well, her unhealed leg propped up on a pile of books in the cramped backseat. This has been going on for over a week now at the request of Mrs. Brody.

During these short morning drives, we talk about supremely unimportant subjects, and we can usually keep this up for the duration of the trip. When we can't—when it's not cold enough to comment on, or when there isn't any physics homework—we are forced into quiet. Worse still, we are occasionally forced to talk. When this happens, I press Samantha for little details about Jane, embarrassing us both with my personal queries. It's not that I mean to, but I can't quite seem to help myself.

In eleven days, this is what I have learned: Jane Abigail Dunn is a junior at Belmont High School and a virgin. We think. She doesn't need braces, but she's embarrassed by a crooked incisor, her only apparent flaw. She is allergic to wool. She writes with her left hand, but eats with her right, and when it's hot enough outside, or when she spends too long in the sun, she gets a rash on her neck. There is more to Jane, I am certain, but these are the important things—the things that I know—and I cling to the bits of fact like crusted grime.
This morning, I have asked Samantha—demanded, really—to set us up on a date.

"It only has to be one," I say.

Samantha is prying loose a stray blue plaster thread from her cast. "I don't think you’d like her, Max. There isn’t a whole lot to her. Besides, she wouldn’t treat you very well. She doesn’t treat anyone well. You’re awfully sensitive. You might get hurt."

"I’m not sensitive. It’s like I told you before, I’m different."

We are stopped at a red light and silence settles in like a sickness. Even Katie, sitting motionless in the passenger seat, is embarrassed. She stares out the window, pretending that she is somewhere else.

"Besides——" I start, but the timing isn’t right. I corral my words until the light changes color, then spit them free in little bursts. "It isn’t. For. For you. To decide."

Samantha sighs. Defeated. "I’ll give you her number," she says, "but I won’t ask her out for you. If you want to get hurt, you’re going to have to do it yourself."

"That’s all I want," I say.

"That’s all you’ll get."

"You’ve got to stop calling, Max."

For a moment, before she moves away, I am close enough to sniff the cottage cheese on her breath. It is an hour after school and the late October wind is rattling the plexiglass. I am standing in front of Ms. Mandy Pope, my books in my hands, pressed to my belly.

Ms. Mandy Pope’s shoulders are set, her figure erect. With a sudden, uncontrollable twitching of the nose, I am prepared for the worst.

"There are rules," she says, "and you’ve broken them."
“I didn’t mean to.”

“That’s irrelevant.”

I smile, because, yes, I have blown it, and yes, I will be forgiven. I set my books on the floor and set to straightening the desks, row by careful row. It is a comforting routine. I take pleasure in the scraping of the desks against the unwashed classroom floor; the metal feet, jostled and cajoled, produce the sound of order, of usefulness. Of obedience.

Ms. Pope doesn’t move. She watches from the front of the class, her head cocked off to the side. “You were right,” she says. “People talked. ‘About us’.”

“People talk a lot, but they don’t always mean what they say. It doesn’t need to matter. Not if you don’t want it to.” I return to the front of the room and set to wiping down the chalkboard. I have no idea what it is that I just said.

Ms. Mandy Pope exhales and when she speaks, she turns away. “We’re not friends, Max. I teach. You learn. End of story.”

I am stunned, and for a moment I am unable to speak. I grip the soiled eraser in my hand, crushing the powdered chalk between my fingers.

“In fact, this, right here: inappropriate. You need to get moving. You’re a nice boy, Max, but you aren’t worth losing a job over.”

“I won’t tell. No one has to hear that anything’s ever happened.”

“That’s the thing, Max. Nothing has happened. Nothing will happen.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

“It doesn’t matter what you mean. This ends.”
I am frantic, now, waving the dirty eraser in the air. "We can talk, though. No one can tell you what to do with your free time."

"That isn't the issue. It's me. I don't want to talk. This might be difficult for you, but it has to end, Max. All of it."

"Not like this."

Ms. Pope is suddenly impatient. "Stop being a child," she says. "I can't help it if you don't understand, and I am truly sorry for that, but I won't let a little boy's feelings get in the way of my job." I watch as she composes herself, manipulating her features into a tight, impenetrable grin. As she exhales, her narrow shoulders relax and her face seems to fall. "You're a boy, Max. I'm sorry if you think I've hurt your feelings, but it's something you'll have to get over. Immediately."

I stagger backwards, nearly tripping over my books. Though I want to protest, I am completely unable. My mouth, my thoughts, have been pierced. I wander from the classroom, stumbling over my books. I leave them on the floor. Ms. Mandy Pope's words are slamming around in my head.

The long, dim hallway fades away, its thousand metal lockers collapsing all around me like some fantastic accordion. My body is numb, too distant to control. I am down the stairs. I am fumbling with my keys. I am driving, passing cars in a fog. I am home.

I find the folded piece of paper in my pocket. Jane Dunn, it reads, in Samantha's perfect cursive, followed by seven digits.

With gritted teeth, I make the call. The conversation lasts less than a minute. Each word, each stumbled-over sentence, is forced and uncomfortable, worse than I
would have imagined. It doesn't matter, the job gets done: I have asked Jane Dunn, a
virgin inclined to heat rash, on a date and she has somehow, magically accepted. When I
hang up the phone, I am shaking.
I am supposed to pick up Jane in thirty minutes, only I can’t decide what to wear.

I am standing in the center of my room, half naked, staring into the closet.

There is a knock on the door and my father barges in.

“You knock,” I say, “and then you wait for an answer. That’s the way it works around here.”

“You’re not seven anymore. I forget that sometimes.” My father sees the outfits on the bed—the three different shirts, the two pairs of pants—and the half-empty jug of cologne, resting on top of the dresser. I smell like a department store. “What’s all this?” he says.

“I’ve got a date.”

He takes a nervous step to the side and says, “Do I know the...person?”

“Yes.”

“Who is...it?”

“‘It’ is a ‘she,’ Dad. Jane Dunn from the hospital.”

People would pay to see the look on my father’s face. I could line them up around the side of the house and charge a dollar a head, maybe even two.

“I’m shocked,” he says. “Not shocked, but...okay, shocked. It’s just that—”

“She’s beautiful. I know.”

“That wasn’t what I was going to say.” He considers something private, then blurts, “She’s very feminine. A real lady.”

“We’ve been through this already.” My finger is in the air, pointing towards the door.
“Can a man be beautiful?”

“I like girls, Dad. I’m not queer. You could have just asked.”

We stand there, staring at each other, tick-tock, tick-tock.

A solitary finger strays towards my father’s mouth. He says, “Of course you like girls.”

“Why can’t you be different?” I say, pulling a T-shirt over my head.

“Than what?”

“This. Everything. You never get it right.”

“I try to.”

“That isn’t good enough.”

My father pats himself down, feeling at his pockets. “Hold on,” he says, raising his hand. “Don’t move a muscle.” He rushes from the room, and I can hear him in the hallway, pounding against the carpet. When he returns, he is panting.

“Breathe,” I tell him. “This isn’t going to end our relationship.”

“Right.” He hands me a pair of twenty dollar bills. “Buy her flowers,” he says.

“Yellow daises.” He retrieves another twenty from his wallet and sets it on the bed.

“Take her somewhere special.”

This, I have taken care of. We have a reservation at Giovanni’s in the North End of Boston. I saw an ad for the restaurant on cable TV.

My father sits down, crushing the money on the bed. “I remember my first date with your mother. Jamie, I mean.”

“I know which one you mean.”

He stops and looks up at me. “It’s been ten years, Max.”
“And two months.”

My father’s head begins to shake from side to side. He says, “I’m trying to be different.”

“Try harder.”

“Do you want to hear about your mother?”

“Get out,” I say, but he does not.

“Well?”

I sigh. “Tell me about Mom.”

“Usually, I’d be nervous,” he says, “but not on that night. Your mother was so gentle. So sincere. She wore a long colored dress—kind of flowy, kind of groovy—and she didn’t wear a bra.”

“That’s my mother, Dad, and she’s dead. Please respect her memory.”

He is smiling to himself. “She looked fantastic,” he says. “She was a genuine ten-pin knockout.”

“I’ve seen the pictures. She wasn’t all that pretty.”

My father looks up at me, hurt. “That’s your mother,” he says.

“I’ve got to get ready.”

My father stands up, all five-foot-eight of him. He reaches into his pants, retrieving four connected squares of thin, glossy plastic from his pocket. They unfold in front of my eyes, dangling from his fingers, dancing. Words flash past, become lodged in my brain: lubricated. Ribbed.

I steady myself with the bottle of cologne, dousing my arms and neck.
My father reaches out and touches me on the shoulder. "I know we haven't had this talk," he says, "but— well, use them. Don't be afraid to insist." He has dreamed of this day. "You know what these are, right?" I nod. "Do you know how to use them?" Another nod, short and quick. It will all be over soon.

My father is massaging my shoulder with incredible force, and it is all that I can manage just to cough.

"Bring her back to the house," he says. "I'll have everyone in bed, we'll all be asleep."

My toes are curled and my breathing is shallow. An image is beginning to form. I can see it in my head, our sweaty, wriggling bodies.

"Do you drink?" says my father.

"You don't have any idea who I am."

"I'll leave some wine out on the counter." My father surveys the room, letting his eyes drift towards the bed.

I turn and have a look, tingling all over. That's where it would happen. Where I would take off all her clothes and put my tongue in her mouth and put my lips on her ears and nose. Skin on skin.

My father's hand is still pumping away at my shoulder, even as my body begins to tense. There is nothing to be done, nothing to be said. I am grotesquely hard, my tight, white briefs protruding. My father's hand still rubbing at my shoulder, kneading me into oblivion.

His chest is heaving. "What more can I do?"

I cannot move. I cannot even cough.
He reaches inside his pocket and comes out with a few more condoms, mashing them into my hand. “You’ll be fine,” he says. “What happens, happens.” But as the words are coming out, his eyes are dropping down. Down. Down. The hand on my shoulder seizes.

There is a moment of absolute nothing, a timeless, shapeless interlude where the world remains unchanged. His hand on my shoulder, frozen, trapping moist heat.

He looks up. “I didn’t see a thing,” says my father, and that one small moment has passed.

“Please leave.”

“I am going to leave,” he says, but he does not move. His hand is attached to my shoulder. “I didn’t mean to,” he says. “It wasn’t intentional. I don’t have any interest in what just happened.”

“Nothing happened.”

“No, nothing happened.”

“Your hand,” I say. I groan.

“I am going to remove my hand.” My father pries himself free, stumbling backwards, his eyes dropping down, staring. He is unable to look away.

I sit on the bed, still hard, still protruding. I stand back up. I turn my hips towards the wall, with my hands on my sides. Still hard.

“I am going to leave,” says my father. He takes a step back, and then another, knocking against the dresser. Feeling for the door. “I didn’t see a thing,” he says. Closing it behind him.

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Just a half-an-hour later, I find myself reaching for a yellow stem of daisies.
“Not those,” says the man behind the counter. “The other ones are fresher. The ones in front.” He is old, but he looks dependable. “Big date?” With all his wrinkles and spots, he thinks he can ask me anything.

“Kind of,” I say, patting at the rubbers in my back right pocket. My face is a bright, steaming red.

“Your first one?”

“Yes, sir.”

The man wraps the flowers in paper, then ties them with a ribbon.

“The ribbon is free,” he says. “What’s her name?”

“It’s Jane.”

“I like that name. I wanted to name my daughter Jane, but my wife wouldn’t let me. We ended up with a Sally.” He reaches behind the counter and comes out with a dampened rag. He says, “You’ll want to wipe a bit of the smell off.” I stare at the old man, but he is shameless. “The cologne. It’s a little too much. Better to embarrass yourself here, in front of me, than in front of your Miss Jane. Here,” he says, holding out the rag. “Wipe.”

I leave a twenty dollar bill on the counter and snatch at the rag as I head for the door. Two miles later, a coarse, wet cloth finds its way to the side of the road, the best smelling trash in all of Lexington.

I finish my route as quickly as I can, passing over the bridge without stopping. My hat is in my hands because I deserve to be cold, to suffer. As I am walking back up my driveway, my body begins to shudder—I mean, it literally shakes—as it occurs to me
that I might be the best thing going for Samantha. That she cares because she has to, because there isn’t anything else for her to care about.

There is a little bit more to this thing with Sam than I’ve been letting on. We’ve got some history behind us and it isn’t all snowflakes and gum drops. It got weird, so many years ago, because I wanted a little more. I wanted too much. We were freshmen in high school and we were kissing every day. It was good, at first, it was fun. Each time we would kiss, I would achieve a stunning erection, which I would then press into Samantha, though our layers upon layers of clothing. Neither one of us could help what was happening. I’m not even that sure we wanted to. Pretty soon, however, I got to wondering why it was that we didn’t go further, that we didn’t go all the way. Because that’s you do, first you kiss, then you grope, then you slip it in and out.

Sam wouldn’t let me, she wouldn’t even talk about it. When I tried to take off her clothes, she would rush to the bathroom, and lock herself in. We would talk through the door, and I would calm her down, and she would come back out, and we’d go through it again, and she’d be back in the bathroom, talking through the door. This happened for a couple of months, and with each passing erection, and subsequent rejection, we were pushed a little closer towards the point of implosion.

The real trouble started during the spring of our freshman year. It was midway through April, and the student body elections were in full swing. Samantha was running for student body treasurer, and I was her campaign manager.

With a week to go before the student body election, I told Scotty Peters that Samantha and I were doing it. I didn’t exactly mean it, I was only bragging, but it sure did slip right out.
Even before the end of the day, someone had written WHORE in red, block letters across the SAM BRODY FOR TREASURER poster in the main hallway; the poster we’d spent hours perfecting and improving upon. Rumors of Samantha’s promiscuity had spread like a sickness. One half a day, that’s all it took.

That afternoon, I found Samantha in a heap on the floor at the foot of her poster, surrounded by a jagged ring of students. Her back was to the cool cement wall, and her legs were spread, so you could see up her skirt—so you could count the tiny butterflies on her white cotton panties.

We stood and watched as she cried, softly at first, but then building and building. No one spoke. No one moved. We did nothing.

For just a split, frozen second, Samantha looked up and saw me through her swollen eyes, and her penetrating wail gave way.

People turned and they stared, but I did not go to her. I couldn’t. I was unable let go of that small, hard place inside of myself that she needed me to give.

I turned away, pushing back against the crowd, and I fled, nearly running, as Samantha’s wailing took over the hallway.

It has begun to drizzle.

There is a long, white Cadillac parked in the driveway. Somehow, I hadn’t counted on parents. Embarrassed, I leave the yellow daisies in the backseat of the car. Now I am late for no reason.

Jane answers the door. She is beautiful as always, the two times I have seen her. I am ready for vows and babies, maybe even a Buick.
“You’re overdressed,” she says.

I look down at my pants and nod: gray, pleated slacks and a button-down shirt.

Jane pushes past me, brushing me with her arm. “Let’s go,” she says, and I follow her out to my car.

We stop at the Route 2 overpass, beyond the crest of Belmont Hill. It is the tallest point for miles and miles.

“Why did you stop?” says Jane.

I climb from the car and run around to the other side. I open Jane’s door.

“What’s going on?” she says.

Stepping to the side, I turn and wave my arm. Behind us is the city of Boston.

Only tonight, in early November, it is covered in fog. My hand drops away and I begin to console myself. “It’s usually special,” I say. “You can normally see for miles.”

“I live here,” says Jane. “I drive by here every day on my way to school.” She waves her hand at the side of the road, which is littered with debris: plastic bags and bits of broken bottles.

I stand there holding onto the door, frozen in place. Behind us, to the west, there is a break in the clouds. It isn’t much, and it will soon be covered over, but in this one small moment, the light comes falling down, sliding across the highway. “Look,” I say, my finger in the air. “It’s a miracle.”

Jane turns to look, a living, breathing groan.

I know that I sound absurd, but I can’t seem to stop myself. I don’t want to.

“That’s what my mother used to say. She used to hold me in the air, under my arms, and
point me towards the sunshine whenever it rained. We’d wait for hours for that one splash of light.”

Jane sits back down, staring forward, barely moving, and waits for me to join her in the car. When I slam the door shut she says, “You shouldn’t joke around. I know about your mother. I know what you did to her.”

“What did I do?”

Jane runs a finger across her neck, and just like that, we are driving again. Past the Fresh Pond rotary. Down Storrow Drive. Parked in a concrete lot.

The restaurant looked bigger on TV. “Fake flowers,” says Jane, as we are led to our seats. “Paper napkins.”

“Plastic tablecloth,” I say.

Jane shakes her head. “Let’s try and do this quickly.”

We are out of things to say before the appetizers have even arrived. There isn’t one small part of one small conversation that we haven’t yet discussed.

“You look nice,” I say. This is the fourth or fifth time that I have mentioned this. Her beauty is now official.

Jane looks away, watching food pass by on trays.

Something needs to be said.

I pause. What I am about to let slip is something big. “I used to date someone older.”

“How much older?”

It’s coming. It shouldn’t be, but it is. “Well, we didn’t really date. We had a relationship, though.” You can practically hear it bubbling up inside.
"How old? Did you kiss her?"

"She's twenty-three. We never kissed. I loved her, though." There is no turning back. "She was my high school math teacher. I suppose she still is." I lean back in my rickety seat to pause and reflect. You've got to give a moment like this some time to breathe.

For the first time all night, Jane looks up at me with her full attention. Her round, brown eyes are fixed and focused and waiting. "Go on."

So I tell her the story, the whole entire thing—how we met, our talks on the phone, and even the first time that I knew that I loved her. The truth wasn't enough, though, so I made some things up. I told Jane about the poems that I had written, and the hug that Ms. Pope had given me when my cat died. Then I started getting all sappy about the things that had never occurred, but just as easily could have. My voice began to catch in my throat, and my skin took on a glossy, sticky sheen.

"We were in love," I say, to fill the empty space, but the reality sinks in, falls all the way down to the murky, brown bottom. There is no more Max and Ms. Pope. Maybe there never was. It hadn't occurred to me until just then, sitting across the table from the magnificent Jane Dunn.

Jane reaches over the table and pats my hand. I try to touch her back, but she pulls herself away.

We are both a little lost now, and I couldn't even talk if I wanted to. I wouldn't know what to say. Jane picks up her napkin and folds it in her lap. Then she picks it up again and sets it back down on the table. My eyes are beginning to well.
I am saved when the dark-haired waiter arrives with our entrees. When the waiter has left, our moment has passed. “I loved her,” I say, but Jane is hardly listening. She is wrapping fettuccini around the tip of her fork.

We finish, I pay, we leave. Not once does Jane thank me.

It is a long drive home. There’s been an accident on the Fresh Pond Bridge in Cambridge, and traffic is backed up beyond the rotary. The steady rain makes it difficult to see.

“Someone had better be dead,” says Jane. We haven’t moved in twenty minutes. Someone might be.

When the traffic begins to clear, Jane says, “I’ve been thinking.”

I can feel my father’s condoms in my back left pocket, pressed against the seat. If she’d like, we can pull over to the side of the highway and do it right there as the cars scream past.

Jane coughs through her nose, and then she touches my arm with her hand. I will run over puppy dogs, I will flatten old ladies with babies, but nothing in this world can make me move my arm.

“Your teacher doesn’t love you,” she says. “I doubt she ever did.” Jane’s hand is returned to her lap, and my arm goes limp.

“That isn’t fair,” I say, as the car begins to drift. “We were special to each other.”

“Don’t be dramatic. She probably wanted attention.”

“We shared emotions.”

“She taught you math.”
“Algebra’s important.” I say. The best I have to offer.

“It was a crush, and nothing more. That’s kids’ stuff. Tell me what happened with you and Samantha.”

I am caught off guard. “We used to kiss,” I say. It is the truth, a boast. I return my hand to the wheel, straightening the car.”

“Sam wouldn’t tell me the whole story.”

“It’s complicated.”

“But it’s over. Whose fault is that?”

“Both of ours.” Then, “Mine. I made a mistake.”

“That doesn’t surprise me. I’ll bet you’ve made a lot of mistakes.”

I am focused on the oncoming headlights, pushing down my foot, jerking the car forward. I say, “You’ve been talking about me.”

“You were a part of our conversation, Max. We also talked about quilting.” Jane pushes on, staring at the side of my face. “Samantha was in love with you.”

“It wasn’t love,” I say, and we drive on for a while in silence.

The rain has tapered off, but the air is still heavy and wet, full of potential. We navigate the foggy back roads of Belmont, and when we’re close to Jane’s house she says, “How does it feel to hurt someone?”

“Bad.”

“Is that it?”

“Terrible?”

“That’s self indulgent, but it isn’t real. That kind of pain doesn’t last very long. What did you feel after that?”
"It was a long time ago."

"That’s an excuse. I’ll bet you liked it. I’ll bet you felt powerful."

"That isn’t true."

"Everybody needs to feel important every once and a while. Especially you."

"You don’t know who I am," I say.

"That doesn’t make me any less right."

We pull to a stop outside the Dunns’ Belmont home, and Jane wastes little time in reaching for the door. She grasps the short handle, her silver rings clattering. She doesn’t push the door open, though, not just yet.

She says, “So what do you have to say?”

“Well—” Tap, tap on the steering wheel. “You’re—” Tap, tap. “This was nice.”

“You can do better.”

“I like you.”

“You don’t mean that, Max. You think I’m pretty and you’d probably like to kiss me, but there’s nothing more to it.”

I am not bold enough to lie, so I tell her the truth. “I want you,” I say. “You’re beautiful.”

Jane, who knows this already, and has been told the same thing by a thousand better-looking boys, does not seem to hear me. “What do you want from me?” she says.

“I want to kiss you.” My voice is strong and composed.
Jane laughs once, sharply, and I know right then that this cannot work, that it
never will. There is no “Us,” no babies in the future or a great big house with a dog on
the porch named Leo. I shift the car into park and remove my foot from the brake.

“It will take more than that,” says Jane, “but at least you tell the truth. It isn’t
much, but it’s something. What’s in it for me?”

Looking down. Whispering. “I am.”

“That isn’t enough.”

My hand is squeezing the wheel, gripping it, crushing it. “You’re selfish,” I say.
“You do whatever it is that you want, and you know that you’ll get away with it. People
let you because you’re beautiful.”

“Do you know how old that gets?”

“You get what you want and you take it for granted.” I am surprised by the force
of my words. I’ve got her beat, I can tell her whatever I want. “I’ll bet that you think I’m
in love with you.”

Jane leans back in her seat, letting me go without saying a word. She raises her
arms above her head, and connects them behind the headrest. “Everybody loves me,” she
says. “You’re no different. You’re not special. You’re like everybody else that wants
something from me. You’ll tell me anything I want to hear, even if you don’t mean it.”

Eyes straight ahead, I say, “Not anything.”

“You’ll say anything that I want you to.”

A pickup truck approaches from the opposite direction, its lights filling the inside
of the car. I say, “I want to see you again. I want to be seen with you.” Her face is lit
up.

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“Is that what you want?”

“Yes.” Desperately.

Jane comes forward, leans in, and I can feel her breath on my cheek. “Is that all that you want?”

“I want to be your boyfriend.”

“What if I broke your heart?”

“At least we would have fallen in love.”

“One of us, at least. That’s all it takes.”

I am shifting in my seat, fidgeting with the wheel. Looking forward. “So are we going to fall in love?”

“Yes,” says Jane. “And I am going to break your heart. For Samantha.”

I turn to look, but there is nothing on her face. No anger, no hurt, not the slightest indication of compassion. The truck passes by, and the darkness returns.

Jane unclasps her seatbelt and pushes the car door open. She does this smoothly, in a seemingly practiced motion, never losing contact with my eyes. Like a final breath, she slides from the car, escaping into the calm of a quiet suburban night. Before closing the door behind her, she points to the backseat and says, “I love yellow daisies. I wish you would have given them to me.”
The Down and the Low

The houses on my paper route are divided into two distinct neighborhoods. There's Gilbert Street, which is comprised of old Victorians, and there's Canin Way, which is littered with brick monstrosities and overpriced lots. The catch is that the two don't touch, they're divided by a brook. It's been dying for years, choked off by rotted trees which continue to fall upstream.

I only bring this up because in order to finish my route, I am forced to cross over this filthy, wheezing flow. The brook is eight feet wide and covered with algae, set at the heels of an overgrown ravine. This is about as close to country as you'll come in my town. Each bank of the ravine runs fifteen feet down to the water's edge, along a long, slow grade. You wouldn't think it, what, with such a little trickle of a brook, but they'd needed to build a substantial bridge to get from one side of the world to the other. And I'll tell you, it's one ugly bridge: a giant white slab of decaying concrete. There are pock marks all up and down the face of it, as though corrosive, atomic raindrops came pouring down for just a few minutes.

Protecting pedestrians from a fifteen-foot drop into the muck are a couple of stainless steel guardrails which are high enough to push against your chest. They're awfully sturdy, these rails. I know because I've tested them, stood on the rungs and shaken them hard. They haven't so much as budged.

Beyond the bridge on either side lies a few hundred feet of nature. The forest floor is dense so that even in the middle of the winter, you can't see through to the houses. That's saying something, too, because the houses on these streets are significant.
With such a sturdy, no-nonsense bridge in the middle of all those trees, it really makes you feel like you’re standing on something important. This concrete monster that attaches two neighborhoods is so grim, so serious, that you really can’t help but feel small. Up on the railing, arms free, it’s like the world is standing still, as though it doesn’t move an inch.

For just a minute or two each morning, I stop and have a rest on the bridge, where the day is entirely my own. I lean against the stainless steel railing and stare out at the water. There is never any noise. It is perfect, and for just a little while at the beginning of each day, so am I.

So that’s it, that’s my bridge. Now you know.

I’m looking forward to my time alone on the cement slab this morning. It’s been a pretty big week and I could use some time to myself. I am behind on my day already, but I will stop just the same. My customers can wait, they always do.

With nearly half of the papers delivered, I pedal up the Brodys’ steep driveway. There is a head in the window, and as I coast to a stop the door swings open. Samantha stands before me in her pink and white striped pajamas. Her hair has been crushed to the side of her head from a full night of sleep. There are bits of yellow crust around the corners of her eyes, but Samantha Brody is not embarrassed.

I turn my wrist as though I’m checking my watch. “It’s early,” I say.

“I was thinking about you.”

“I suppose I ought to be flattered.”
“Not flattered,” she says. “Just thankful.” Samantha gives a shudder as the wind kicks up. Freshly fallen leaves are caught up in the gust and thrown against the driveway. They are dragged across its face, screaming as they go.

“What do want?” I say.

“Just to talk. How did things go last night?”

“We didn’t kiss, all right?”

“Did you need to?”

This, I have to think about. “I wanted to.”

“Well, I’m sorry then.”

“You don’t look very sorry.”

Samantha brushes the matted hair from her face, and one of her crutches tips over.

Neither one of us makes a move.

She says, “I woke up just to see you. To find out how things went.”

I have nothing more to offer than a shrug. It’s a big one though, if that counts for anything. My shoulders nearly touch.

Samantha sighs. “I don’t ask a lot of you, Max. I’m only taking an interest.”

“You’re jealous,” I say. “You should stick to your own business instead of trying to live through mine.”

If it’s any consolation, it occurs to me on this dark Thursday morning, that I am, conclusively, a prick. Samantha Brody, who stands before me in shock, might be the only person in this whole wide world who genuinely cares whether or not I exist. In return, I treat her like a stranger. No, not just a stranger, but someone that I need to repel. I tell her things that I don’t even mean. I can’t seem to help it.
Samantha wants to speak, but she can’t seem to form any words. Her soft, round mouth is beginning to quiver. She is making an “oooh, oooh” noise, and if I am not mistaken—yes, at any moment now, her breath is just beginning to catch—she is about to start crying. There is a choking sound and then a gurgle and just like that, the tear drops begin to fall.

I say, “You know I didn’t mean it,” but I wonder which part that refers to?

Samantha stands in the doorway, her body tense, like iron. She is ignoring her tears, pretending that all systems are go, like this happens every morning. With each little fiber of her body, she is holding back the floodgates. Her hand is beginning to twitch.

I stand there, looking down at the driveways’ pavement, wondering, hoping that I might just fit into one of the smaller cracks. I probably could, I’ll bet that I could slip right through. It wouldn’t take too much, I don’t think, just a shimmy and a shake and a great, big leap. If only I could. If only I would try.

“Whu— You—” Samantha speaks. “Why do you like her so much? What is it about Jane that makes her so special?”

So now I’ve got a couple of options. I can… A. Drop my bike, papers spilling everywhere, and rush to Samantha. I can take her into my arms, patting her on the back, and tell her how very sorry that I am. I can assure her that I never meant to hurt her. I can thank her for her years of selfless friendship and support and let her know that everything—all those up’s and down’s, those bumps and bruises—will turn out fine in the end, just fine.
That might work. But what if I...B. Told her the truth: let Samantha in on an indisputable truth that will last her the remainder of her lifetime, sparing her countless nights of wasted tears over boys she could do without. I could let her know, in no uncertain terms, that a girl with a pretty face—with eyes set just the right distance apart, high cheekbones, and a comfortable, well-set jaw—will have an unfair, unjust, and altogether irrational advantage over the plain and not-quite-Jane. Period.

Or, I could...C. You guessed it. Stand there, petrified, with a hideous expression on my face as though I'm watching an animal give birth. As hard as I try, my expression will not bend.

As Samantha cries, I straddle my bike, unable to look away. Buried deep down inside are heaps and piles of good intentions, but all that I can manage is a lopsided grin, the best that I have to offer.

Then just like that, the door slams shut. Samantha disappears.