People I knew from home: A collection of short stories

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Table of Contents

FICTION

Birthday 2
Tumbling 18
Peggy Sue 21
In Cuba 41
Summer Kill 43
Brother/Man 47
Buddy 59
Hoffentlich 73

ESSAYS

Memo From Bridesmaid #8 77
WOF 81
Marguerite 86
For my parents.
FICTION

Birthday
Tumbling
Peggy Sue
In Cuba
Summer Kill
Brother/Man
Buddy
Hoffentlich
Birthday
It’s February and I’m twelve when my dad shows me a gun. A .454 Casull, he says. She’ll shoot through an engine block. He turns it in his palm. She’ll take down an elk.

That’s big time, I say. Did you ever shoot an elk? Outside, it’s hard winter. The sky is white. In the backyard, our apple trees bend under ice.

He thinks. I shot at one, he says, and missed. The brush was so thick and the slope—(he slants his hand)—was like this.

So it got away? I ask.

He nods. I tried to find her. But there was no blood, nothing. Just trampled sticks. Saplings broke in two.

Maybe, I say, she just stood real still. Pretended she was a tree. See, look, like this!—and I stand up, and close my eyes, and make my arms stiff at my sides.

Maybe, my dad says, and pulls out a drawer in his filing cabinet. He puts the gun in the drawer, which he closes and locks.

I sit back down, cross my arms and smile. I’m pretty sharp for a kid, I tell him. You got to watch out.

He smiles. You’re a real threat to the order of things, he says.

I look his desk blotter, where he’s got stationary paper with his name on it. This girl at school calls her parents by their first names, I tell him. Rick and Rhonda. They say it’s more human. What do you say about that, Bill?

But my dad just shakes his head and says, Teeth time, which means curtains for me. I skirt the desk and smooch his cheek. Goodnight Bill, I say, and he says, Cool it, Weirdo, and starts opening the mail.
I brush my teeth and get in bed and fall asleep quick. That night, though, I dream an of elk, and gunshots. It’s summer and the ground is green. Run, my dream self thinks. Go. She’s crashing down a mountain, her heart like a train. She runs so fast and scared she wakes me up sick.

In the morning, I find my way back again, off the mountain and out of the woods and down into my own skin. For awhile, my heart beats crazy like it’s out of my chest. Outside, the trees in the backyard are covered.

***

The next day it’s noodle bake casserole for dinner at my Aunt Cindy and Uncle Mark’s. When we get there my cousin Harriet’s on the floor in the den watching TV, some detective show with a lot of sexy kissing in it. I have to sit there with her while my mom and Cindy get dinner on.

Finally I tell her, You’re not supposed to watch stuff with frenching in it.

Harriet’s a year younger than me. She goes to private school across town. We used to be best friends until last week when Harriet said she wanted to name her first kid Tiffany Renee and I said that’s what I was naming my first kid and we got into it. Also, I called her Harriet Scarriet, which she hates.

Harriet turns around. MYOB, name stealer, she says, and goes back to the TV.

Oh that’s mature, I say. I pick some fuzz off the arm of the couch and throw it at the back of her head. There’s something in your hair, I tell her.
She doesn’t say anything, just stares at the screen, where people are shooting at each other now, and frenching.

I’ve seen a real gun, I say.

Neato, Harriet says.

My dad has it for hunting.

Great.

Harriet, please.

Harriet turns around again. So you saw a gun. Big fizz. This boy in my class has hair cancer. He lost all his hair.

He doesn’t have hair cancer, stupid, I tell her.

Welp, he sure is bald, she says, and punches up the volume on the TV.

What’s his name? I ask her.

Dusty.

Is he skinny?

I don’t know. Yeah. He’s gone a lot.

Do you make him cards all the time?

Harriet shakes her head. I get up and wander to the living room where my dad and my Uncle Mark are talking. I sit there and think about if I were bald. People could sign my head with dry erase markers. I could get a wig.

I walk back into the den and ask Harriet, Does Dusty have a wig?

Nope, she says. He’s going to die soon. She doesn’t look at me.

And I say, Oh. Then I walk into the kitchen and open a Sprite.
But I think about Dusty all through dinner. I wonder if he looks old.

Sometimes sick kids do. Also, I wonder how he gets around, if he has a Rascal or something.

After dinner I tell Harriet sorry for whatever, and she says okay, apology accepted, and we’re back on track. Then we go to her room to plan our futures as famous people. I tell her, You should be grateful you have all your hair. She says, You should be, too, and we leave it at that.

***

The next Sunday I’m watching a 60 Minutes on rats when the telephone rings.

Hello, I say. Richards residence.

Evie? Says a boy’s voice.

I don’t know who it is at first. Then it comes to me. May I please ask who’s calling? I say anyway.

It’s so quiet at the other end I wonder if Michael Simon from Accelerated Math is passed out or something. Finally, he snaps out of it. This is Michael Simon from Accelerated Math, he says. Is this Evie Richards?

It is, I say. May I ask what this is in pertinence to?

There is a pause at the other end. What? He says.

I clear my throat. It’s called phone manners, I say loudly. May I ask as to the nature of your call?

Umm, Michael Simon says. Uh.
I'm sweating, so I peel off my purple sweatshirt and straighten my tank top underneath. So what’s up? I am trying to think of things to say. What do you think about math? I ask.

Um, he says, Do you mean, what do I think about math the subject, as in math in general, or what do I think about math the class? Because there’s a difference, he says, so I’m just wondering what you’re asking.

Okay, I say. Because I wasn’t really asking you.

Okay? He says.

Because you were just sitting there. And so I said that thing about math. But, if you want to talk about something else, I mean.

Right, he says. I’m having this thing at the skating rink this weekend. You should come. I’m inviting other girls.

Oh, I say. Okay.

It’s at seven on Saturday. You should be there. I called Crystal Jenkins and she’s coming. So that should be cool.


Suddenly Michael Simon is quiet. I don’t know, he says, Crystal Jenkins from English. You shouldn’t go around saying that, he says.

This is going wrong. I feel terrible. I don’t even know what a handjob is.

I don’t even know what that is, I say too loudly. My heart’s going nuts. I wonder if Michael Simon can hear it through the phone. Then I tell him, I don’t even know where I heard that. In library, I think. I don’t know what it means, though.
So seven on Saturday, Michael Simon says. It’s my birthday so you can bring a card or something.

But I don’t want him to hang up. I want to keep talking because this is my first phone call from a boy and it’s supposed to be fun. And also, I said the handjob thing which is stupid. He shouldn’t be mad, though; I don’t think he knows what it means either.

Which is what I say. I don’t think you know either, I tell him. What that is, I mean.

Are you kidding me? He says. Are there monkeys on your planet? What about computers? And tall buildings? He laughs wildly.

For your information, I tell him, I live happily on Earth. Where you’ll be happy to know there are computers. Unfortunately, I would have the same questions for you regarding where you come from.

My heart is going like crazy now. I don’t even know what I’m talking about. I think I might cry.

Whatever, Michael Simon says. Because I know what it is.

 Yep, I say. Right.

Because. It’s when a girl touches you down there. Okay? Geez. He says this like it’s case closed.

I’ll see you Saturday, I say suddenly.

Okay, see you, he says.

Happy early Birthday, I say, after a second, but the line is dead.
I go downstairs where my parents are reading and sit on the couch for awhile.

After a minute my dad says who was that and I say, Nobody. Just this kid from school. He's having a birthday or something.

Then my dad puts his book down so I say, DAD! PLEASE! and run back upstairs to call Harriet. She says Evie, this is BIG, and we talk about outfits for the rest of the night.

***

At breakfast I tell my dad Harriet knows a cancer kid. He stares at me for a minute then says, Be respectful.

Sorry, I say, shoving a piece of toast in my mouth. How long do you think he'll make it?

Make it, my dad repeats. How long he lives, he says, depends on how sick he is. How strong his body can be.

I think about that for a minute. Then, for some reason, I think about how fast an elk runs. How it knows when it's safe to stop.

Do you think you stop growing, if you get sick like that?

My dad shrugs. You mean, does it stunt you? He takes his bowl to the sink. I don't know, sweetheart, he says.

Hey that skating party guy's not my boyfriend, I say. He just called here, big deal.

Okay.
And he’s totally healthy. I take a gulp of milk. In case you were wondering.

My dad gets up to leave, leans down and kisses the top of my head. Music to my ears, he says, then stands there like he wants to say something else. He doesn’t, though. And I can hear my heart in my head, so I don’t say anything either.

Later, after school, I walk the six blocks to Harriet’s. She answers the door and pulls me in by the wrist.

Get in here, she says. I have to tell you something.

Ouch, what? Her fingers leave pink marks on my arm.

Cancer boy took a turn for the worse. This counselor lady came in today and told us he’s not coming back to school. Can you believe it? This is BIG.

I shake my head. Wow. What happened?

Harriet’s eyes get huge. What do you mean? He’s deadsville. Or, at least, he’s going to be. She takes a piece of watermelon gum out of her pocket, unwraps it, and bites it in half. Here, she says, and hands my half me to.

I mean, why did he get worse?

Harriet shrugs. She blows a bubble and it pops on her face. Then she takes the clump of gum out of her mouth and starts dabbing her lips. This always gets it, she says.

You’re gross, Harriet, I tell her. Are you even listening to me?

Um hmm. Yeah. I don’t know why he got worse. He just did. He was this little guy anyway, even before. He was nice though. It’ll be sad. She makes a sad face.

Is that your I’m-sorry-for-Dusty look? I ask her.
Oh, you remember his name. Well I’m sorry, I’m not a professional sad person like you.

Whatever. You should be more respectful, I tell her. And suddenly, I don’t even want to be near her anymore. I think for a second that Harriet doesn’t deserve nice things, she’s too mean. Then I wonder if I deserve nice things, either.

I just remembered I have to go, I tell her. See you.

Okay. Call me, Harriet says, and I say I will.

I walk back, and the wind bites my face. The snow is melting in spots. When I get home I go to the backyard and break a branch off one of the trees. The ice on the bark glitters up, shot through with sun, and it hurts my eyes with brightness.

* * *

Saturday comes finally, and I spend the morning at Harriet’s trying on shirts. She says I should show some arm, but I say no, give me full coverage, something white and sparkly. I want to catch the blacklight.

I eat a tunafish sandwich for lunch then brush and floss and practice smiling only my top teeth. Harriet says I shouldn’t look too excited. I say, But I AM excited, Look at me! and she says, I know, look at you, just don’t try so hard, geez.

At seven, my dad drops me off at the rink. There’s music coming from the building. The windows are tinted black.

I don’t like tinted windows, my dad says, dropping his pickup into neutral.

Okay, I say.
You know not to leave here with anyone, even if it’s an adult?

I’m in sixth grade, I say. Can I go?

You can remember that weirdos are everywhere, he says. And not get a bad attitude about safety.

Okay, I say again.

You look pretty, he says.

I know, I say. I mean thanks. See you at 9:30. And I hop out of the cab, slamming the door behind me.

Inside, the music is loud. I try to cover my ears, but I have a card for Michael Simon in one hand and a new purse in the other. So I just stand there, feeling delicious, because I don’t know where to go.

After a minute my eyes adjust and I head toward the rink. I stand for a long time at the edge, watching people fly by. Everyone’s moving. I want to get my skates on and get out there. Pump my legs hard and wind around and around.

Michael Simon and some kids from school are at the snack bar, so I walk over. A woman stands up and smiles at me.

You must be Evie, she says. I’m Mrs. Simon. Would you like a snack, or something to drink?

I shake my head. I’m alright, I say. Thank you.

I look around, and spot Michael sitting in a corner booth with some boys. I’m the only girl here so far.

I walk up to the table. Hey Michael, I say. What’s up?
He grins, and his face turns red. He looks down. Nothing, he says, but the way he says it makes me feel good.

Can I sit? I ask. The two boys across from Michael scooch over and I squeeze in. I hand Michael his card. This is for you, I tell him. Happy Birthday.

He doesn’t look up at me, but he nods. Cool, he says. Want some cake or something? He sort of motions toward the gift table where there’s a sheet cake with thirteen candles and HAPPY BIRTHDAY, MICHAEL!! written on it. He jiggles his knee hard under the table.

We haven’t sang yet, I say.

Oh, he says, and jiggles his knee harder.

Mrs. Simon comes up and puts her hand on my shoulder. Evie, if you’d like, here’s a ticket for your skate rental. Just go to that window over there and tell the man your size.

I get my skates, and once I’m laced up I clop toward the rink. Michael’s already out there. No sign of Crystal Jenkins.

It’s been awhile since I’ve been on wheels. I stand on the floor and shuffle my feet, getting the feel of it. I glide a bit, then test my stoppers.

The disco ball cuts everyone’s face up, and I can’t tell where Michael went. People whoosh by. After a few seconds, I push off and make a lap around the oval. Then another, and another. My legs feel stronger, like new legs, and I think about Dusty, and if he goes to parties. I wonder if they’d let him drive his Rascal on the rink.
Just then someone skates by and grabs my hand. Michael, I say, automatically. But it’s not Michael. It’s Steven, Michael’s friend.

Hullo, he says.

Hi. Where’s Michael?

I dunno, he says. He squeezes my fingers. I like your sweater.

I got it for Christmas, I tell him, which is a lie. I don’t know why I say it.

Steven drops my hand. Okay, bye, he says, heading off toward the side. See you at cake!

I push around for another lap, and my legs and arms feel wonderful. Everything feels wonderful, I think, and I wonder how I’ll survive it. I’m afraid maybe I won’t.

When cake is served, and Michael opens presents, he looks at me when he doesn’t think I’m watching. His face is deep red, flushed from skating, and there’s sweat on his lip as he rips the paper on his gifts.

Afterward, people go back to out, but I have to check my lip gloss. I roll off toward the restrooms, when I feel a hand on my shoulder.

Evie, Michael says. Wait up.

I turn around. Hey, Michael. Are you having a good party?

It’s cool, he says.

I nod. I’m having a great time, I tell him. Then, I shout, I love this music!

We’re standing in a corner. It’s dark. Michael rolls in close, so I look around and say, Sorry about the phone call. Me being so weird and all. I take a step back and smile just my top teeth.
What are you doing? Michael says.

I keep smiling.

What are you doing with your teeth?

I clap my hand over my mouth. What? I say.

He looks confused. He smiles, though. I’m glad you came, he says. Your hair looks really clean.

I touch my head. It is, very, I tell him. I read lots of magazines about it.

He nods, and I nod with him, and I want to tell him why I was weird on the phone, which is because I was so nervous. Like I am now.

So I say, I was nervous! But the music is loud. Then I laugh like a crazy person, I don’t know why.

You’re what? Michael leans in to hear.

NERVOUS! I yell, and he skates back a step.

On the phone, I say. And now.

Oh, he says. Me too.

Now? I ask.

He nods.

Then his face gets closer and blocks out the disco ball and I know what’s happening because my eyeballs are humming. And I could touch him or something, but I don’t. Instead I stand there like a tree and say, This boy I know is going to die soon. He doesn’t have any hair. My eyes fill up with tears.

Wow, he says. I’m sorry. He stares at me. After a minute he says, So, you don’t want to kiss?
But I do want to kiss, which I can't figure out. Then I reach up and feel my face; my cheeks are wet.

It's kind of weird that you're crying, Michael says. I can tell he means it in a nice way.

I know, I say. I really want to kiss you, though.

He nods, like he's getting his nerve up. I think if you kissed me I wouldn't cry, I tell him. Not as hard anyway.

Are you sure? He says.

I nod. I think so, I say. The heart in my chest is my dream heart, pounding. If there's a safer place, I tell him suddenly, then we should go there.

He stares at me. Safer? He says.

And I think for a minute, but I don't know where I mean.

If you don't want to, he says, and starts to roll back, but in my brain I hear GO! so I lean in and kiss him. Close face, hot breath. This is something I do now, I think, even before it's over. This is how I am.

Afterward, he says, You taste like cake.

So do you, I say.

I had some nachos, earlier, he says. He cups his hand, breathes into it and sniffs. I don't think you can smell them, though.

I shake my head. I don't think you can.

In the truck, on the way home, I put the radio on country, turn the volume up loud. My dad says how was your party and I say yes. He says, Did you skate your heart out? And I nod my head against the window.
It was fine, I say. I’m kind of too tired to talk about it.

He doesn’t say anything, then, and that makes me sad. I don’t know why, but it does.

When I get home I call Harriet, and she says Evie, this is BIG, you have NO IDEA how big. I say I know, Harriet, geez, even though I don’t. I don’t know. Because we’re so young in our new bodies. And it’s winter out, and the trees in the orchard are all breaking.
Tumbling
I do tumbling on Tuesdays. I got this new leotard and I think I’m going to take ballet next time. It’s only in spring, though. But I like tumbling, and Miss Lewis says I’m good on mats for a fourth grader, so I don’t know. I like mats a lot. This girl says if you do ballet your toes break. She said they make you stand up in these shoes with wood in the front and your toes snap and grow right back, and that’s how you get good. I like dancing though, so I may do it anyway. And if I break my toes and they give me toe casts, like if I had five separate toe casts, then people could sign them. If you break something you get to sit out in gym. You get to time the sprints. I like this guy in gym so much his name is Bobby Hammond. I told my mom yesterday, I said I’m going to marry Bobby Hammond. Because I love him. I want to French him. We were in the car coming home from tumbling.

But my mom goes, Elaine, you know I would never divorce your father.

And I said I would never divorce Bobby Hammond. Because he is so cute. If you saw him you’d know. He’s not just cute, he’s nice. He’s really good with gerbils too because there was this guy at school Frank who kept flicking the gerbil. You know Domingo? The one Miss Kay brought in for class pet? Anyway Bobby saw him and said something, dude, that’s not cool or something, and then he grabbed the gerbil. Frank was holding it and Bobby just took it. Then Domingo pooped on him and it was so gross. Everybody was like clapping and Miss Kay was like, giving us this big talk on how we treat class pets, it was so funny.

Then my mom was like, That is funny, Elaine, but she wasn’t really laughing. Then she goes, You are a smart girl and boys are going to like you. That’s normal
and healthy. It’s healthy for boys and girls to like one another, and to care for one another.

And I was like, I know. Because I thought she was trying to talk to me about Developing.

But then she was like, And sometimes when people care for one another it is hard. But that doesn’t mean you’re going to get a divorce. I love your father very much.

And I was like, Well, thanks. Because I knew that.

And she was like, I just wanted to make sure you knew.

And I was like, Well, I’m not a retard.

And she was like, Don’t use unkind language. It hurts me.

So I said I was sorry. I looked out the window.

When we pulled into my driveway my mom was all cheery. Just YEP! Alright, YAY! All of a sudden. And she was like, Wonder what’s for dinner! Do you think the maid came! Then laughing all crazy, because we don’t have a maid.

But I just went to my room. Because when I marry Bobby Hammond we’re eating sundaes all the time. He is so cute, we’ll be so in love. We’ll have a gerbil named Terry. And I will dance ballet for them, Bobby and Terry, at nights before ice cream. And they will say Bravo, Elaine, Bravo, Your toes don’t look broke at all.
Peggy Sue
The summer I’m ten my mom works days, so I have a sitter named Peggy Sue Bird. Peggy starts high school soon. She’s fourteen. She has the same favorites as me, like purple, and Munsters reruns, and talk shows about famous people. Also, she lives in a mobile home park called Englewood Heights, by a pond that smells like fish bellies. We pick her up every morning at eight.

Peggy’s saving up for a chinchilla. She says chinchillas are ideal pets for several reasons. They don’t die off like hamsters, she says, and they’re smarter. They clean themselves, unlike hamsters, and they can give affection. When she shows me a picture, we’re at my kitchen table, eating lunch.

It looks like a weasel, I say. But furrier.

It’s related to weasels, she says. That’s why.

I look into my spaghettios. Why don’t you just get a cat? I ask. You could get one of those manx cats. They don’t have tails.

Peggy Sue stirs her spoon around. Because we can’t have cats, she says. It’s a rental thing. Plus, my mom’s allergic.

Mine too, I tell her. One time I found this stray cat and put it in my room and my mom didn’t know and she was sneezing all the time, it was so funny. Finally I was like, Hello, there’s a cat under my bed, that’s why! Did you ever think about where all those hot dogs were going, that’s why! She didn’t even know. She never goes in there.

You fed it hot dogs? Peggy says.

I nod. Until it started barfing everywhere.

Peggy Sue stares at her weasel picture.
That thing creeps me out, I tell her. How much is it?

She shrugs. Like fifty dollars or something, for a good one. I don’t know. Plus a cage and one of those water bottles. So more like seventy dollars, probably, or eighty. It depends.

Yikes, I say. I take my bowl to the sink. That’s a lot. I run the water for awhile. What do you want to do today?

Peggy Sue picks at the corner of her placemat. I don’t know, she says. Want me to fill the pool?

I shake my head. No way, I tell her. That’s for babies.

Want to run through the sprinkler? She says.

Maybe, I say. Did you bring your suit?

Nope, she says. Not today. I forgot it.

So it’d just be me by myself?

It’s hot as hell, Eileen. I bet you’d like it.

I shake my head again. Don’t say hell, I tell her. And bring your suit tomorrow.

She nods and says she will.

Are you going to have a boyfriend in high school? I ask her.

Peggy Sue yawns. I have a boyfriend, she says. His name’s Robby.

I look at her for details. Well, I tell her. Give it up. Give me the scoop.

What scoop? We’ve been together for, like, a month. He’s got a learner’s permit. He gets his license in August.

He’s older?
Peggy Sue nods and I nod with her. I don’t know why, I just do. I only date older men, she says.

That’s probably smart, I tell her. I only date older men, too.

She smiles, then walks over to the window unit AC and turns it all the way up. Is this thing even on? She says, leaning her face in close to the dusty vents. Then she parts the curtains and looks out over the backyard.

Hey, let’s watch Price is Right, I say, but Peggy shakes her head. She chews her lip.

Maybe I’ll call Robby, she says after a moment.

From here? I say, and she nods.

I’m about to say yes, when out of the blue I want to do crafts. Hey! I say. Why be on the phone when you could be doing something?

Peggy Sue looks at me hard.

I’ll get my craft stuff, I say. I just got new stuff. We can make puppets! Sock or Paper Mache. I’ll let you choose. Puppets are so fun.

Right, Peggy says. Fun. But she sits back down.

I get my stuff anyway and we make three puppets—two people puppets and one chinchilla puppet. Peggy says the chinchilla’s name is Marilyn. I say you can’t name a weasel Marilyn and we almost get into a fight.

Finally she says, Well what would you name it?

I think about it. Is it a boy or a girl? I ask.

I guess it can be a boy, she says. That’s better anyway.

Boy? I say. You’re sure?
The females can be mean. They bite each other.

Good to know, I say. Then its name is Smiley.

Smiley! Peggy Sue shouts. That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard of!

I don’t know why it’s any dumber than Marilyn. Like it’s a freaking person.

At least a weasel named Smiley knows it’s a weasel.

It’s not a weasel, Peggy Sue says. She holds up the picture again. A big fat chinchilla pants back at me, all tongue and teeth.

Look at that smile! I say. Tell me that’s not a Smiley if you ever saw one! I give the picture a thwap! for emphasis.

Fair enough, she says. Smiley it is.

After the glue is dry, we make up a show. I write the words. Not much happens, but in the end, Smiley ends up in a mansion with an in-ground swimming pool and a roomful of chocolate Easter bunnies.

Bravo! Peggy Sue shouts when it’s over. Brilliant!

I smile and bow, then look at Smiley on my right hand. He bows, too.

Later, we sit on the back porch with our sleeves rolled up, trying to get tans. Peggy lets me practice French braids on her hair until I’ve almost got it, and when I’m done she pats her head and says not bad, not bad at all. The day is a success. We eat Bombpops and listen to the radio until my Mom comes home.
The next morning we get Peggy Sue at eight. She doesn’t answer when I knock on the door, but I can see her inside. She is on the phone. I knock louder. She turns like she’s surprised and waves for me to come in.

Peggy’s house is two colors of purple on the outside, dark grape purple around the trim and light lilac purple everywhere else. There’s a white fence around her little yard. It only comes up to my waist. It’s not really a fence, I think.

When I step inside, Peggy Sue’s back is to me and she’s whispering into the phone. She’s talking to Robby because she keeps saying his name like it’s a question. Then she starts to snuffle. I wonder why she’s crying.

So I ask her. Peggy Sue? I say. What’s wrong?

She covers the mouthpiece with her hand and says hold on, Eileen. I’ll be off in a minute. Then she goes back to her phone call.

So I wander down the hall. The wall is wood paneling, and at the end, there’s the bathroom. I know it’s rude to look around in other people’s houses, but I figure Peggy Sue’s tied up and anyway, there’s no one here but us.

Peggy Sue’s room is the first one on the left. She has a bunk bed, but the top bunk is all stuffed animals. She doesn’t have brothers or sisters. She doesn’t have a dad, either, at least not one she’s met. She calls him the sperm donor.

There’s a desk, and above that, a corkboard. Lots of pictures. I lean in close to get a good look. There’s Peggy Sue in a dress, holding a purse. The sun’s in her
face, and she’s squinting. There’s another one of her with a boy, Robby maybe, whose hand she’s holding. In another one, she’s dressed up like a bat.

I step back into the hall, but Peggy Sue’s still talking. Then I notice another door, across from Peggy Sue’s. I put my hand on the knob and push. The door’s hollow, and it sticks on the carpet at first. Finally, it thumps open.

Inside, the blinds are shut and the air smells trapped. Another bedroom, Peggy Sue’s mom’s. I’ve never met her. I’m about to turn and go when my eyes adjust and I notice something. There’s a woman in the bed, sleeping. Mrs. Bird. Mrs. Bird is huge.

The covers are kicked off, and I can see her. Underpants, black. Toenails, glitter blue. T-shirt, neon pink, stretched into a sag at the neck. She’s on her side, facing me, and I see fat on her bare legs where her knees should be. There’s fat around her face, too, so that her mouth and eyes look small. Her hair is brown and thin. I can see her scalp.

It takes the wind out of me, looking at her. Mrs. Bird is the biggest woman I’ve ever seen up close. Out of nowhere, I feel sorry for Peggy Sue. So sorry. For some reason, though, I don’t feel sorry for the lump of Mrs. Bird in front of me. I don’t even feel like she’s real. I know this is not the right thing to feel about a person.

So I reach down and touch her hand. She’ll be real if I touch her, I think. But she doesn’t move. Her fingernails are painted blue, too, like her toes. The paint is thin and scratching off. Bits of pink nail show through.
And it's the bits of pink nail that make me sad. Like something trying to get through, out from underneath. I back out of the room and shut the door. My heart is loud in my ears.

Peggy Sue is hanging up. She wipes her eyes and smiles. Ready? She says, trying to sound hopeful, and I nod. She says, I'm real sorry about that, and sniffs. I take her hand.

When we get in the car my mom says, What took you two so long? I thought I was going to have to send a search and rescue!

Peggy Sue explains. I'm sorry, she says. The phone rang right before you pulled up and you know how that is. It's all straightened out, though. I hope you won't be late for work.

It's fine, my mom says. I've got flex time. There's macaroni and cheese for lunch, or sandwich meat. She checks the rearview mirror. Her mouth is open, and her teeth are white and straight. There's never any lipstick on them. This morning, her red hair is curled around her face and hairsprayed into place, like wings. I try to decide who's prettier, her or Peggy Sue.

At breakfast, Peggy Sue's on another planet. She doesn't want to do crafts. She won't do the sprinkler. She didn't even bring her bathing suit, like she said she would. I stomp around for awhile. Then I watch TV. Peggy Sue reads a book.

Around 11:30 I walk into the kitchen and make an announcement: I want to know why you were crying, I announce. It's not a question.

Peggy Sue looks like maybe she'll tell me. Then she says, I can't tell you.

Yes, you can, I say.
No, I can’t, she says.

I think for a second. If I were sad I’d want to talk about it, I tell her.

She just shrugs.

Is it about your boyfriend Robby because I heard you say his name. I sit down at the table and put my chin in my hands. Peggy Sue marks her page and shuts her book.

Maybe, she says. Okay. Yes.

I knew it! I say. I bang my hand on the table and lean in. So?

So I don’t want to talk about it, She says.

Not an option, I say. This is what she says to me when I beg to watch Munsters re-runs all morning long. Does he not want to be your boyfriend anymore or what?

Thanks, Eileen, she says. But she doesn’t say I’m wrong.

There are other fish in the sea, I offer. This is what my mom told my aunt Lynn when Lynn’s marriage went south.

Peggy Sue looks like she might cry again. But I don’t want another fish! She says after a minute. Then she bangs her hand on the table, too.

Is he running out on you? I ask. I don’t really know what this means.

Peggy Sue gives me a sharp look. What do you know about that? She says.

I shrug. Not a lot, really. Just that it’s something people do.

She looks down. I think he might be, she says. I don’t really know. She sighs. Then she tells me, This is what always happens.
Peggy Sue is extra pretty, prettier than all the girls at my school. Her skin is smooth and pale, and she has green eyes. I’ve always wanted green eyes.

What do you mean, always happens? I say. Have you had other boyfriends?


Your mom let you hang out with guys? Before Robby?

She nods.

I’ve never met your mom, I say. My voice is careful. What’s she like?

Peggy Sue looks at me. She’s very beautiful, she tells me. And her eyes go dead then, like something in her brain’s just turned off. She stares hard at me and says, In fact, she sort of looks like your mom. She’s tall, for a woman. Red hair. Except she’s got green eyes, instead of blue, same as me.

Wow, I say. She sounds pretty.

She is, Peggy says again. She’s very pretty. People love her.

We should get our mothers together, I say, leaning forward. The four of us could go shopping.

I don’t know, Peggy says.

We could have lunch.

We could.

Or go to a water park.

My mom doesn’t swim.

Or to the movies, I say, Everybody likes movies.

Is that a fact, Peggy Sue says, and goes back to her book.
I think of Peggy’s mother in her huge pink shirt. How she was just lying there. Suddenly, I want Peggy to tell me that her mother is a monster. I want her to say that she eats all day. If she tells me that, I’ll tell her it’s alright, my mom’s teeth are really yellow. That she dyes them white to get men. I might say other stuff, too, depending. But Peggy has to go first.

Does she live with you? I ask after a moment.

Well I don’t live by myself, Peggy says. She licks her pointer finger and turns a page.

I didn’t think you did, I say. I feel my face warm. I was just asking.

Peggy Sue nods and keeps reading.

Which drives me nuts. Because, I’m thinking, you can’t just make up a mom. You can’t just invent one. They’re assigned, you don’t get to choose them, and you sure as heck don’t get to switch them around if you don’t like the one you’ve got.

So I hold my breath for a minute then say, I’d like to meet her. I don’t completely know why I say it, except that I feel like I have to. Like if I don’t, I’m not doing my job in the universe.

Peggy looks up. Meet who?

Your mom. I want to meet the famous Mrs. Bird.

But Peggy Sue shakes her head. Forget it, she says. Not an option.

I reach over and slap her book closed. I hate it when you say that, I tell her.

Stop it, Eileen, she says, leafing through her pages. You made me lose my place.

Well why not? Why is it not an option?
Because my mom works nights and sleeps days. She’s asleep when you come pick me up in the morning, and she’s probably still asleep when you take me home at night. I don’t wake her up. Okay?

Fine, I say.

Thank you. Peggy Sue goes back to her book. As she reads, though, I notice her nails. Clean and pink, no polish. Nice length, pale moons. No hangnails for biting.

I tell her, Your nails look fake. They’re too clean.

She smiles, and waggles her fingers, and says, Thank you, Eileen, you’re a sweetheart. Which is weird, because it wasn’t a compliment.

***

The next afternoon, Peggy Sue says we should walk to the pool.

That’ll take an hour, I say. Are you nuts?

Half an hour, tops, I know a shortcut, she says.

I’m not supposed to go on big roads, I remind her.

I said I know a shortcut. You want to sit around here all day? Okay, fine. I can fill the baby pool. She looks out the window.

I hate the baby pool! I yell. You know I hate it!

Peggy Sue shrugs. Unless you can think of something better, she says. It’s up to you.
I think about it for a minute. Alright, I say. We can go. But I get half an hour of TV when we come back. And you have to make snacks.

Peggy Sue smiles. Twenty minutes later we’re on our way. It takes almost forty minutes, and when we get there, the Municipal Pool is crowded. I recognize some boys from school, so I stand behind Peggy Sue while she buys us a punch pass. The sun’s in my eyes.

Inside, Peggy finds us a couple of chairs and sets our stuff down. She’s wearing a yellow and blue flowered bikini. I’m wearing a swim team Speedo from two summers ago. The straps are knotted in the back so it doesn’t fall off when I dive.

I kick off my flip-flops. The concrete is hot on the bottoms of my feet. I’m going in, I tell Peggy Sue. Let’s go.

But Peggy Sue isn’t listening to me. Instead she’s looking around. Who are you looking for? I ask her, dancing on the hot surface. Let’s go!

Hold on, she says. She sits down on a lounger and stretches out. You go on and I’ll meet you in there. I want to sit for a minute.

Just then a boy walks up. Robby! Peggy Sue says, like she’s surprised. Then she looks at me. This is Eileen, she says. Robby, Eileen, Eileen, Robby.

Robby nods and smiles. He thinks he’s handsome, I can tell. He is handsome. He’s got wavy brown hair and freckles on either side of his nose, and a good tan. His lips are really chapped, though. And he’s a nail biter. His fingers are nubs.
Peggy Sue looks so excited all of a sudden, and I can tell she wants me to leave. So I stay.

Robby, I say. I’ve heard so much about you!

Robby smiles at no one in particular and looks around.

She means I’ve told her you were getting your license soon, Peggy says quickly.

I’m getting a Grand Am, Robby tells me, grinning. Brand new. Happy birthday to me.

Grand Am, I say. That’s a car, right? Puke, I think.

Robby’s grin fades and Peggy steps in. A very nice car, she says. Maybe if you’re nice he’ll let you ride in it sometime. Peggy fastens her smile on Robby’s face.

Maybe, Robby says, looking around again.

Robby’s a guard here, Peggy tells me.

He nods. Yep, he says. He touches a whistle on a rope around his neck. It pays the bills.

What bills? I ask.

He looks at Peggy, then back at me. The bills, he says again.

I just wondered what your bills were. Peggy Sue doesn’t have any bills, do you Peggy Sue? I look at her. She looks like a sheet, but I go on anyway. Except she wants to buy a chinchilla. You know, one of those weasel things? She says they’re smarter than weasels, though, and they’re nicer. Except for the girls, who bite each other. But you wouldn’t get a girl, would you, Peggy Sue?
Robby’s quit nodding. You want to buy a weasel? He says to Peggy.

They’re not weasels! I interject. This is exasperating. They have fur, they’re more affectionate, they clean themselves…Peggy’s probably told you all about it, though. I smile up at him. He doesn’t smile back.


In a minute, she says. I’ll be there in a minute. She doesn’t take her eyes off Robby.

So I get in the pool, and when I look back I notice Peggy Sue and Robby don’t look happy. They stand there facing each other for awhile, talking, then Robby climbs back into his lifeguard stand and blows his whistle for adult swim. I crawl out of the water and slap back over to Peggy Sue.

Can I have my towel? I ask her. She’s reading a magazine. She hands my towel to me without speaking.

Are you mad because I told Robby you want to buy a chinchilla?

She shakes her head.

Do you want to be left alone?

She nods.

I’m going to the snack bar, I say. Can I have a dollar?

She digs in the swim bag and hands me her wallet. She doesn’t look at me.

I’ll be over there, I say, pointing. She nods and doesn’t look up.

Bye, I say, trying again.

She waves and turns a page.
I’m eating a hotdog when I see Robby walk over to her and sit down. He puts his hands on her bare shins and rubs them. Peggy Sue giggles. She pretends to keep reading her magazine. Then he puts his head in her lap and hugs her waist. She throws her head back and laughs, all teeth.

I wonder what she’s laughing at. It makes me angry, watching her with Robby. What’s so funny, I think. It’s probably not even that funny.

Robby sits up and cups her face in his hands. Peggy Sue looks thrilled. Big deal, I think, chewing my hotdog. Big fat hairy deal.

Then he leans in, his tan body curving over her. He’s holding her face. Peggy Sue’s magazine has slipped off her lap. It’s on the ground, open at the spine. She doesn’t seem to notice. He kisses her. She kisses him back. Then they pull away and smile at each other. I can hardly believe it.

I don’t even want the rest of my hotdog. I can barely breathe. This is some nerve, I think. Some nerve. I’m so mad I can’t even look at her, so I go to the bathroom to fix my bathing suit straps.

I stand in front of the mirror for a long time. My hair is long. It hangs down to my shoulders in wet strings. My legs don’t touch at the thigh, like Peggy Sue’s. My fingers and toes are shriveled white and cold from the water. And I’m chattering; my lips are blue. Suddenly, I just want to go home.

I’m ready to go, I tell Peggy Sue when I come out.

Now? She asks.

I’m cold, I tell her. And I think some boys are peeing in the big pool on purpose.
She looks around. But we just got here, she said. Why don’t you splash around in the baby pool? She looks down at her lap, where she’s back to her magazine.

Because I’m not a baby, I say loudly. A few people stop what they’re doing and look over.

She squints up at me. Hey, cool it, she says. You don’t have to yell.

You just want to stay here so you can talk to Robby, I say. And that’s not fair. You’re not getting paid to be on a date. You’re getting paid to watch me.

She sits up straighter and folds her arms over her chest. So go do something, she says, and I’ll sit here and watch you do it.

My teeth are chattering uncontrollably now. I can’t believe you, I say. I throw my wet towel on her stomach and go back to the snackbar. I buy a Coke and sit there, glaring at her across the pool. I am glaring very hard and hoping she notices.

I’m glaring so hard I don’t notice when Robby walks up. Hey, he says. Eileen, right?

I nod. I take a long sip of coke, holding the cup with two hands, and don’t say anything.

Listen, I’m off shift for lunch right now, he says. Me and a buddy are going to run out and get some food. Would you tell Peggy Sue for me? Tell her we’ll be back in twenty minutes?

I give him a good hard look. You like Peggy don’t you? I say finally.
Well, yeah, he says. Obviously. He’s wearing a ballcap. He takes it off, scratches his head, then puts it back on. He’s wearing a t-shirt now, too.

She likes you a lot, I tell him. He smiles. He’s not shy at all, I realize. I wonder what he said yesterday that made her cry. I think of Peggy smiling at him, letting him touch her legs and kiss her. I can’t believe she let him.

Did you know Peggy Sue’s mom’s a big fat cow? I say suddenly. I don’t know why. I didn’t know I was going to say it.

Robby looks uncomfortable, but I can’t stop.

I mean have you met her? She’s enormous. She looks like a whale. She’s like seven of you. I mean, you’re skinny. She’s disgusting, though. You should see it. I saw her yesterday in her underwear. I almost puked.

I take a long slurp of my Coke, and then I almost do puke.

Robby’s eyes get big. I go on.

So you haven’t met her? You haven’t been to Peggy Sue’s trailer? It’s real nice. Purple on the outside, nice wood paneling on the inside. You haven’t been there?

Robby shakes his head slowly. He’s backing away.

You should go sometime, I say. You should go meet Mrs. Bird.

Okay, he says, but he doesn’t sound sure.

Okay, I say. Have a good afternoon. I’ll tell Peggy you’re running out.

A few minutes later, I walk back over to Peggy Sue. She looks up and smiles.

Sorry I was being such a jerk, she says. We can go anytime you want.
She starts to pack up, but I don’t help her. I want to watch her the way Robby watched her earlier, when he held her face. Or maybe, I just want to know what it feels like to be watched like that. I wonder what the difference is, or even if there is a difference.

Peggy Sue, I say, let’s go home and do puppets. We can make popcorn.

Come on come on come on! I’m jumping up and down now, my wet towel around my shoulders.

Hold on, she says. I want to say bye to Robby. Do you mind if I say bye to him first? She looks around.

Nope, I don’t mind. I think I saw him leave, though. He was with someone else.

Oh, Peggy Sue says. Okay. She looks confused.

I just stand there while she crams her towel into the bag.

Peggy, I say suddenly, don’t be sad about Robby! His lips were chapped!

I’m not sad, Eileen, she say but her eyes go dead again.

I take hold of her hand. It’s okay, Peggy, I say. Let’s just go. I’ll brush your hair out and braid it. Look at these tangles. And I’ll make snacks.

That’s nice of you, she says. I’d like that.

When we get home, I write another puppet show. Peggy Sue is in it. I give her a pet chinchilla Smiley, and a red-haired, red-mouthed mother. The beautiful Mrs. Bird. Not much happens, but in the end, everyone ends up in mansions with swimming pools and roomfuls of chocolate bunnies.
Afterward, Peggy Sue laughs. I laugh, too, but like a crazy person.

Something about feeling bad. Then I bow, and look at Mrs. Bird on my right hand.

She bows, too.

Later, we sit outside. Peggy says I can fix her hair, but I tell her no, my hands are tired, what with all the puppet-showing. Then we eat bombpops, five of them between us, because we can’t get enough, and because, suddenly, there’s nothing to say. Peggy picks up her magazine, and folds the cover back. I listen to the radio until Mom comes home.
In Cuba
This girl goes out to get some stories, out around the bend. In bars she smiles, smokes loud, hollers, Which one of you wants to be my man! when her money runs out. And the boys with sense all blush, all look into their beer.

You think I make this up? She says. Her eyes back in her head. Cause I love all you all, she says. Waving her arms at the room.

Somewhere back in somewhere her brother’s growing up, starting second grade. King of Smelly Knees. Little sugar baby. But her mama said, Don’t come around here until you get yourself right, and that was four years ago and now look. Sick in a bathroom all over again.

She went home once, when she was twenty, said Mama please I want to know the truth, Are there or aren’t there missiles in Cuba, is there or is there not a crisis? But it was the wrong question, and her mama pumped her stomach for the bright in her eyes.

But now. Here, inside this stall, the stench of shared places. And there. And everywhere. And outside, in the bar’s dark, where friends look at the TV and think about love songs.

Her mama said, You are what you are.

Tomorrow, though, in a room in a house in a neighborhood people rent, she will remember summer. Sun in the trees, and walking younger barefoot. Cuba’s shores a speck.

This will be her story, the one she left to get. And when it is over, the boys she knew will know her, too, and they will bring her flowers.
Summer Kill
I’m fourteen when my uncle Bobby tells me this story about my dad.

Bobby says:

He killed these two dogs. (This is after your mother left.) It was June, warming up outside, and the guy down the street decides to let his dogs run. You want to let your dogs run, fine, but these were big dogs, rotties. These dogs bit.

So your dad goes down the road and says to this guy, Get your dogs chained up or else. I got a kid at home. Your dogs chased my kid.

(This is before leash laws and such.)

And the guy tells him, Fuck you man. Get off my property and all this. The guy says, Maybe you should keep your kid chained up instead. He shuts the door in your dad’s face.

Which is a bad idea.

So your dad says okay. Alright. He goes in there that night, into that guy’s yard, with a pound of ground beef and antifreeze and says, Here boy, Here boy. Until the dogs come over and lick the fence.

Your mom would have croaked.

When he told me, afterward, I asked what it looked like. Which was weird, maybe. I don’t know. Because your dad just stared at me. He said it looked like two dogs dying on antifreeze. He said you can’t really explain.
Which made me wonder.

So I asked him again, Well, what’d they do? Those dogs, I mean.

Because I’d never killed anything before. I never had. And I guess I wanted to know.


He wasn’t drinking a lot then, no. But he wasn’t doing great, either. (This is after your mom took off.)

Then one night a month or so later he calls me up.

I would have shot those dogs, Bobby, he says. Bullet to the head, for being in my yard. I would have done it sooner.

Which is your dad for you.


And it’s not your fault she left.

(I can hear him on the other end, thinking.)

And now you got a kid to look after, I say. You got to start thinking about that.

For a long time, he’s quiet. Then he says, This is the dead part, right Bobby? The part of it that’s worst?
And I say, Yeah, Buddy, it is, it better be. And I laugh.

Because what do I know. Hell.

But that got me thinking. About the worst of it and all.

Because your dad—he killed those dogs. But who knows, I was thinking, how he felt when he was doing it.

Or even if, you know, he ever came home after.
Brother/Man
I’m fifteen and my dad’s just died and my brother Peter Patrick’s spun out on speed, trying to start conversation about where we come from, figuratively.

It’s beyond what humans can know, Tommy, he says, and pats himself for cigarettes. He’s slouched down on the sofa. I mean, he says, it’s huge. Where do we come from? I don’t know. We’re just born. Not made, born. Doesn’t that blow your mind? I mean, doesn’t it?

I look over at him, then back at the TV. What does that even mean? I say.

It means you are who you are. I mean, you’re only sixteen—

Fifteen, I say.

Okay, He says, but you got good blood. It’s like me. We got this whatever inside us, this, just, feeling. Spirit, I don’t know. Makes us want to bust out. You know what I’m saying? Brotherman?

I shake my head. Don’t call me that, I tell him. It’s stupid.

He shrugs. It’s like, nobody’s going to fuck with me, you know. That kind of thing. I mean, he says, do people fuck with you, Tommy? Do they? No. No they do not. You are what you are.

I look over. It’s almost dark outside and Peter Patrick’s face looks bruised in the living room light.

You’re freaking me out, Petey, I tell him. For the love of God.

And he stops, like he’s thinking about that. After a minute he says, Yeah? And then he smiles all his teeth at once, like he’s in a TV interview. Like he’s just been nominated for class president.

And I say, Yeah. Geez. Just cool it, okay?
Petey laughs this big laugh and taps a camel from his soft pack. I'm right, though, aren't I? He says. He points his cigarette at me. Aren't I?

I don't know, I say, but he makes me smile anyway. I don't know why but he does.

After awhile Mom comes home from work with Chinese food and says, Oh, Peter Patrick, what a nice surprise you still live here. She sets cartons of sweet and sour pork on the coffee table and goes into the kitchen.

Petey looks up. He puts on this big wounded face. Then he says, What crawled up her ass and died? He says it just loud enough so she can probably hear.

I pick up the remote and click off the television and turn to look at Petey, because I don’t get why he has to be such a dickhead all the time. I look at him hard and at first he looks hard back, then he looks away and sticks his cigarette between his lips.

Can't smoke in here, I tell him.

He turns and stares at me.

Why do you have to be such a prick? I ask. I mean seriously, I say.

And he says, Why do you have to be such a mama’s boy, no wonder you probably get your ass kicked all the time. Acting like a mama’s baby.

You’re sick, I tell him then, and it’s the first time I’ve said it, ever. Look at you, I say.

And for some reason he does, he looks down at his jeans and sneakers.
Then mom comes back in with forks and says, Tommy share with your brother, I think there’s enough to go around if we all share. But Petey’s not hungry, so mom and I eat by ourselves.

After dinner we watch the news, all three of us, and after that mom goes upstairs to do bills. I turn off the TV and open my Algebra book, and pretend not to notice Peter Patrick, who’s staring at me like I just hatched.

Don’t you got to be someplace? I ask him. I don’t look up.

But Petey just sits there. I see him shake his head out of the corner of my eye.

Listen, I say. I know what you’re into, okay? And it’s stupid. It’s the stupidest thing I ever heard of.

Petey stands up, then sits back down. He stares at the blank TV.

And I know you’re nineteen, I say, and your life’s a wreck, and you’re having this big woe-is-me-I-got-a-dead-dad party for yourself all the time, woe-is-me-I’m-a-community-college-dropout, but seriously. Just don’t bring it around here, you know?

What? He says.

What? I say. You know what. Don’t bring it around. Okay?

One time when Petey was little he got his head stuck in the wrought iron bars of the railing on our front stoop. Nobody knew he was out there at first, and then he started hollering. And mom was like, How the hell, yanking and pulling while Petey just screamed louder. He wouldn’t stop screaming. Finally she had to grease him down, and afterward, Petey just sulked. He wouldn’t eat dinner, he wouldn’t talk to anybody. I think he was embarrassed. He was the way he was, even then.
Petey stands up again and shrugs on his jacket

Where are you going? I ask him. I can hear the upstairs TV. Mom's watching Dateline.

Maybe you should ask yourself the same question, Petey says. Where are you going? When you die, I mean? And he laughs this wild laugh, his eyes creasing up.

I stare at the buttons on his coat. I feel sorry for you, I tell him, finally.

Petey throws his hands over his heart. Wow, he says. That’s heavy.

He walks to the front door. I hear the TV turn off upstairs. When he turns around, his eyes are hard. His smile is small and mean. I feel afraid to be his brother.

I feel sorry for you, too, Tom, he says. He pulls a lighter from his coat pocket and makes the flame tall. He shakes his head. You got to know, he says. I really, really do.

Then he’s gone, and I watch him out the picture window. His body bright in the streetlights, walking off, going where he goes. Wherever he goes. Upstairs, the TV comes on again, Jane Pauley’s voice loud in the house. Tonight on Dateline, Jane Pauley’s voice says.

When I was little my dad left for a year because he had a girlfriend in Des Moines. Where are you going? I said to him. He was packing his suitcase. And he said, Away for a little bit, got to get some space to think. Talking to me like I was grown up. When he came back, I was in braces, and that was a year of my life gone.

I think about what Petey says sometimes, about how we’re both of us like him. Like that’s anything to be proud of. Like he’s anyone we know.
I don’t bring a jacket, even though the air is cool. It’s October out, and dark, and there are still yard leaves. I call out to Petey, but he’s disappeared. Then I call out again, because I think I see someone. Where are you going! I shout, and a light comes on in the house across the street. Just one light. But no one answers back.

* * *

Two blocks over and around the corner, there’s a playground. Petey got arrested there in high school for drinking with his friends. He was sixteen. The cops just pulled up and took one look at him and that was it. They said how old are you, and Petey choked and said eighteen, which could go down in records as the world’s dumbest lie. Then he got to take a ride in the squad car, where Petey said the cops said things like what a shame he was, and what a bad influence on kids. But I don’t know if I believe that.

I walk down there, because it’s a thing to do. There’s nobody around, though, so I sit on a swing and shuffle my feet in the dirt. The wind is up and the other swings move, chains creaking. The moon glares off the slide. After a while Petey walks up, and I’m not surprised because I knew that, eventually, he would.

He says what are you doing here and I say what are you and we look at each other for a minute. Then I notice he’s not alone, he’s got a girl with him, but she’s standing behind him and to the side and her face is turned away.

So I point and say, Where’d you find her?
Petey says this is Karen Crawley and sort of yanks her by the wrist so that she turns around. Karen waves quick like she’s waving me away and then she looks at Petey.

I’m Tommy, I tell her. Peter Patrick’s brother. I don’t know what he goes by to you.

She nods. Her jeans are on too tight, and low. I wonder how she moves around. She looks younger than him.

Karen and me here were just enjoying the night air, Petey says. Enjoying a hiatus from the demands of family life, and then low and behold here you are. What a pleasant surprise.

He looks like he could murder me.

Then Karen takes his hand and looks up at him, like she wants permission. Peter told me about your daddy, she says suddenly.

Oh yeah? I say, but I’m not looking at her at all. Instead, I’m looking at Petey. You got the whole story?

Karen nods, Yes, she says, the whole thing and I think it’s so sad. The two of you left to take care of your mom while your daddy plays around with some girl half his age. I think it’s sick.

It is sick, I tell her.

I told Peter if there was anything I could do he should let me know. I’m real busy with volleyball right now, but I can still help out. If there’s something you need, meal-wise or something.
That's nice of you, I say. I cock my head and I can feel the smile on my face, and how it's not a real smile at all, but something strange and different.

Then Petey whispers something to Karen, and she drops his hand. Over by the monkey bars, he says, and she goes and stands to the side.

Volleyball, I say to Petey.

Go home, Petey says to me.

I want to talk, I tell him. Send her home.

I'm not sending her home, Petey says. He lights a cigarette and exhales through his nose. He looks worn out.

You're hurting mom, I tell him.

He frowns.

Hello?

I heard you! He says.

I mean, are you losing your shit or what? This girl's sixteen, maybe. I think she goes to my school.

I expect Petey to look crazy in the face, to at least say something crazy. He doesn't, though. He just stands there. He doesn't look angry either, just lonely, and I see for one half second how he must look to Karen. Like somebody who wants something, and isn't smart enough to get it.

I got stuff to do, I say. I turn around and walk past the monkey bars. Past the slides and swings, away from the playground and onto pavement. I think maybe Petey will come with me, I think that's what I want, but he doesn't. He doesn't call after me at all.
Then I hear Karen laughing. Swing me, Peter, she’s saying, Swing me high!

And something about her laugh makes me turn around, because it’s filled up with everything she doesn’t know yet. With what she wants from him and won’t ever get.

She laughs again, and I see Petey behind her, pushing. Higher? He says. You want to go higher? And she laughs and says yes and Petey pushes harder. And he keeps saying, Higher? Higher? You said higher? And the chains are snapping, doubling up on themselves, so that she’s jostling hard on the down swing and holding on tight. I see her holding on. And he says higher? You like to go higher? And finally her voice is different when she says, No, Peter no, stop it Peter please. Please.

But Petey doesn’t stop. Please? He says. Please? He laughs a loud windy laugh.

Karen kicks the air with her legs, trying to slow down. A clump of her hair gets caught in her fists, she’s holding on too tight, and she screams.

Petey pushes harder.

You want to fly then fly, he’s saying, pushing, panting it out.

Karen’s screaming Stop, please, stop, and then so is Petey, he starts shrieking too, Stop it Peter, he’s screaming, Stop it now, then laughing. It’s the sound of the fear in both of them that makes me want to vomit.

Then I remember something. Once, when Petey and me were younger, dad was home from Des Moines and things were getting back on track, Petey took me aside and said it’s not your fault he left. He didn’t leave because of you.
And I thought he was joking, because I knew that. I never even thought he did.

So I said, Thanks, Petey, thanks a lot, and nodded. Petey said you’re welcome, and he nodded too, and I could tell he thought he’d really taught me something.

I jog back to the playground.

Knock it off, I tell Petey when I get there, but he doesn’t look at me. Karen’s face is wet and blank with terror where the moon hits it.

Did you hear me? I say. Around my feet, grass grows up through bleached out asphalt.

I’m sorry, Petey says. Because this is an A and B conversation? Right Karen?

Karen hiccoughs, a small crying sound.

She knows I’m right, Petey says. So maybe, baby—Petey looks hard at me—maybe you should just C your way out of it? He laughs again, and bats hard at the swing, sending it twisting.

I bend down, then, and claw a piece of asphalt loose. I hold it for a second, thinking how sharp and pale it is. And when I throw it, and when it hits Petey’s face, I think: I’ve killed you, Peter. And the thing is, there’s nothing even attached to that.

Then Petey screams and holds his hand over the bleeding. Karen stumbles off the swing and the sound of her breath is fast and ragged and mixed with mine and Petey’s, so that I can’t tell who’s breathing hardest.

And all of the sudden, I want to say the worst true thing.
My dad left because of Peter, I tell Karen.

Karen stands up, and brushes dirt off her jeans. She brushes her face dry with the back of her sleeve.

Because Peter can't treat people right, I say. I look at Petey. And everything he touches turns to shit and dies.

Karen runs a hand through her hair and shakes her head.

Fuck him, Petey says, stepping toward her. Hey.

But Karen backs away, and says, slowly, Don’t call me, ever. Do you hear me?

Petey shrugs. When she walks off, he doesn’t stop her. Instead, he stands there looking beat, and I say, because I have to, You lied.

He stares at me for a long time, then, a scrape of black blood on his face. He lights another cigarette. Finally he says, So did you.

And I want to scream, No, Peter, look! Okay? Please? Because I think maybe we can help each other.

I don’t, though. I don’t say anything. Instead, I turn around and walk home. When I get there, the downstairs is dark and Mom’s in her bedroom on the phone with her sister. I walk by and wave and she smiles and waves back.

I don’t fall asleep until late.

The next morning, Petey’s gone. I lie in bed and think that maybe, last night, he went home to the wrong house, the one across the street that turned the light on when I called. Or maybe, I think, he’s on the front porch, deciding to come home, or sleeping on the swings, or next to Karen Crawley. But I know he probably isn’t any
of those places. Then I think that maybe, he just forgets himself, and what it means to
be, and has to go away, high and scared and screaming out his name, in order to
remember.
Buddy
It’s Friday night, and I make fish sticks and tater tots for Buddy and me, just like always. I open up the house and turn on the oscillating fans and make fresh lemonade and turn on Wheel of Fortune and sit there, like always, watching Vanna White light up those letters to spell TAKE ME DOWN TO PARADISE CITY. Buddy loves Vanna White. Last week he said he thought she was hot and I told him he didn’t know what hot was. I told him he was 13. He just shrugged. I wondered who this guy was, this new Buddy, this Buddy who thinks Vanna White’s a babe. I wondered, because it’s not my Buddy, that’s for sure.

I sit on the sofa with my plate in my lap. Buddy sits in the EZ Boy recliner in front of the picture window. He likes to swivel. He sets his lemonade on the sill behind him, then every few minutes he whips around to take a drink. Sometimes he whips so hard his chair hops and thumps a dent into the wall, and when that happens I tell him you’re a crazy man, quit acting crazy, eat your fish sticks. Usually he just giggles, takes a drink, rocks slower and doesn’t take his eyes off me.

People say Buddy’s slow. Which he is, but mostly he just doesn’t push himself. Like if you say, “Buddy, tell me the president of the United States and who he beat,” and Buddy’s in the mood, he’ll tell you. Or, same deal: “Buddy, what’s 25 plus 13?” He can tell you, because he can do concepts just fine. That’s what this specialist told our mom when Buddy was five. He just has a hard time paying attention.

Buddy’s 13 now, and that doesn’t help things, either. This Vanna White business, for one. He goes to normal middle school, but he has a teacher, Miss Sara, who helps him stay on top of things. She helps him keep all his homework in a
folder, and if it looks like Buddy’s not staying on top of things she calls me. Buddy doesn’t like it when that happens, because then I make him do stuff around the house he doesn’t like to do. Like sweep. Or clean gutters. I tell him stay on the ball at school and you won’t have to clean gutters, Buddy, and he pouts and swivels around like a maniac in his EZ Boy, but he always cools off. We stay on track alright around here, Buddy and me.

I’m twenty four, and sometimes Buddy asks me if I like being eleven years older than him. I tell him yes, I do, it’s nice. But, I tell him, we’re going to have to figure some things out, because I’m not sticking around here forever.

Then, sometimes, he gets to feeling pretty sorry for himself, since his goldfish Herman died last month. He says, I hate people dying on me, and by that he means Herman (not a person, but try telling that to Buddy), and our mom and our dad.

When he gets to going like that, though, I’m just like Earth to Buddy, nobody does, and usually that shuts him up. Last time he started getting really down, I said, “Don’t you have fish stick dinners and clean underpants and have a smiley day notes in your lunch bag? I don’t see what the problem is.” And he said he was sorry and that he really did like those fish sticks, especially the new ones I’d been buying. I said, “Well, there it is, then.”

That’s just another example of how we get through things.

Anyway, after dinner, Buddy goes upstairs and starts listening to music. “The Devil Went Down to Georgia” on repeat, his favorite. He likes the fiddle, I guess, something about the energy, and when I walk by his bedroom sometimes I see him shaking his brown head in time with the music. His hair’s longer than I like it, and I
keep telling him to get it cut. I said you’re going to end up with a mullet if you don’t get a trim. Buddy’s his own guy, though. When he wants a cut, he says, he’ll get one.

Tonight, though, I’m not thinking about Buddy’s mullet. I’ve got a date. And not like that getting-to-know-you BS I went on with Ron Heiderman the week before last where he took me to the Lakeside Lanes and made me pay for my own shoes, either. This is the real deal.

Which is why I don’t tell Buddy that I’m going. Part of that’s because A) it’s none of his business, he’s 13 and I’m what, like, fifty already? and B) Buddy has this thing about me leaving him. Which is embarrassing. I guess he freaks out because of the whole Herman, etc. situation, but sometimes before I leave the house he does this panicky thing like he can’t breathe. Most of the time I think he fakes it, but it makes me feel awful, anyway. He scared my friend Jeanie so bad she won’t come back. I told him last time he pulled that number that if he tried it again I’d sell his Charlie Daniels CDs to strangers when he wasn’t home. So far so good on that front.

Anway, our house isn’t much to look at, and we don’t have people over that often, so when my date Nelson pulls into the driveway an hour after Wheel of Fortune I open the front door right away. I call up to Buddy, “I’m going out for awhile. Don’t stay up late.” I listen for a response.

“Hold on,” I holler to the driveway. Nelson’s half out of his car, a boxy silver Tercel, but I hold up my hand for him to wait.

Inside, I hustle down the hall and clump up the stairs to Buddy’s room.

“Aren’t you going to say bye to me? I called up to you.”
I’m thinking about how I don’t have time for this, and about how if he has one of those cat fits again dear lord I’ll make his life a sick sad story for so long, he doesn’t even know. Sometimes Buddy gets sullen, like talking or even thinking zaps all his energy. But I try not to put up with a whole lot of that. When I ask you a question, I’ve told him, I want an answer.

Tonight, though, he just looks at me. Finally, he says, “You look like you’re going out. Are you going out?” Something about the way he asks me that, makes me want to run back downstairs and tell Nelson to go on without me. To call me another time.

I don’t, though.

“So you’ll be okay then?” I check my watch. Nelson’s probably walking up to the door right now. I don’t want him to come in. I don’t want him to see the mountain of cheapo paper plates in the kitchen trash, or the cracks in the brown linoleum in the entryway. Not like he’s the catch of the day, I’m pretty sure about that, but you never know.

“You could’ve said something. Earlier. I was going to see if you wanted to play battleship later.” Buddy kicks his legs against the end of his bed and sighs.

“Buddy.”

“What?”

“We can do that anytime. Tonight, even, after I get back. Okay?”
Buddy nods. I tell him that’s a way, don’t stay up too late and maybe if he gets some work done I’ll bring home some leftover cheesecake or something.

“Cheesecake?” He says. “From where?”

“Where do you think?”

Buddy brightens. “You’re going to Olive Garden?”

I nod.

“Then get that kind with the little chocolate shavers on top. See if you can get extra shavers.”

I nod again, blow Buddy a kiss, and clump back down the stairs. I’m wearing a pair of brown Payless clogs and they feel like they’re about to slip off. Not to mention I sound like I’m wearing jackboots when I go up and down steps. My slacks are fitting a little tight these days, too, which is Buddy’s fault, I think. He’s the one who has to have those damn fish sticks eight nights a week. I’ve probably got a big greasy fish stick growing on its own inside my main artery, thanks to him.

I step out on the porch and wave to Nelson, who doesn’t see me because he’s fiddling with the radio. That’s when I think, panicky, that maybe I shouldn’t go. Nelson and me met at the DMV earlier that week, both standing in line to get our licenses renewed. I was wearing something new, feeling noticeable, which, apparently, I was. Now, though, I feel queasy. Tired, too. I take a deep breath and pick my way across the lawn.

“I don’t have air conditioning,” Nelson says to me first thing when I open the car door and hop in. “Broke on me last week.”
"That's okay," I tell him. His seats are vinyl, though, and I can feel the underneath of my thighs baking up like fried chickens inside my khakis.

I realize, on the way to the restaurant, that Nelson's a talker. You like Italian? You ever been to Italy? You look sort of Italian, where your parents from? And on and on. He can make conversation out of anything. At first I feel like who wants to play twenty questions. I'm just ready for some of that free Olive Garden salad, and maybe a beer or two. And when we get to the restaurant, and Nelson's going full speed there, too, I just think *No rest for the wicked, Dear Lord.* He talks to the hostess, talks to the waiters, smiles and laughs and even does that little "gotcha" thumb and index finger gun move every once in a while. He's like a Senator, only his canines are kind of yellow from smoking. He's not wearing an undershirt either, and if the light hits him just right I can see chest like a cavity through his white button down shirt.

But he's nice enough, I decide, after a drink at the bar. And when he looks at me I feel like he's looking at me, which is something.

"You ready to order?" He asks, once we sit down. His front teeth are large and square, and he's always chewing on a toothpick. I don't know what I think about that. A waitress stands over our table, pen ready. She looks tired, too.

I point at my Bud Light, and the waitress nods. "Maybe just another minute with the menu," I tell them both.

Nelson settles his eyes on me. This is the part where we look at each other and talk, I remind myself. But I'm exhausted.

"You're a nurse," Nelson says.
I nod.

"An ER nurse?"

I shake my head.

"What kind of nurse?"


Handle what? I'm thinking. Then I remember the day before last when Mr. Fitz peed the bed and I swear it was on purpose because he couldn't get his pain meds upped and he's certifiable anyway. I'd said something like, "You pee that bed one more time Richard Fitz and I'll call psych ward and see what they can do for you."

Thinking about it now creeps me out, though, because I'm never like that with people.

"I like my job," I tell Nelson. "Sometimes I get tired, you know. It's hard working with old people a lot of the time. They don't think about things the same way we do, and they're cranky, and a lot of them don't have people to come and visit. It's just a different deal."

Nelson's nodding at me, pushing some salad around on his plate with his dinner fork.

"But the old people? You do hospice care, or no? Or is that another field?"

"Hospice? I mean, some of these people are in their nineties."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that yeah, some of them die. Last week we had one guy check in with a strep infection and he only lasted a couple of days." I look around. Not a lot
to talk about, I realize. So I fasten my eyes back on Nelson, and think about what to say. “It’s pretty sad,” is what I come up with.

The waitress comes back and takes our order. I’m thankful for a break in the action. It’s like I’m on “This Is Your Life” or something. Or, maybe, “Is This Your Life?” Geez. When she leaves, though, Nelson’s right back at it.

“So you live alone? By yourself in that house?”

I stare at him. “I’m sorry?”

“You live alone?”

I peel off the label on my beer, then fold it into triangles. Then I nod. Nelson nods too. “And that’s...?”

I take a long drink of water. “Fun?” I say, finally.

“Fun,” Nelson says. He sits back. “I guess it would be. Having all that space. I’ve had a roommate since college. I don’t know what that much privacy’s like.”

I smile, sort of. “It’s great,” I tell him. “Really, really... great.” And I nod, again, and chew a hangnail on my pinky.

When the waitress brings our dinners, it seems like a good idea to get some wine. I notice Nelson’s eyes pop when I order a bottle, but I reach over and squeeze his hand and he seems to relax a little. He even squeezes my hand back. I feel his foot brush my ankle.

It takes us awhile to get through the bottle. We talk about how Nelson’s working at the Enterprise Rent-a-Car just until he gets his band off the ground.
“We’re really good,” he says, and I laugh so hard wine comes out my nose. Nelson laughs, too, sort of.

“I’m not laughing at you,” I say. I can tell he doesn’t believe me.

Then Nelson asks me all these questions about being a nurse, like he thinks I’m on some inside track or something. Finally, I grab his wrist and look at him straight.

“For the love of God, Nelson, you’re killing me. Okay? With the questions and the this and the that about sick people.”

He looks at me like he’s deciding to be offended. But I break my face into a laugh and then he does, too.

“Seriously,” I tell him, taking a long red gulp. “People get sick and then they kick it. It’s the circle of life and all that crap. Not a whole lot of mystery there, you know?”

I fork a piece of broccoli chicken into my mouth and smile. Nelson looks away.

When we’re done, we look at each other fuzzily. Our lips and teeth are purple. Nelson’s face looks sort of puffy.

“You look all puffy,” I tell him.

“So you do,” he says.

“Want to go?” He asks.

I shake the empty wine bottle, tipping it upside down. “Not a drop. I think it’s time.”
We make it to the car and Nelson fumbles for the keys at the lock. He’s not even good looking, I realize. Not at all.

“So you work tomorrow?” He asks.


“That’s a toughie,” Nelson says.

I nod at the window. “A toughie,” I repeat.

It’s almost midnight when we pull up to my house. The lights are off. Nelson cuts the engine and turns his puffy purple face on me.

“I had a real good time,” he says.

“Me too,” I tell him.

“You okay to get inside?”

“I’m fine. Thanks for dinner. It was... nice.”


“Just nice?” He says. Senator Nelson. I can see something waking up in his face. Something telling him to close the deal, Nelson, she’s about to bolt.

“Fun,” I say. “It was fun. I had a good time.”

He twists toward me. The way the streetlight’s hitting, I can see his nipples through his shirt. It makes me want to puke.

“Well, that’s good,” he says. He touches my face. “I had fun, too.”

I nod. “Yep, that’s good. Good deal. Sure enough.” Except he’s looking at me like we’re sharing something, though, and still touching my face.
I reach up to take his hand off my cheek but he grabs my wrist. All the sudden there’s ice in my fingers. He just keeps smiling at me. Twenty hundred purple teeth.

“What are you doing?” I say.

“What are you doing?” He says. Then he drops my wrist and settles back in his seat.

“I’m going inside,” I tell him, reaching for the door handle. “That’s what I’m doing.”

I don’t what I expect then. For him to try to keep me here, maybe. He doesn’t, though. I’m thinking it’s not because he doesn’t want to, but maybe just because he doesn’t have the balls. Half of getting what you want in life is having balls, and Nelson’s a little deficient in that department, I’m thinking.

So like I said, I don’t know what I thought was going to happen. I don’t have time to think about it, though, because just then there’s a light on the lawn. The front door’s opening and Buddy’s in the doorway. I’m so happy to see him I could cry.


And all of the sudden, here’s Buddy knocking on my window. He’s in his Batman jammies, but he doesn’t look like he’s been sleeping yet. I crack the window.

“Hey Bud, I’ll be inside in a second, okay?”

“Who’s this?” Nelson says.

Buddy shakes his head and taps the window. He motions for me to roll it all the way down.
“Who’s this? What’s the deal here?” Nelson keeps saying, looking at Buddy then back at me. Like he’s seeing double.

I ignore him, roll the window down, and take a big breath. “What, Buddy?” I ask. I’ll be inside in a second, can it wait?”

Buddy reaches in and takes my right hand. He picks it up and drops it. He does the same thing to my left hand. Like he’s looking for something.

Then I remember. “Buddy, I’m so sorry,” I tell him. He looks panicked.

“You said you’d get me extra shavers!” He whispers.

Nelson looks panicked, too.

“And I waited. I waited up.” Buddy’s whimpering now, sort of hopping back and forth from foot to foot. I don’t go in for that bit, either, though, and he knows it. I don’t know what he thinks he’s doing. “You said,” Buddy yelps. “You said!”

Nelson leans over me and looks at Buddy. There’s a quiet second between them. Finally, slowly, Nelson speaks. “Annie said she lives alone,” he says. He hiccoughs, then, belching back his wine. “Who are you?”

Buddy’s upset, but when Nelson says that he just stops. Stops hopping, stops whining, stops dancing around. He stops asking about shavers and steps back. He doesn’t even look at Nelson, then. Just at me. He doesn’t stop looking, either.

“Buddy,” I start, but he’s tiptoeing, backward, across the lawn. His Batman jammies are almost too little for him, and his ankles look see-through in streetlight. He’s still looking.

“Only kid?” That’s what Nelson had asked me at dinner. I’d said yes.
I stumble out of the car. I don’t even think I shut that door before Nelson’s in reverse and out the driveway. It doesn’t matter. All I want is to get to Buddy and explain. My legs are blocks, though, wine in the blood, and I trip and rip my pants on a stick. Buddy won’t come close to me, either. He’s standing on the porch, arms down.

If I could, I’d tell him what I told Nelson, about how people really die. How it happens in little pieces over lots of days, and how that’s nothing like this. I’d tell him how no one’s changing this deal we’ve got going, and how he shouldn’t even worry. We shouldn’t even be out here, is what I’d tell him, because there’s nothing to be afraid of in the first place.

I can’t tell him that, though. He won’t come near me. I look up at my brother, but he’s no one I know now.
Hoffentlich
At dinner my mom says how was school and I tell her fine, the principal came to talk about Germany, and she says what about it and I say I don’t know, IT, and then from upstairs there’s the sound of my dad writing love songs to God, which is what he’s been doing for, like, a month.

Which is the entire problem.

How long is he going to play that stupid guitar? I say, and my mom shrugs.

I say, Does he even know it’s dinner? And my mom rolls her eyes and shouts RAYMOND! DINNER! PRONTO! until the playing stops.

Then my dad comes to the table all excited, going, I just wrote this great chorus! And, The guys are going to love it!

My mom just says GREAT.

So my dad gives her the look, which means don’t even, Cindy, DON’T EVEN, which is also the entire problem. That is, the giving of looks, and the saying of GREAT at the table when GREAT is clearly not meant.

After my dad lost his job at All-State last month he started writing music, and “jamming” in our basement with these lamo music guys from First Presbyterian. Then a couple days ago he said he thought, maybe, who knows, this could be his last chance? And, also, this thing about being who he was for Jesus? To which my mom just said, Does being who you are for Jesus pay our water bill, oh wait, no. It doesn’t. Geez. Freak this. And she got up from the dinner table and left.

Tonight, though, we eat together in peace. Because I tell them about my day, and about Germany, and about how hoffentlich, which is our principal’s last name, means ‘hopefully’ in German.
So I know a German word, I say, and shove a forkful of cheesy potatoes into my mouth. I chew, and swallow, and beam.

But my mom gets up and takes her plate to the sink and says, That’s great, baby, but hopefully’s not a word. Not in English anyway.

And she stands there for a long time, thinking.

Then my dad says, That’s okay, sweetheart, no big deal, and reaches across the table to pat my arm.

When he does, though, I pull away.

Doesn’t exist, my mom says. Isn’t that funny? She runs some water in the sink.

My dad stares at her back.

She says, But it’s a common mistake.
ESSAYS

(These stories aren’t true. They’re just related to things that might be.)

Memo From Bridesmaid #8

WOF

Marguerite
Memo From Bridesmaid #8
Last weekend I was a bridesmaid in my cousin Kelly’s wedding. Kelly and I are very different. One difference is that she does not have hangnails. I do. Sometimes I don’t mind them, and sometimes I just bite them off. Sometimes I clip them with the fingernail clippers, which I find satisfying.

Another difference is that I don’t smell like gin. She doesn’t either; she smells like very expensive Vera Wang oil, but her bridal party does. Every one of them. Especially Stephanie, this very awful girl who went to high school with Kelly and me. Stephanie married rich. Now, she just wiles away her days drinking and expressing adulation for Jessica Simpson. For example, I overheard her tell Kelly, “I just hope you and Brad are always as happy as Jessica and Nick, and as beautiful!” Anyway, after a couple of hours with Stephanie I wanted to shout, “Gin is NOT a fragrance, you fat ho!” But I didn’t, because after a chat with my mother in the coat room I realized that it’s not about me all the time.

Another difference between Kelly and me is that I think people should be who they really are and not try to be someone else just to fit in. Okay. Just kidding. I don’t really think that. A lot of people shouldn’t be who they really are—like Stephanie, or Kelly’s completely annoying husband, or people who want to hurt animals. You know who you are.

Anyway, I highlight these examples of the differences between Kelly and me to point out something very important about weddings. That is: You don’t have to like or even really know the people you ask to stand up with you before God and everybody on the day you yoke yourself permanently to another flawed human being. You don’t.
It’s a good idea, though, to ask the people who like you to stand up with you on that day. When you don’t, things can happen. Last weekend, for example, I was sort of blanking out and forgot to take my bouquet up to the front when we lined up after communion. Also, when that happened, I was being sort of passive aggressive, because I was like, so what if I forget my bouquet. What are you going to do about it. That’s right, nothing. And I have to admit it was exhilarating, breaking with the program in the middle of the program, if you know what I mean. This isn’t widely accepted behavior, but sometimes it’s necessary and rewarding work.

Disgruntled bridesmaids aren’t smiling bridesmaids, either. And who wants to spend $50,000 on a production where your actors don’t smile? For example, there are in existence now approximately seven hours of video footage documenting wedding and pre-wedding festivities. I am glowering in all seven hours of that footage. In fact I think there’s a thunderbolt in my left hand in one of the shots. Maybe it’s forking down from the swirling black portal that sort of followed me, Ghostbusters-style, all weekend. It’s hard to say at this point.

Anyway, there are several shots of me when I think no one’s looking. Most of the time I am staring at Angie, Bridesmaid #3, who has abnormally thick facial hair for a twenty-four year old woman. I am fascinated by Angie’s facial hair, and by the rest of the world’s apparent decision to overlook this flaw and let her be a big fat bitch anyway. Sometimes I am staring at Carrie, Bridesmaid #4, and thinking, “If you say ‘awesome’ one more time I will cut you.” Other times I am looking at the hot appetizers and wondering why, WHY, are there no more chicken satays. You can actually see my mind at work in these shots, because I look at the buffet, glower, and
then look over at the groom’s friend Teddy (whose plate I saw LOADED with satays) and glower some more. In one shot I am eating cheese cubes off of some child’s plate. Again, I thought no one was looking.

Maybe everyone in the universe is nicer than me. That’s probably what my mother would say. “If you have to tear others down to make yourself feel good,” she’d say, “then there’s something wrong with you.” She would pause, and then add: “You need to work on your attitude toward others.”

And she’s probably right. I probably need to be more awesome. Because maybe gin is a fragrance. Maybe Teddy needed those satays, or else he’d starve. Maybe Angie needs that abnormally thick facial hair, to keep warm and dry and winter. It does snow a lot back home.

Then again maybe, at Kelly’s next wedding, I’ll feel like smiling more.
WOF
My uncle Harry lives in a rich neighborhood. His neighbors are CEOs and
big-time middle managers. One guy runs a toilet paper company. Another guy runs
Worlds of Fun. Worlds of Fun is the Six Flags, the Magic Mountain, the baby
Disneyland of the Middle West. At least until you get to St. Louis, where they
actually have a Six Flags. Six Flags is nice because you can’t just get in with a coke
can and a ten dollar bill. You can’t just wear your swimsuit and a fanny pack and a
pair of reef shoes and pass it off like an okay thing. At Six Flags, you come
appropriately clad and shod, or not at all. No jelly sandals, no debate.

Not so much, at Worlds of Fun. At Worlds of Fun, it’s always a balmy
hundred and seven degrees. That’s because the empire of WOF, as its employees call
it, rises from a black asphalt slab so large it owns its own weather pattern. Sort of
traps the heat and then rain happens, that sort of thing. And at WOF, there are no
dress codes, except for the workers, who are costumed, alarmingly, like pirates and
jungle animals.

Despite these factors, though, WOF is a place where magic happens. People
lose their virginity there. I personally know four girls who gave it up, or an important
part of it anyway, on the Zambeezee Zinger. Also, people fall in love. One time this
guy bought me a stuffed dolphin and said if I wanted to page him later or whatever it
was cool. I said do I know you, have we met before and he said girl, I been checking
you out all night. He pulled a cigarette out of his pocket and put it behind his ear. I
said I’m here with my friends and I have to go, but thanks for the dolphin, that’s
really sweet. He was like bitch that ain’t your dolphin, shit, and grabbed it back and
walked away. I personally never fell in love at WOF, but I heard about lots of people who did.

Anyway, I don’t know the guy’s name, Harry’s neighbor, the WOF owner. I think his name was Mike. (There are a lot of Mikes in big-time management.) This is, however, not my point exactly.

My point is that Mike had a son named Paul, an oddly Germanic-looking member of his otherwise Kansan-featured tribe. That is to say, while Paul’s parents and siblings looked like Bradys, Paul looked like Thor. It was, diplomatically speaking, something you noticed. Looking at Paul, though, you might have noticed other things, too. Like, for example, the way he tucked in his shirt all the time. Or his complete ineptitude in most social situations. Or his total lack of self-awareness, or humor.

It was painful.

Paul asked me to Homecoming with him sophomore year. He was new in town, his daddy having just, over the summer, purchased his controlling interest in KC’s WOF empire. Paul said if I went with him, he might be able to get me some WOF tickets. I said okay, I’d go if his friend Mark would ask my friend Megan and we could double date. And all get WOF tickets. Negotiations proceeded into the eleventh hour, but Paul finally agreed. A bargain was struck.

Dinner was the proverbial disaster; the dance was worse. I like to think Paul was the one holding us back, although in fairness, I think I was feeling like I was working a little too hard for a couple of WOF tickets for Meg and me. I think I started feeling like hey, Meg could get her own WOF tickets. I started thinking, Why
should I have to ride around town all night in Paul’s stupid camaro, just so she could
get a free pass to the largest Sunglasses Hut on earth?

And then, midway through the Homecoming dance, I realized Paul had still
not produced the tickets. So I think I said something. Where’s my WOF tickets, I
think. And all the sudden he was like Michael Jackson, all, people only hang out with
me for WOF tickets and all this, it was like this in Minneapolis, too. And I was like,
You’re from Minneapolis? And he was like Yeah, that’s where WOF’s world
headquarters are, and I was like, I have family in Minneapolis. And there was a
pause, as though we’d reached a moment of commonness and sharing, and he was
like, what part? And I said the north part, and he said that’s a pretty big part, I mean,
do you even know what neighborhood? And there was something about his tone that
was so condescending, like here I am, heir to the WOF fortune, and all the sudden I
wanted to backhand him, which was pretty much how I’d been feeling all night.
What neighborhood. The Hamptons, Paul, the Hamptons of Minneapolis.

So it was a culmination of things but I said take me home I want out of this
freaking dress anyway, and at first his eyes sort of lit up like maybe that meant
something, but then I hollered across the gym floor to Megan who was slow dancing
with a guy Dominic who looked like he meant it. And Heather was over in a second
and I said we’re getting out of here, get Mark, and that was that.

When we got to my house Paul said, Well I guess you realize there are no
WOF tickets. Then, coolly, catching Mark’s eye in the rearview mirror, he added,
For you anyway. And I shook my head, because I didn’t know Paul had it in him.
Good luck getting a ride in this camaro ever again, Mark piped up from the back seat, and then I think he and Paul high fived or something.

Inside my house, Meg and I died laughing.

We saw the two of them at WOF that next summer. They were ride operators. Paul was tarzan; Mark, unfortunately, had been cast as a female lion. “Welcome to the jungle, boys!” Meg hollered at them as we walked by. I think they looked at each other in deep shame.

My uncle Harry had other neighbors too, like the Mob. But big deal, right? The mob didn’t drive a bitchin camaro. It didn’t look Viking. And of course, it was nowhere close to being Worlds of Fun.
Marguerite
My mom’s friend Marguerite hasn’t had a job since Reagan’s first term. That’s when her husband got rich, and she got pregnant. Now, though, she’s tired all the time, and no one knows why. She thinks it’s because of a bunion.

“Honey, I put this weight on last year when I had that bunion on my foot and couldn’t get around,” she says. We’re sitting on my patio talking, and she’s just walked seven miles: her house to mine and back again twice.

“I didn’t know you had a bunion,” I say.

“Honey, let me tell you something.” She pulls a cell phone out of her fanny pack, glances at it, and shoves it back in. “If you ever get a bunion, and I hope to GOD you don’t, but let me tell you something, sweetheart, if you do, you just remember this one thing. Okay? Alright?”

“Okay,” I say.

“You just tell that bastard you ain’t gonna give up. Okay?” She takes a long drink of Crystal Light. “You just look that thing right in the eye and you tell it, Hey Mr. Bad News! Mr. Bad Actor! That’s right! I’m talking to you, Mr. ‘I’m going to ruin your ambition and your motivation and your simple ability to get out of bed in the morning’! You get that thing’s attention and you don’t let go.”

I smile, but I don’t know why. It’s creepy. Marguerite’s got all this time on her hands so she cuts and dyes her own hair. It’s like somebody got to it with a machete and a home-highlight kit. “You’re talking about the bunion?” I say.

“I’m talking TO the bunion,” she says. “I’m talking to the cancer on your foot. Because that thing will do everything in its power to make you feel like crap. It will come at you from every angle, it will say whatever it has to say, it will do
whatever it has to do, to make you feel bad. It’s sick. It doesn’t leave you, either.
You don’t just cut it off and say ‘Bye-bye Mr. Discomfort! Hasta la vista night and
day blinding pain!’ I had to have surgery to get rid of mine, and I tell you what, there
are days I wake up and STILL feel it. Because I lived with it for so long, you know,
and suffered? I mean really suffered? It’s like I told Herman last week. That
bunion’s in my blood.” She sits back, unzips her fanny pack again and produces a
tube of lipstick. “I mean,” she says, smacking, “I’m a very intuitive person.”

I nod. It really is scary. “But it’s not cancer, right? I mean, technically? It’s
like, a growth?”

Marguerite stares at me.

“...Or I could be totally wrong...”

“You are wrong,” she says. “Cancer, sweetheart, is whatever eats your spirit.
It’s whatever makes you feel like you’re not God’s child.”

“But they don’t have patches? At the drugstore? I think there are these
overnight creams...”

“Honey, there isn’t a patch in the world strong enough to fight off what that
bunion did to me. Have you ever been bedridden? Have you ever woken up in the
morning and just felt like, How in the hell am I going to get out of bed today? How
am I going to do it?”

I nod slowly. “Yeah, I guess. I broke up with this guy once, and I was in this
really bad place emotionally—”
"Right," she says. "Ha ha! Details are details, we’ve all been there. Anyway. Take that feeling and times it by ten, is what I’m saying. And that’s what a bunion does. It doesn’t mess around."

"Wow," I say. "Nuts."

"We’re strong, though," Marguerite says. She slaps her thighs. "Women—we don’t mess around! And that’s why I could fight it off. Because I knew there was so much to live for. And if I was in bed all the time, sleeping off the painkillers the doctor gave me for that bunion, I would miss all that. All that beautiful life." She takes a long drink of Crystal Light and beams.

"Like other people’s weddings," I say. I look at my watch. "Or funerals."

She nods. "Or, like, yoga."

"Right," I say, "Or even just, you know, walking. Seven miles. In a day."

"Honey," she says, "I’ve been so tired lately, it’s a miracle I can walk anywhere."

And, for some reason, I believe her.