

The Space Around Them

by

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A thesis presented for the B.A. degree
with Honors in
The Department of English
University of Michigan
Spring 2009

Readers: Keith Taylor and Peter Ho Davies

This is dedicated to my father,
who has read these stories over and over and over.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank several people for their cooperation, advice, and constant encouragement. First and foremost, thank you to Keith Taylor and Peter Ho Davies for their diligent reading, edits, and suggestions. I owe a lot to my earliest teachers, including Davelyn Kafka, Tony Salmeto, Suzanne Hosner, Amanda Pringle, Jack Driscoll, and Mika Perrine. Thank you also to my most recent instructors, Michael Byers, Craig Holden, and Tish O’Dowd. Thank you to my friends for their good humor, attention, and answers. Of course, thank you to my mother, my father, my sister, and my brother for offering all sorts of support and inspiration. And thank you to Ben for everything.

Abstract

This thesis is comprised of four stories. While the narrators in the stories differ greatly, they all face the trial of gaining a personal awareness that allows them to extend themselves out to others. This might seem like a fairly ubiquitous conflict—we all deal with relationships and are hindered by our own judgments and perceptions. But I think the very fact that this experience *is* universal is what allows it to translate so well into fiction. The characters are average people, which, I hope, makes them accessible for the reader.

The theme of space, both real and metaphorical, is significant in each of these stories, particularly in how the characters sequester themselves from their own scrutiny and the scrutiny of those around them. Through events as common as graduation parties and school dances, to struggles as difficult as illness and death, the characters are able to step out of the spaces they have kept themselves inside and move into new spaces both much larger and more challenging.

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We Want To Believe We Deserve To Be Loved

From the back porch of their neighbors' house, Rob noticed the tattered newspaper stuck in a bush in his yard. He hadn't seen it before. It was hidden from the windows. He should remember to pick that up. Or maybe Joyce would see it. Probably Joyce would see it and she'd leave the graduation party and walk down the Dangos' driveway around the chain link fence and up their own driveway to the backyard where she'd yank the bleached paper from the bush's branches and clench it in her fist and shove it in a trash can. That's what Joyce did. She went around grabbing things that didn't belong and she put them in their proper places. Like the toothpaste, for instance. Rob always left the toothpaste out on the sink because, well, that made sense. No one else lived in their house, so no one else would know, or care, if the toothpaste was on the sink or in the cabinet or even in the toilet. But every morning, he left it out on the sink, only to have it disappear, back into the cabinet where it "belonged." They never talked about it. But he knew.

Next to him, Joyce was talking to one of the Dango relatives. One of George's brothers, he thought. She had started talking with him while at Rob's side, but as the conversation went on and Rob declined to jump in, she had turned more and more towards the brother and now she had her back to Rob. She wore a tank top with straps thinner than her swimsuit and the paleness

of her tan lines stood out against the brown of her skin. He could see beads of sweat forming between her shoulder blades.

“We just moved here a few months ago,” Joyce was saying. “It was so nice of the Dangos to invite us. We’re new to the area.”

Mallory and George had rented a tent for their son’s graduation party. It was blue and underneath it, people sat at long wooden tables, sweating and fanning themselves. The sun was low in the sky (Rob and Joyce had arrived late) but the day was still steamy. On the deck though, there was a small breeze and Rob kept sipping from his cup to stay cool. It was a screwdriver. Probably with too much vodka. That was Joyce’s fault. Not fault, exactly. Her tendency to over pour drinks was one of the things that made him fall in love with her. It was kind of cute but also, in her eyes, efficient. She did not like to waste time.

“We’re from Michigan,” she was saying now. “I just started grad school at Duke and Rob’s working at the NPR station.”

The Dangos had an awfully nice yard. Rob decided that his least favorite thing about moving into a real house was taking care of the lawn. Here in Raleigh the grass grew a lot more than it did in Michigan. Yet the Dangos’ lawn was meticulously kept. Forty-year-old George went out there almost every morning with the push mower, smiling and shirtless, showing off his deltoids. Sometimes, Rob thought as he finished his drink, he hated the Dangos.

Suddenly, Joyce’s hand was on Rob’s elbow. She was still talking with the man, but her hand was a sign that he needed to wake up and join in. He turned around, leaning against the railing.

“No, no, not yet,” she said and by her smile, he could tell she was talking about the wedding. It was that smile she had that was both huge and thin. Her face, even with her tan,

flushed red. It was the smile she made when she opened a present she didn't really like. "We don't have a date picked. We just got engaged a few months ago."

"Well, buying a house is a pretty big step," the man said and raised his eyebrows. His face, full of creases, reminded Rob of a bulldog. He had the largest teeth of anyone Rob had ever seen.

"Well, sure," Joyce replied, still smiling. "I guess we're just doing things out of order."

"And houses don't come with anniversaries," Rob said. The man kept grinning with his huge teeth. Joyce laughed with her eyes open.

"Excuse me," Rob said. "Gotta get a refill!" He scooted around Joyce and opened the sliding screen door to go into the Dangos' house. Everything was dark for a moment as his eyes adjusted. He thought if he took a step, he might stumble into someone. Inside on the kitchen counter, behind the homemade salsas and fruit trays, Rob could see an array of liquor bottles out for guests. Some of the high schoolers were drinking. Rob had seen one of them grab a bottle of tequila when he thought no one was looking and stick it up his polo shirt. But the Dangos probably didn't care. They seemed to let Brian do whatever he wanted and he'd turned out fine. A partial scholarship to MIT. Couldn't complain about that.

To get through the kitchen, he had to shove his way through a crowd. The house smelled like paprika and flowers. Most of the people inside were women in sleeveless blouses and denim skirts. Why did everyone here look like Mallory and George? He hadn't seen the hosts at all, just their family members. There were kids, too, mostly teenagers, but some younger. Under the kitchen table, a small girl in shorts and a juice-stained t-shirt banged a Barbie doll against the floor as though she wanted the head to break off.

Surrounded by all of these people he didn't know suddenly made him think of Anne. She came up unexpectedly, like how you remember things when you first wake up. First happiness

and then guilt. He saw her shoulders, small and petite, and the mole above her collarbone, and then, in a flash, how firm her feet looked in high heels.

Anne was the classical music producer, the only person at the station who had ever asked him to do anything after work. They'd gone out a couple of times, once with the station secretary and twice alone. It never occurred to Rob that there might be anything wrong with what they were doing, not until the last time when she'd had three amaretto sours and he had more beers than he should of, and in the parking lot, in the darkness, away from the streetlamps, they'd kissed just once, but deeply and almost like it was a habit, something they'd done before, and then they'd gotten into their separate cars and driven their separate ways. The kiss sobered him and he drove the whole way back with his hands steady on the wheel and his foot gentle on the pedal. When he got home, Joyce was asleep on the couch, her hand on the remote. Her mouth was open. He'd let her stay there and gone upstairs and sat alone in their bedroom for a long time with the lights off. He stared at the wall, which was covered with a striped wallpaper that hurt to look at after a while. His hands, so steady before, had begun shaking just a little.

Rob blinked. A middle-aged woman with large arms opened a bag of barbeque chips and poured them into a basket. Other women moved around the kitchen, placing more food and two-liters on every available surface. Everyone seemed to know exactly where to find something and then where to put it. It appeared they had the kitchen memorized, although none of them lived there. He still didn't even know where to find bowls in his own kitchen.

At the Dangos' counter, he made another screwdriver as strong as the one Joyce poured him. When he graduated from college the spring before, he assumed his drinking days were over, that now, as a real man, he'd just have a beer or two on Saturday afternoons. Instead, he noticed he'd been going out more and more. If he and Joyce had a weeknight free, they usually went to a martini bar or a nearby Irish pub. Somewhere noisy. Now he wondered if he should

bring her a drink. But she already had a cup and he wasn't sure how close she was to finishing it. It would be annoying to give her another cup. She might not even want another cup. And it might look bad. If she wanted one, she could come get it.

Back outside, Joyce was alone now. She had her arms on the deck railing and her butt stuck out a little. He tried to remember how he'd seen her when they were first dating, or even when they were first engaged. It was hard—living together made everything change, somehow. Joyce was always there. He always knew right away who had made the bed, who left the mail on the counter. Who moved the toothpaste. It was good and bad. Good because it was something he didn't have to worry about, but a little bad, too. There were no surprises anymore. They owned a house, she had a ring, and that was that. And that should be fine.

"Hi," Rob said as he joined her.

"Hi," she said. Her freckles that summer had exploded across her face, spreading from cheek to cheek. She looked sad. Her cup was, in fact, empty and balanced on the railing. He handed her his.

"Here," he said. "Have some." She took a drink. Rob watched the muscles in her throat move.

"Want to get out of here?" he said.

"No," she said and handed the cup back.

"I want to go home."

"Why? We've hardly been here."

"I don't know," Rob said and he didn't. He didn't really want to leave but the image of Anne made him uncomfortable and he wanted a change of setting. Maybe that would help. He suspected sometimes that Joyce knew, if there was anything to know (the kiss with Anne was wrong, yes, but only the kiss, just that, really). The day after his last date with Anne (but it

wasn't a real date; he shouldn't even use that word), he had a voicemail from Joyce waiting at work, asking him if he was coming right home. It scared him, but rationally, it was just a coincidence. She had probably wanted something from the store and hadn't gotten it on her way home from class. That was it. She could have called his cell phone, but she didn't. It was probably so unimportant that she'd forgotten about calling at all.

"We should sit over there." She pointed to an area under the blue tent where there was a space at a picnic table.

"Why?"

"Because. We should meet some people."

"Why?"

"Stop being obstinate."

"Obstinate?" he said. She took his cup again and drank from it.

"I'm going to go make my own," she said and, sighing, handed it back and went into the house.

That morning, he and Joyce had had a fight. It was small, like most fights, but bitter. Joyce had wanted to go to the mall and pick things out for a gift registry but Rob said doing that would be pointless this early. Joyce replied that yes, it would be pointless, seeing as how they didn't even have a date yet. Well, they'd pick a date soon; they'd barely settled in. How much settling does it take to pick a date on a calendar? Well, why did they need a registry anyway? Registries are how people knew what to get without repeating each other. And they could check on-line. Well, that was stupid. What did people do before the internet? They had paper registries at the stores. What did they do before that? Lots of people have gotten married without registries. That's not the point, she just doesn't think Rob's committed. Etc, etc, etc.

The fight ended with Rob hugging Joyce and promising her that he'd start researching reception halls back in Michigan. He had wrapped his arms around her, pinning her arms to her sides until he could feel the heat of her body and the rapid beating of her heart, like a small animal, caught and terrified. That only made him hug her harder, but his heart started thudding, too.

When Joyce reappeared on the porch, cup in hand, she looked at Rob but kept heading down the porch steps, towards the tent. He followed, not because he felt he had to, but because he saw no other option.

She took a seat opposite a man who wore a green t-shirt but under the blue tent, it looked a little turquoise. He was blond and tan and while the tent affected his t-shirt, it did not affect his chiseled cheekbones. Rob caught up with Joyce and sat down as she was introducing herself.

"And this is Rob," she said without looking at him, "my fiancé."

"That's a nice house next door," the man said.

"It's got a hot tub," Joyce said.

"Nice." He raised his eyebrows. His name was Chad. He was a high school science teacher.

"Science!" Joyce cried. "That must be so hard." Sometimes, Rob thought, Joyce acted very drunk and loud when she was not drunk at all.

"It has its moments," Chad said, grinning. Like the man on the porch, his teeth were huge. It must be a Dango thing. "We just dissected owl pellets. It was pretty, well, disgusting." Joyce laughed, hunching her shoulders forward.

"What do you do, Rob?" Chad asked.

"I work at the NPR station."

“Oh yeah? Like, All Things Considered and all that?”

“Yeah,” Rob said, staring at the tabletop. The table was covered with a sticky blue vinyl and near his elbow was a mustard stain. “We broadcast that, anyway.”

Next to Chad were two girls who, according to their introductions, were also cousins of Brian’s. One was a brunette and one was a dark blonde, but otherwise they looked identical.

“When’s the wedding?” the blonde asked. Her lips were colored blood red.

“Never,” Joyce said, smiling and sipping from her drink.

“Soon,” Rob said.

“How was the proposal?” the brunette asked excitedly.

“Well.” Joyce set her cup down with a pop. “It was very romantic. Rob took me to dinner.”

“Oh!” the blonde squeaked.

“And then we went to this park, where we had one of our first dates, and Rob, well, you know,” she said. Rob thought she really was talking too loudly.

“That’s so sweet!” the brunette said.

“Yeah,” Joyce said. “And very creative.”

“Oh my God,” Rob said. “It was the best I could do.”

There was a pause. Someone at the table, Rob couldn’t tell who, had left a plate of half-eaten chicken wings and tortilla chips. Whenever the breeze slipped under the tent, the smell of the chicken carried into the air. It made the orange juice in Rob’s stomach stir uncomfortably.

“How do you like North Carolina so far?” Chad asked.

“Love it,” Joyce said. She raised her glass. Chad laughed and knocked his cup against hers. There were sweat stains under his arms.

“I’ve never been to Michigan,” the brunette chirped. “Is it cold?”

“In January, yes,” Rob said and tipped his cup back. Almost empty.

“Rob, honestly.” Joyce tapped his shoulder, almost like she was flirting, which she wasn’t, he was sure. She laughed, but kept her face turned. He thought about putting his arm around her then, to see if that would maybe make him look nicer to these people, but he didn’t think it would, so instead he grabbed his empty cup.

“Anyone else need a refill?” he asked as he stood. No one did.

When he first proposed, he felt empowered and completely sure of himself. He loved Joyce, he really did, and she filled his thoughts. Well, sort of. She filled the back of them. Wherever he went, whatever he did, she was in the back of his mind. At the end of the day, when they met up after class or studying, they were consumed with each other. The proposal alone changed their relationship for months. It was the best decision that he’d made in his entire life, he had told himself, relieved and determined to believe it.

In the Dangos’ kitchen, he made another drink. There were less people than before. It was cooler inside, now that doors had been closed and the air conditioning had circulated. He thought of Anne again, now that he was away from the tent. He felt less guilty thinking about her here. They had been alone only once since that night at the bar, when she’d approached his desk while everyone else had gone out to lunch.

“Rob,” she said. “Hi.”

“Hi,” he said, staring at his computer monitor. Rob wasn’t sure how he felt, then—if he wanted to talk to her or not. If he should.

“So,” she said. Sometimes, when he looked at her out of the corner of his eye, she reminded him of Joyce. They were exactly the same size. “How’s it going?”

“Fine,” he said. His desk, he noticed, was very messy.

“So,” she said again. “About the other night.”

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“Well, I just—” she paused. “I guess I just want to clear things up. I mean, I know you and...and your fiancée are, well, engaged.”

He didn’t know what to say, but he couldn’t bring himself to look up at her.

“Yeah,” he said.

“So, I’m really sorry,” she said and he glanced up at her. Her hip was cocked and her arms were crossed. She didn’t look comfortable, but she didn’t look upset. She just looked like she wanted to go.

“Me too,” he said and looked away and then back at her, feeling redundant and ugly and very, very mean.

“I guess I’ll see you around,” she said and smiled. It was a tiny, thin smile. Then she turned around and walked away.

“Okay,” he said, but he was sure she could not hear.

By the time the sun had set, Joyce and Rob were still in the Dangos’ backyard and several drinks in. The mosquitoes had come out, but they seemed to avoid the area under the tent. The Dangos’ supply of liquor was endless. Joyce had worried, she whispered to Rob as they sat under the almost empty tent, that North Carolina would be full of uptight conservatives and teetotalers, but now she knew, “This was the place to be!”

“We could go in our hot tub,” Joyce drawled, looking from Chad to each of the girl cousins. “I mean, it’s getting a little chilly out here. It might feel good.”

“Yes!” the blonde yelled, shooting her fists in the air. Rob wanted to put his forehead onto the table.

The hot tub was the biggest thing that had sold them on the house. The neighborhood was a little out of the way, far from the downtown where other people their age lived, but the house had a hot tub and, of course, a yard. And thank God for the yard.

The five of them stood up and left. As they passed the deck and headed to the driveway, Rob finally saw Mallory and George. In the twilight, they looked younger, smaller even. George had his arm draped over Mallory's shoulder and she had her hand in his butt pocket. With his free arm, he scraped the grill and they both laughed at something but Rob couldn't make out what.

The group walked around the chain link fence and up Rob's driveway. Joyce had insisted on locking the house and they waited while she fumbled for her key. Inside, the place was dark and cool. No one turned on any lights. Joyce led the two girls upstairs to borrow bathing suits while Rob took Chad out onto their porch. It seemed tinier than it ever had before after so much time on the Dangos' deck, but there was the hot tub.

"This is sweet, man," Chad said. "You guys got it made."

"Yeah," Rob said. "It's nice."

"Seriously. A house. A yard. A fucking hot tub."

It was a clear night and the stars were out. Rob was still hot, but the breeze had picked up and getting into the water didn't sound so bad to him.

"It's okay," Rob said. "But, you know."

"Sure, sure, I know." Chad seemed to be snickering, but Rob wasn't really sure why. Rob wasn't even sure why he'd said what he had. He couldn't think of anything else to say.

The girls came down and somehow, in slow motion, everyone got into the hot tub. Rob remembered to take his wallet out of his shorts' pocket and set it on the deck floor. Chad

stripped down to his boxers. Everyone still had their drinks and their arms hung out above the water, like they were playing some sort of balancing game to see who could hold out the longest.

“This is paradise,” one of the girls said. Maybe it was Joyce, but he didn’t think so because she probably didn’t feel that way.

Up above, the stars looked like they were shining brighter than usual. The breeze had stopped and other than the bubbling of the hot tub, everything held still. Chad started telling a story about a blind date he went on where the girl turned out to be his dental hygienist. The girls all giggled but Rob, his body heavy, sank a little lower into the water.

He wondered what it would be like to go on a date with Anne, a real date. Or what it would be like if they’d met at some other time, before he knew Joyce. But wait—he couldn’t think like that. That was not fair. Joyce was it. Joyce was the one. That’s why they were here, outside in this hot tub, in beautiful North Carolina, looking up at these unmoving stars. Because if he was wrong, if Joyce wasn’t the person he should be with, he’d never be able to tell if anyone else was better. Not better. Just right. He tried to remember how he felt about things before he met Anne. Anne maybe wasn’t even all that great. He hardly knew her. Probably it wouldn’t go any better than with Joyce. But most likely it was all just him. Rob felt hot and smothered, partly from the water that was up to his shoulders, but when he sat up and opened his eyes, the feeling was still there.

Joyce laughed all of a sudden. He could hardly tell, looking at her laughing in the almost-dark, if her eyes were open or not, but he imagined they were. The juice in his cup was tepid now and he thought about pouring it over the edge of the tub onto the grass, but he didn’t. Everyone laughed then, and one of the girls said something that sounded like a song lyric but Rob couldn’t make out any of it. His drunkenness has reached a point of dulled sobriety where things were no longer fun, they were just happening around him.

What seemed like a minute later, he saw shadows of limbs climbing out of the water and heard more voices rising. There was Joyce, wrapping a towel around her waist, wringing out her long hair. Everyone else seemed to have vanished.

He wanted, he realized, for Joyce to be completely and totally unaware and apart from this. He did not want to tell her his thoughts, his fears, his incredible inadequacies. She might even know already, or suspect, which would just make it worse, because she was still here, still waking up next to him in the house they had bought together, in the home they had made.

Someone was talking to him. It was Joyce. Everyone stood on the deck, drying off. It was very dark.

“Rob, get out of the hot tub,” Joyce said, looking at him. Now he could see the whites of her eyes. In the back of his mind, deep down, her words began to make sense.

“Get out of the hot tub, Rob,” she said. “It’s time to get out.”

Valentine's Day

If either of my parents was to have an affair, it seemed most likely to be my mother. But it wasn't. Or at least she didn't get caught. No one suspected my father until the car accident, the winter I turned twelve. At one in the morning on a Saturday in February, my mother got a call from the hospital. A voice on the phone told her that her husband had hit a patch of ice in the road and crashed into a tree. He was in stable condition, though he'd suffered whiplash, and would have to remain in the hospital for a few hours. They'd given him a bed, and he was sleeping. The passenger, the hospital attendant told my mother, was unharmed.

"What passenger?" my mother asked. Both my little brother and I were awake now, having heard the phone from our bedrooms. I still remember the strangeness of waking in the middle of the night to her voice from down the hall, loud, not like she was trying to be quiet.

"Well," my mother said. My brother and I came into her room as soon as we'd woken up, watching her as she sat up in bed, her nails glowing red against the white sheets. "That's good to hear. I'm glad she's fine." She hung up then and told us to go back to sleep.

Neither of us did. Instead Robbie came into my room, and we sat on my bed together, with a blanket over our legs. We waited.

“What happened, Anna?” Robbie whispered. He was seven then and still sucked his fingers, although our parents were trying to get him to stop. Instead of his thumb, he sucked on his pointer and index fingers, clenched together between his teeth.

“I don’t know,” I replied and told him to try to go to sleep, but neither of us lay down. Time passed and eventually his head fell onto my lap and he slept. I tried to rub his back and stroke his short hair the way my mother did when he woke from a nightmare or when he fell off his bike, but I was afraid of disturbing him. I slept a little, my head against the wall. A few hours later, close to five a.m., I heard my mother get out of bed and go downstairs to the kitchen. She fumbled in the cupboard, and then the coffeepot started grumbling. Soon she came back up and walked to my room. She opened the door and looked at Robbie and me on the bed. She was wearing her bathrobe, which was a light blue, but in the dark, it looked silver. I could smell the coffee in her mug.

“You’re still awake,” she said. Robbie started when he heard her voice and sat up. She didn’t sound surprised. Her dark hair fell over her shoulders, almost to her elbows. She only wore her hair down when she was sleeping. With her hair against the silvery robe, she reminded me of a snow queen I’d seen in a movie once.

“I’m going to see your father in the hospital. If you want to come with me, you need to get dressed,” our mother said and then she moved down the hall to her room.

My mother worked as a real estate agent. She started the job when Robbie was old enough for kindergarten because she said she needed to get out of the house. At the time, my dad joked that she’d just end up spending all of her time in other people’s houses.

She had only been working a little over a year, but the refrigerator was covered with flyers of houses she was showing or had already sold, each with pictures of perfect rooms, neatly

made beds, and shiny new appliances. One of the flyers had a photograph of a bedroom and on the bed was a sleeping cat. Underneath the picture, it read, "Cat not included."

Our own house began to take on the feeling of those houses pictured on our fridge. Once she started showing homes, it seemed as if our home had to be ready for showing, too. She bought new curtains and funny little vases that sat on the mantel above our fireplace. She told me we could paint my room a new color so it wouldn't be a baby pink anymore, maybe something like maroon. I didn't like maroon, but I didn't say anything and we hadn't gotten around to painting it, anyway.

My mother got a new car, too. It was a black SUV, from a company that had a name that sounded like something from outer space. She kept it as clean as our house and when Robbie and I got in to go with her to the hospital, she told us to knock the snow off our boots first. There was hardly any snow on the ground and the walk from the front door to the car was short, but we stomped our boots on the cement and climbed in. I usually sat in the front, but that time, I helped Robbie buckle and set next to him as my mother started the car.

When we got to the hospital, the sun still hadn't risen. Small snow drifts were scattered around the huge parking lot. I'd never been to the hospital, and as we approached the entrance, at first it reminded me of the shopping mall where my mom took me to get school clothes. The stone building was illuminated by the light coming from the parking lot lampposts. Above it, the sky was cloudy and gray and, higher up, solid black. The air was freezing cold, and by the time we got inside, my ears were numb. My mother never stopped to ask for directions to my father's room; she must have gotten the room number on the phone. Paper hearts and doilies were taped on the walls in some hallways. It was almost Valentine's Day. I wondered what they did for Valentine's Day at a hospital. Not many people were around, except for a woman with a mop and a man who rode on a strange machine that reminded me of a Zamboni to wax the floor.

My father was lying in bed, with his legs under the covers. I expected the room to have a strange smell, something sour and medicinal, but I smelled nothing. The room was still. He woke when we entered and turned to look at us. His eyes met my mother's briefly, then looked down at me and Robbie. We all waited for my mother to say something, but she didn't.

"Are you okay, Dad?" Robbie asked after a moment.

"Sure I am, Robbie. Just a little sore," my father said. He had a cut on his chin, and from where I stood, it looked like a line of dried red ink. I tried to imagine my father crashing the car. I thought of him as a careful person. He wouldn't let me use the stovetop on my own until the year before when I'd turned eleven and he watched me make scrambled eggs. In the summer, he rode his bike a lot, sometimes with Robbie and me on ours, and he always made us wear our helmets. His own helmet was blue with metallic stripes and Robbie said it reminded him of the Power Rangers.

"When can you leave?" my mother asked.

"Later this morning. They wanted to check some x-rays, but I should be out by nine or so."

"Your car?" my mother asked. I wondered why she said, 'your.' The thought of my father in his small black car sliding across the road reminded me of his helmet. I imagined it on his head. His face looked yellowed and sunken and his hair, the same brown as Robbie's, clung to his head in thin strips. He was a tall man, but the hospital bed was even bigger than him.

"I think it's totaled," he said. Just then, a nurse came in and yanked open the blinds, then checked a machine on the wall. She smiled at us and left. Then there was just silence. Robbie sat down in one of the room's chairs. I followed. Robbie started kicking his feet, knocking against the legs of his chair. It made a plunk, plunk, plunk sound but no one told him to stop.

My mother stood silently, not looking at anybody but watching out the window, as the early rays of sunlight slipped up into the sky, first gray, then, slowly, pink.

That Monday at school, I told my best friend Natalie about the accident.

“Is your dad okay?” Natalie asked. Her mother always packed her lunch. Today she had a peanut butter and sugar sandwich, a bag of Fritos, and some grapes. I usually packed one, too, but that morning I was running late and grabbed change from the jar near the front door. It was Pizza Day, but the limp square of pizza on my tray didn’t look much like pizza. I took a bite and set it back down.

“He’s fine,” I told her. “The car is ruined, though.”

“Does that mean you get a brand new one?” Natalie wore her hair in braided pigtails everyday because she wanted to turn her straight hair wavy. I had told her I didn’t think that would work, but she wanted to try. Today, one of her pigtails was braided a little longer than the other one.

“I don’t know. It depends on insurance, my mom said.”

“Why was your dad out that late? My parents always go to sleep before, like, ten, even on the weekends.” She opened her bag of Fritos and offered it to me. I glanced down at my pizza, and then reached for a Frito.

“I’m not sure. I think he was coming home from a work party or something.”

“Whoa, what if your mom was with him? They both could’ve been killed!” Natalie cried. She popped a grape in her mouth.

I didn’t want to tell Natalie everything I’d heard my parents say on the ride home from the hospital, because I wasn’t sure what it all meant to them. My mother had plainly asked him who it was in the car and he told her. She turned out to be a co-worker, a woman who worked

down the hall in the graphic design department. She was a woman we all knew, whom we'd met at my dad's work parties in the past. Her name was Christie, and once when I was nine and got to spend the day at my dad's office, she came in to ask if he wanted anything from Starbuck's. She looked at me and smiled and asked if I wanted something, maybe a hot chocolate? I only remember she had black hair and bangs that she curled up over her forehead.

"You're going to the Valentine's Dance on Friday, right?" Natalie asked. I shrugged.

"Anna!" she cried. Her voice was high and carried easily. Some kids at the next table looked at her. Natalie was tiny and jittery and always full of energy. After my mother first met her, she told me she thought Natalie was going to be a cheerleader in high school. "Watch out," she'd said to me. "Choose your friends wisely. You don't want to get hurt." I'm not sure why she said that. My mother had been a cheerleader, or at least I had seen pictures of her at my grandma's house, shaped like she was now, only younger, wearing the white pleated skirt with a confidence that looked sincere, like she knew exactly what she was doing.

"Anna, you have to go to the dance." She leaned across the table and bent down to my face. Her breath smelled like peanut butter.

"Ethan's going," she whispered. "I heard him talking about it in math. And he doesn't have a date," she added and sat back down. I was silent for a minute.

"It's not like he'd dance with me. I've never even talked to him." Ethan Brown was a boy I watched from a distance, during assemblies or out on the playground after lunch. Once when Natalie had pestered me over and over about what boy I thought was the cutest, his name was the only one I came up with.

"How do you know? I'm totally positive he would," Natalie said and ate another grape. My pizza was cold and I slid it into the garbage can next to us.

"I'll ask him, if you want. He sits right in front of me!" Natalie said.

“Don’t. I’d be so embarrassed!” My face reddened so deeply that I glanced around to see if anyone was looking. The bell rang and we stood and headed to the doors of the cafeteria.

“Promise me you won’t say anything to anybody,” I said and Natalie waved her hand around. She painted her nails a different color every week and today they were teal.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” she said. “Only if you promise me you’ll go to the dance.”

“I’ll try.”

“Good. Now we just have to decide what to wear,” she said and turned down the hall, towards her locker on the other side of the building.

“Bye!” I called, but she couldn’t hear me through the mob of students, filling in the space around her.

The days at home following the accident were quiet. My mother drove my dad to and from work so she could have the car to go to the real estate office in the afternoon. She dropped me off at the middle school first, then my dad at work, and by then, it was time for Robbie’s elementary school to start. He slept in the car for most of the ride, but my mom brought him a plastic bag full of Cheerios for when he woke up. The drives were silent except for the radio, which played a news station I didn’t like but my parents listened to so intently that they seemed to be expecting something.

Dinners were quiet, too. After my mother picked my father up from work, she came home and went into the kitchen. My father sat on the couch and watched television, usually news, until dinner was ready. Robbie liked to play with his trucks on the floor in front of the TV and usually my dad shushed him to quiet down, but that week he hardly said anything to any of us.

One night, Robbie asked about the new car.

“When are you getting a new car? Can we get a convertible, like on TV?”

“I’m not sure, honey,” my mother said. She stabbed at her plate and scraped her fork against the surface, missing the spaghetti. “We don’t have the money yet.”

“I could look into getting a company car,” my dad said. “They offer them. I’ve just never thought about it.”

“You’ve gotten enough from that company, I think. Don’t you?” my mother said. When she talked to him that way, her cheekbones stuck out more and her eyes shone like small, black bullets. My face got hot and I looked down. The conversation stopped then, and my dad pushed his chair back and got up from the table. He headed to the stairs. Robbie took another bite and spaghetti sauce flicked into his hair, but my mother didn’t tell him to be careful or take smaller bites.

Her face was blank. She wasn’t even frowning. The smoothness of it reminded me of a vacation we’d taken, years earlier, when Robbie was just a baby. We went to Florida. My parents helped me build a sand castle, and then they buried me in the sand, all the way up to my neck, laughing the whole time while Robbie napped on a blanket. I was so comfortable, surrounded by the cool sand, the grains rubbing my arms and legs. My dad was careful to keep the sand out of my face. Once, while I was still trapped, they leaned in over me and kissed. I’d squinted then and squirmed to get out, and they had just laughed harder.

But now, at the dinner table, my mother sat rigidly, her head turned to the stairs, as she watched my father disappear at the top.

Natalie and I were at lunch again and this time we each had peanut butter and sugar sandwiches. We both were scrawny, but Natalie’s limbs looked more elegant and purposeful than mine. I liked to wear large sweatshirts and plain jeans, clothes I could hide in, but she wore

sparkly pants and strappy tank tops, even though the dress code said we couldn't wear sleeveless shirts. She wore a cardigan or a blouse, too, but sometimes in class, she slipped it off and waited to see how long before teacher told her to put it back on.

"I talked to Ethan today," Natalie said. She had grapes again. She held one between her teeth and bit into it so that juice burst everywhere. Some of it hit my hand.

"About what?"

"The dance. I asked if he was going and if he was going to dance with anyone."

"Natalie!" I said. "Why did you do that?"

"I was just wondering. Chill out. He didn't say anything anyway," she said. "Did your dad get a new car yet?"

"No."

"That sucks," she said. "We can pick you up for the dance so your mom doesn't have to drive. Or maybe you can come over before and we can get ready together."

"Yeah," I said. "That'd be fun."

"I can curl your hair. It would look great. And I have green eye shadow that would totally match your eyes. You have really gorgeous eyes, Anna. Did you know that?"

She drew out the 'o' sound, like she was imitating someone. I looked down at my lunch. I had packed an apple from the fruit bowl on our kitchen table, but now I noticed it had brown spots all around it.

"They're just eyes."

"I bet Ethan thinks they're pretty," she said, giggling.

"Shut up, Natalie," I said.

At night, my parents started arguing. They had always argued now and then, but after the accident, the fights seemed more regular, and instead of hearing shouts from their bedroom, I only heard an occasional voice, usually my mom's, raised above the sound of the furnace starting up at night. I imagined that their fights were tenser now, more compact and less dramatic. Instead of yelling, there were just hushed discussions, controlled accusations. Sometimes I tried to picture them in their bedroom, which was the first part of the house my mom redecorated when she became a realtor. I grew up with them in a room that was pastel-colored, but now everything was forest green and brown, like a hotel room. For some reason, I always pictured my father sitting on the bed with his face dark and fluid, while my mother stood apart, her arms crossed. When she was angry, she didn't move.

None of the other mothers I knew were like mine. Natalie's mom was in an aerobics class with my mother on Tuesday and Thursday nights, and Natalie told me her mother thought my mother wore outfits that were "sexy."

"My mom says your mom looks like someone on MTV," Natalie told me. "She wears clothes that my mom couldn't even wear in high school." I wasn't sure whether Natalie meant that as a compliment. Even before she had started working, my mother had always been conscious of her appearance. When I started middle school, she told me I could start wearing make-up if I wanted to, but I didn't and she seemed disappointed.

My mother went to her class every Tuesday and Thursday night unless she had to show a house. Sometimes she went out to meet friends on Friday nights. They were friends we'd never met and I didn't know how she'd met them in the first place, but she referred to them sometimes in passing, like "My friend Mary's son is a grade ahead of you, Anna. Maybe you've seen him at school." Nothing more than that.

She wore different outfits then. Instead of a blouse and slacks, she wore dresses or skirts and heels and did her hair so that her neck showed. She wore a lilac perfume, too, a scent that was meant to be worn lightly, but with her it took on a certain strength and always lingered a little after she went out the door.

When my parents' voices stopped at night, I usually fell asleep quickly. But sometimes I wondered what they did then, if they just decided to stop talking or if something had been reconciled. If my mother put on her nightgown in front of my father or if she went into their bathroom. If my father turned out the light without looking at her. Things that are silent, but still can have meaning.

The next evening, my mother drove with my father to a used car dealer and they came home in separate vehicles. My dad's new car wasn't new at all. It was painted red, but had chips and dents all over it. Inside, the seats were cracked and windows were the kind with a handle you have to roll to make the glass go up and down.

"I liked your other one better," Robbie said when we came out to look at it. My mother went inside, but we stayed a moment, observing the car.

"Me too, Robbie," my dad said. "But it'll do for now." When he looked at the car, his shoulders slouched. Then he went into the house, too.

That night, a huge snow storm hit. It was the kind that comes out of nowhere, without any warning. I woke early to get ready for school and went downstairs to the kitchen. My mother was there in her bathrobe, drinking coffee.

"School's cancelled today," she told me. "You can go back to sleep." Out the window over the sink, it was still dark but the ground glowed with new-fallen snow.

"Do you think it'll be cancelled tomorrow?" I asked. She looked at me.

“I have no idea. Why?”

“There’s a thing tomorrow night I want to go to,” I mumbled. I felt foolish, standing in the kitchen in a nightgown two years old and too small, my hair unbrushed and full of static.

“Well, hopefully, it won’t be cancelled,” she said and sipped her coffee. I thought about Ethan Brown. I had seen him yesterday, after classes got out and I was waiting for my mom to pick me up. He was waiting for a ride, too, and stood about ten feet away. I tried not to stare at him, at the way he held his backpack at a slant on one shoulder or the way the cuffs of his pants covered his tennis shoes. He noticed me, though, and I turned my face, my head pounding. I think he smiled.

“Where’s Dad?” I asked. I saw his coffee mug empty on the counter.

“He left. I told him the roads were too bad, especially in that wreck of a car. But he said he can’t miss work.” Now she shifted her gaze and stared over my head.

“Try to go back to sleep,” she said. “That’s what snow days are for.” I went back to my room, but I didn’t sleep right away. It was still snowing outside and I watched the white through my window, trying to pick out individual snowflakes, but they all blurred together and soon I fell asleep.

When I woke, Robbie was up, too. His first grade class was having a Valentine’s Day party the next day, and he sat at the kitchen table with construction paper, glue sticks, and scissors. My mother had papers from the real estate office in different piles on the table, but Robbie had shoved them to one corner. I wondered if she was going to be angry.

“How do you spell ‘Valentine’?” he asked me. I told him and then asked where our mom was.

“In the shower,” he said. I got a bowl of cereal and sat at the table with him and watched. He had trouble cutting out the hearts so I tried to help him, but I was bad, too. A while later, my

mother came back into the kitchen. Her hair was down and wet and little drops of water soaked into her sweater.

“How’s it going, Robbie? Do you have enough paper?” He nodded. She watched us for a minute, as Robbie tried to stick the paper hearts into cards with his gluey fingers and I fumbled with the scissors.

“Don’t get glue on the table,” she said. Neither of us responded. I waited for her to mention the pile of her papers on the tabletop, which was becoming increasingly covered in glitter, but she didn’t.

“Do you want some lunch?” she asked instead.

“It’s only ten o’clock,” I said. “I just had cereal.”

“Oh,” she said. She sounded a little funny, as if she’d been crying. I glanced at her—I’d never seen her cry before—but her face was clean from the shower, without make-up. I couldn’t tell.

“What do you say we go for a drive?” she said. Robbie set a card down and tried to lift his palm, but the paper stuck.

“Is it still snowing?” I asked.

“No, it stopped. And the plows have been out. The roads should be fine now.”

“I have to finish my valentines,” Robbie said.

“We’ll be back soon, honey. You’ll have time.”

He pulled the card from his hand and pushed away from the table.

“Robbie, wash your hands to get the glue off,” I said and looked to my mother, but she’d already left the kitchen.

The three of us put on our coats and walked outside. Either my mother was lying or hadn’t been paying attention, because it’d started snowing again. The roads were plowed, but

already new snow was covering the asphalt. We got into her giant black SUV, me in the front and Robbie in the back.

It didn't take long for me to figure out we were going to my dad's work. My mother drove slowly, but she kept her hands gripped around the wheel and didn't turn her head. Her hair was still down, but it had dried a little and a few strands loosened from their combed lines. No other cars were on the road. Only once when she stopped at a stoplight did the car shudder a little. The radio was on but it was turned so low that it was hard to tell when there was a newscaster talking or a commercial.

My father's office was normally twenty minutes from our house, but that day it took almost forty. Approaching the parking lot, my mother slowed even more.

"Are we going to see Dad?" Robbie asked.

"One sec, honey," she said and we pulled into the lot. It was mostly full. We turned down the first row of parked cars, and then down the next. I could see the building where my dad worked. It was still snowing, but I tried to find the window where his office was on the fifth floor.

"What are we doing, Mom?" Robbie asked. She didn't answer but kept driving, her head turning side to side. She was looking at the cars.

"There," she said suddenly and we stopped. The tires skidded, and I lurched forward, my seatbelt straining against my chest. It made me think of my dad hitting the tree. I wondered whether he yelled out, if Christie screamed when the air bags exploded.

Outside of my mother's window, we could see the red car. The rear windshield was covered with snow, and the body of the car was hard to make out, but there was no doubt it was the used car.

“Now what?” Robbie said. He sounded impatient, and I felt him kick the back of my seat.

“Nothing,” my mother said. She still stared out the window. “That’s all. I just wanted to make sure your father got to work safely.”

Then she glanced at me. I looked out my own window at the office building in the distance.

“Why are we doing this?” I asked. The car had warmed up, and the windows steamed a little. I turned to her. She looked younger than usual, without her make-up. She stared at me, her face still and cold.

“Why are we doing what?” she said, her voice as rigid as her expression.

“I don’t know,” I said and turned away. “Like, why are you spying on Dad? Isn’t that weird?” The heat bursting out of the vents on the dashboard felt heavy and overwhelming, piling into the air.

“You don’t know anything about this, Anna,” she said. My stomach tightened. I couldn’t tell whether something inside her was opening up or shutting down, but my mother’s voice was not the same. She looked at me as though she was terrified.

“This is the last thing I need, you questioning me,” my mother continued. “I try so hard,” she said, sounding almost sorry. I wasn’t sure what she meant but I don’t think she knew, either. She just shifted the car back into drive and without a word, we drove home.

The next day was Friday. School resumed and Natalie spent the lunch hour talking about the dance and how she wanted to do her hair.

“Anna, you have to ask Ethan. You only have this one chance. There aren’t any more dances this year.” With everything that had happened in the past few days, I hadn’t spent much

time thinking about Ethan or Valentine's Day. Besides, Natalie seemed to like talking about him more than I did.

"I don't think so, Natalie. He'll say no. I don't even care, anyway."

She bit her lip, which she did so often that she had a scab in the middle of her mouth.

"When should my mom and I come get you? Do you want to get ready at my house?"

I nodded. Again I'd run late that morning, but the change jar was nearly empty, so I didn't bring anything for lunch. Natalie offered me some of her chips, but I said no.

"We'll come at, like, five, so I have time to use the curling iron. Do you want me to curl your hair?" she asked. I shrugged.

The night before, after we got back from my dad's office, my mother went upstairs to her bedroom and I helped Robbie finish his valentines. She came back down in the afternoon and said she had to show a house on the other side of town. She didn't return until well after my dad came home from work. Neither Robbie or I told him what we'd done that morning. When my mother came in the front door, the three of us were at the kitchen table, eating macaroni and cheese, the only thing my dad could make.

"Hi," she said and set her purse down on the table. "I'm sorry I'm late." The smell of her perfume floated over us.

"Are you hungry?" my dad asked. Robbie dropped his fork and I bent down to pick it up.

"No," she said. "I grabbed a bite with one of my clients." She walked past my father and kissed him on the head, roughly. Then she went back up the stairs. She never looked any of us in the eyes.

I waited by the door for Natalie, holding my backpack. Inside I had packed black pants and the high heels I'd worn to my mom's cousin's wedding the year before.

“Where’re you going?” my mother asked. She had been in the kitchen, chopping vegetables for dinner and when she came out, she noticed me by the door.

“Natalie’s mom is picking me up. I’m going to her house and then the dance.”

“Oh, right,” my mother said. She was behind me, but I pictured her wiping her hands on her jeans, damp from slicing green peppers.

“What time do you need to be picked up? I’ll tell your father; he’ll have to do it. I’m going out after I get dinner ready.” It occurred to me then that maybe she didn’t know it was Valentine’s Day, that it had slipped her mind. But usually my parents went to a restaurant an hour away, where they had a cheesecake dessert my mother loved and only ate once a year. One of them must have made a very deliberate decision not to go. I just wasn’t sure which one.

“I don’t need a ride,” I said and saw Natalie’s family’s minivan pull into our driveway. “I’m staying overnight.”

“Okay,” she said. I opened the door and went outside.

“Bye,” I called.

“Be smart,” she called back.

At Natalie’s house, I let her curl my hair. I borrowed one of her tank tops, one with purple glitter and straps that crisscrossed in the back. And I let her do my make-up.

“Anna, you’re going to look so hot,” she said and told me to close my eyes as she painted something cold and thin over my eyelids. When she was done, I only looked in the mirror for a second. I didn’t like it.

“You look so old! That is so crazy,” Natalie said. Her mother came into her bedroom to ask if we were ready to go.

“Well,” she said. “You two certainly are dressed up.” Natalie’s mother usually wore sweaters with pictures of cats or sunflowers on the front. Today she wore one with hearts. “You sure you’re allowed to wear those shirts?”

“Of course, Mom,” Natalie said and we grabbed our coats and left. I felt wobbly in my heels and tried to avoid looking at my reflection in the windows of Natalie’s house as we went out to the car. I didn’t want to look too closely at myself in case there was something wrong, smudged lipstick or a displaced curl I couldn’t fix.

When Natalie’s mother dropped us off at the school, the dance had already started. It was in the cafeteria and all of the tables were pushed to the side, making room for a dance floor. Even with all of the blinking lights and the DJ’s disco ball hanging in the center of the ceiling, it still smelled like bologna and French fries. The room was crowded and the DJ, set up in the corner, played a song I thought I’d heard before, but I didn’t know the words. Mostly I felt it, the bass thumping up through the floor.

“This is awesome!” Natalie cried and grabbed my hand. We put our coats on a pile on one of the tables.

“How do I look?” she asked. She looked beautiful. The room was warm and humid, and I suddenly worried that the make-up might start melting down my face. My eyelids felt sticky.

We saw a couple of girls we knew, just as dressed up as Natalie and I were, and they went out onto the dance floor. I told Natalie I just wanted to watch first and waited on the sidelines, surrounded mostly by boys, who looked like they did at school, except they all seemed to have wet hair combed a little differently. The air smelled sharp, as if someone had sprayed a bunch of different colognes and perfumes all at once.

Natalie and the girls were dancing like people we saw in music videos, thrusting their stomachs out and shaking their arms. They didn't smile but instead maintained their usual expressions, as if they were trying to look bored.

Half an hour or so passed. More students arrived, and the cafeteria got very crowded. Natalie came over to me a couple of times to try to persuade me to dance, but I didn't want to. I felt safe along the dark walls, next to everyone as nervous as I was. Then I saw Ethan Brown come in. He was with a group of boys and they stood along the opposite wall. Nausea hit me, a panicky feeling that something inescapable and uncomfortable was about to happen. I felt too small, or too separate, really, to do what everyone was doing. A song finished, and there was a pause. Another song started, something slow that sent a small cry flying up from the dancing girls.

"I love this song!" Natalie yelled. She ran to me and tugged on my arm.

"Come on, Anna, this is it. Go ask Ethan." I saw him, still standing against the wall. He had his hands in his pockets and was talking to a boy next to him.

"No," I said. But suddenly, part of me wanted to. Although I knew even then it was wrong, I pictured my mother and the way she walked in her heels when she went out at night, how determinedly she walked out the door.

"Just do it, this is your only chance. Or I'll go ask him for you," Natalie said. Other kids were already pairing off, the girls putting their slender wrists on the boys' shoulders, while the boys, scarcely moving their feet, placed their hands on the girls' waists.

"No," I said again, unsure. A girl I didn't know went up to Ethan and the boy next to him. A shiver went down my back. The girl left and the boy next to Ethan followed. Ethan didn't move.

“Go on, do it,” Natalie said. We both were staring at him, and I’m sure he saw us, but pretended not to. My heart was heavy again, thudding so hard that I wanted to sit down.

“Fine,” I said and started across the floor. I placed my feet firmly, trying not to slip. I wasn’t warm anymore, but I still wondered if my make-up had smeared or if my hair was loose. Ethan met my eyes when I was only a few feet away. I made myself look at him.

“Hi,” I said. He frowned.

“What?”

“Hi,” I said, louder. He blinked.

“I’m Anna,” I said. He just looked at me. I noticed a small pimple forming on his chin, and for some reason, that helped.

“Do you want to dance?” I asked and had to look away.

“Oh,” he said.

I stared at his feet. He wore white tennis shoes.

“Um, not really. Sorry.”

“Okay,” I said. And I turned and walked out of the cafeteria and into the hallway. It was colder out there and the fluorescent lights turned the skin on my arms yellow. I blinked and wrapped my arms around my sides, struggling to walk without looking up.

Stupid, stupid, stupid, I thought, and my throat closed. I found a bathroom and opened the door. The lighting in there was even worse, and when I looked in the mirror, I finally started to cry, my shoulders shuddering and my face turning red underneath the foundation Natalie had applied.

“Stupid,” I said out loud. “Stupid!” I cried harder. I should have known, I should have been smarter. The preciseness of how obvious it was stung me. I could not think why, really why, I had gone up to him. The confidence that had slipped into me as I walked over to him

drained, so sharply that I imagined I could feel it leaving my shaking arms. I grabbed the sides of the sink. I didn't want to move.

I heard a knock on the door and Natalie's voice calling my name. I thought of my mother, in the car staring up at my dad's building. She had looked horrified, I thought as I stared into the mirror, the rawest I had ever seen her. She had a new awareness of herself, as if a stone had sunk deep into her consciousness. I knew could understand that then, as I kept gripping the porcelain sink. There was so much else I didn't know, but I did know that I was vulnerable, whether I wanted to be or not; things were going to happen, and keep happening.

I came out of the bathroom after what felt like a long time. Natalie was still there, which surprised me, and instead of making me talk, she lent me her cell phone.

I called my mother. I asked her to come pick me up and she did. I still don't know where she came from, or how she'd been spending her Valentine's Day. All I know is she drove to the school and I climbed into her car, still crying, and she reached over and hugged me to her chest and started crying, too.

Something Beautiful

When Lauren's sister showed up at her doorstep one Friday night, Lauren knew immediately that something was wrong. She had been getting ready to go out with some friends and was in the middle of brushing her teeth when the doorbell rang. She finished too quickly, not rinsing her mouth well enough. She opened the door and there was her older sister, red-eyed and shivering on the porch. It was early spring and the nights were still cold.

"Heather!" she said.

"Hi," Heather said.

"What—what's going on? What are you doing here?" she asked. She stepped back to let Heather inside. She had a huge duffle bag with her, which she dragged over the doorstep.

"Nothing," Heather said, yanking the bag. "I just—I just needed to see you."

The last time Lauren had talked to her sister was two months before, in February, for Heather's birthday. Lauren had only called because their mother reminded her to.

"Is everything okay?" she asked.

"Um, yeah, I don't know," Heather said. She looked smaller than ever. Everyone always thought Lauren was the older sister, mostly because she was taller and bigger and usually louder. Being around Heather sometimes made Lauren feel like an ogre, but sometimes it made her feel stronger, as though she had become a stable sort of person, the kind other people could depend

on. And sometimes Heather made her feel both things. Watching Heather drag her bag inside made Lauren want to offer to help so Heather wouldn't look so pathetic, but it also made her feel like she was in Heather's way.

Lauren didn't know what to do. Here was Heather, Heather who wore button-up sweaters and only drank wine at family weddings. Heather had never been to this house before; she'd never visited Lauren at school at all. Then again, Lauren had never visited her, either. Since Heather had graduated and moved to Chicago, they were only a few hours apart, but still they never visited.

"Is everything okay?" Lauren said again. She couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Yeah, I just—I just wanted to see you," Heather said.

They went into the living room, Heather still towing her bag. Beer cans were scattered on the glass coffee table, which was covered in fingerprints. Socks, boots, and other pieces of clothing covered the furniture, a potted plant had been knocked over in the corner, and in the middle of the carpet was a giant purple stain from a spilled glass of sangria.

"So, this is my house," Lauren said. This was an ogre moment.

"Cute," Heather squeaked. "How many other people live here?"

"Um, three," Lauren said, looking everywhere around the room except at Heather and her giant bag. "But they're all out right now. I was, um, going out too, but no big deal."

"Oh," Heather said, and the way she said it was both perfectly apologetic and disappointed. Lauren thought maybe their mother had encouraged Heather to visit. Their mother was a small, earnest woman who, after the girls moved out, bought a beagle puppy and named it Rosie, even though it was a male. She was constantly trying to bring the sisters back together, the way they were when they were children. The last time Lauren talked with her mother, she'd told Lauren that Heather had broken up with her boyfriend, Will, and that Lauren

should call her, which she never managed to do. Maybe this was about Will. It probably was about Will.

“If you have to go...” Heather said.

“No, it’s not a big deal. Really. It’s—it’s good to see you,” Lauren said.

Heather left her bag and went to the couch. Lauren and her friends had found it on a curb the week they first moved in. Heather would not want to know that. She sat down, sort of rigidly, and said nothing.

“Can I get you anything?” Lauren said. “Tea or something?”

“I’m okay,” Heather responded. “Maybe tea.”

“Tea?”

“Yes. Please.”

“Okay,” Lauren said and went into the kitchen. The kettle was dusty and grimy because they rarely used it, so before she filled it with water, she rinsed the outside. In the cupboard, there were several boxes of tea, which surprised her since no one drank it regularly.

“What kind do you want?” she called.

“Anything is fine.”

“Raspberry? Black pekoe?” Lauren shouted.

“Raspberry sounds good.”

Lauren pulled out a mug with a picture of the Eiffel Tower and set a tea bag on it. The water was nowhere near ready, so she went back into the living room. Heather was staring into space. There were dark circles under her eyes, and her arms, which had always been slender, crossed over her knees, making her look gangly and young. She wore a dirty sweatshirt, navy blue with ripped cuffs. It was strange to see Heather dressed so casually. She was precise about her appearance, even around family. That past Christmas, Heather came down the stairs in

khakis and a sweater and glanced at Lauren, who was embarrassed to be in pajamas in front of the tree.

“So, what’s up?” Lauren said. She sat in an armchair sideways, with her legs over one of the armrests.

“I just had to get out of Chicago,” she said. She leaned back into the couch.

“How long are you staying?” Lauren asked, eyeing the duffle bag in the middle of the room. She meant it as a joke, but it came out wrong, too flat.

“Oh, I don’t know. I just...I just grabbed a lot of stuff. I don’t know. I’m not a very good packer,” Heather said. That was not true. Heather was a very good packer. When they went to Hawaii with their parents a few years ago, Heather had made fun of Lauren’s bulging backpack. “If you roll your clothes, they take up less space, you know,” Heather had said to her. Lauren could still remember exactly how she said it.

A sharp whistle came from the kitchen and Lauren got up to get the tea kettle. Heather began to get up, but Lauren waved her back down.

“I’ll get it,” she said. In the kitchen, she poured the cup of water carefully. The smell of the tea, steamy and pungent, filled the air. The water turned fuschia. She wondered how Heather found Lauren’s address. Maybe off of a card or something. This must be about Will. She could think of no other reason why Heather would act so impulsively. Heather planned. Heather prepared. Heather didn’t just act.

“Mom told me about Will. I’m really sorry,” she said, carrying the mug into the living room. She handed it to Heather, who shrugged. Lauren watched her, but she didn’t respond. She didn’t even blush.

“Oh, it was a while go. I mean, it’s over.”

“It must have been hard.”

“It *was* hard,” Heather replied. “But you know, it was for the best. It just wasn’t good anymore. I don’t know. I might leave Chicago, go out east, maybe. Or back home.”

“Sure, you can go wherever you want.” Lauren watched Heather clutch her tea with both hands.

“Yeah,” Heather replied and brought her mug close to her face, but didn’t sip it. She looked cold. She took a breath then, and got a strange look on her face, like she was trying not to laugh but it hurt.

“What’s wrong?” Lauren said. Heather screwed her eyes shut.

“I went to the doctor last week,” Heather said.

“What happened?”

“I...I’ve been having problems, like with my period,” and her strange expression grew stranger, her face turning red. Lauren stared at her sister, at the steam rising out of her cup, at the freckles sprinkled over her sister’s hands.

“And I had some tests,” Heather went on. She opened her eyes and gazed inside of her mug.

“Yeah?”

“And I guess I, I can’t have children.”

“You mean, like infertile?”

Heather nodded. For some reason, Lauren wanted to laugh. She had that panicky feeling she got whenever she heard bad news she didn’t understand. Like when their grandmother died and Lauren, nine at the time, had jumped onto an armchair and bounced in place over and over silently, while her mother sat on the couch with her head in her hands and Heather went into her room alone.

“I...I wasn’t getting my period anymore and I knew I wasn’t pregnant, so I went to the doctor and I have, it’s called premature ovarian failure.” She said the words as though she wasn’t sure how to pronounce them. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. With her eyes closed, Heather looked both like a child and an old woman.

“It means my ovaries just stopped. Like stopped working.”

“Well, do they know why?”

“I don’t know yet,” Heather said and her voice twisted on the last word. “Sometimes they never know. I have to have more tests, but...but it just doesn’t seem like it will make a difference.” She made a gasping sound, still holding her mug. She drew her knees up onto the couch as though she wanted to take up the smallest amount of space possible. Lauren felt like she should try to hug her, but the way Heather curled up made a hug seem like a bad option. And sometimes Heather hated hugs. When she’d come home crying because her prom date stood her up, Lauren, the only one awake that night, had tried to hug her but Heather, sucking in her sobs, had kept her arms pinned at her sides.

“Do Mom and Dad know?”

“No.” Heather leaned forward and set her cup down on the smudgy coffee table and covered her face with her hands. Maybe Lauren really should hug her.

“Do you want to call them? Mom at least?”

“No,” Heather said sharply. She dropped her hands in her lap. “I don’t want to talk to Mom. That’s why I didn’t call her. I...I came here because I don’t have anybody in Chicago. No one. I just, God, I just don’t know what I am supposed to do.”

Lauren said nothing. She didn’t know what to do, either. The room had grown chilly now that the sun had been down so long, but Lauren’s skin felt hot, almost as though she had a

fever. The lighting in the room was poor, with just one lamp on a table, and the longer Lauren looked at her sister, the more faded her features became.

“What about, like, surgery or something?” Lauren asked. Heather ignored her.

“I just don’t know what to do. I mean, I don’t really know what it means. I—I *know*, but I don’t really get it. I hardly even thought about kids,” she said. “And Will, I should have given him another chance but now, now he’ll be glad. He’ll be glad I called it off. He’s really lucky!” Heather was tearing up a little, but not quite crying.

“Heather, I’m sorry. That’s really awful. Really.” Lauren said these words without really thinking about them. She felt like there must be something more to say, but Heather wasn’t listening. She was staring down at her abandoned cup on the table.

“I spent hours at work googling things,” Heather said. “I’m supposed to be working on this giant database that’s due at the end of the month, but I can hardly concentrate on anything. On the train ride here, I just stared out the window. I couldn’t even read.”

Lauren knew that what Heather was saying didn’t really sound like Heather. Heather was rational, focused; she always did things for a reason and she always knew what she wanted. When she applied for college, she made a list of what she needed in a school. Lauren remembered how she sat at the kitchen table, pouring over pamphlets and packets. In the end, she only found two that met her requirements (not too small or too big; prestigious; good libraries) and had chosen Duke because it was farther away from home, which, while not a requirement on her list, was a plus. On every vacation from school, Heather always stayed home for as short a time as possible. Lauren didn’t know why. There wasn’t anything wrong with their home. It wasn’t the most exciting place, but it wasn’t a bad one, either. She assumed Heather just needed to be productive, to keep doing things. Once she had moved away, there was no reason to stay at home at all.

Heather picked her mug back up and tried another sip. It was probably cold now, which must have made it even bitterer. She closed and opened her eyes.

“You don’t have to finish that,” Lauren said.

“Okay,” Heather said quickly. Lauren tried to think of something else to say, something to suggest.

“I’m sorry, Heather,” she said for what felt like the hundredth time, but her words just went out into the empty darkness and hung there for a long time.

No matter how many times Lauren asked her, Heather offered no suggestions for dinner. Lauren finally decided to order a pizza, even though it didn’t sound that good. She felt like she had to feed her sister. Heather wouldn’t say what she wanted on it, so to be safe, Lauren ordered it half cheese and half pepperoni. Heather pulled a pair of pajama pants out of her giant bag, which was still in the middle of the room and asked Lauren where the bathroom was.

While she was gone, Lauren went to the fridge and grabbed a pop. She didn’t think any of her housemates would be back that night, which was good; two of them had boyfriends whom they spent the weekends with and another had gone home.

Lauren went back to the living room. Heather returned wearing pajama pants decorated in little hearts. She sat back on the couch.

“How are you feeling?” Lauren asked. Heather shrugged.

“It’s nice to be here. I can’t believe I’ve never visited you before.”

“Yeah,” Lauren said. “It’s weird.”

There was a silence. Heather was staring at the floor of the living room, at the sangria stain. She had definitely lost weight, which was bad because she was already thin. In the pajama pants, her knees poked against the fabric, like a little kid playing dress-up.

The pizza came and Lauren went to the door to get it. When she came back, Heather had pulled out her wallet and held cash up to Lauren.

“Can I pay for part of it?”

“No, it’s like seven dollars. Don’t worry about it.”

“But I have a job.”

“So do I.”

“Yeah, but I have a fulltime job. Where do you work?”

“At a coffee shop,” Lauren said, taking a bite of pizza.

“Are you sure?” She lowered her hand, but left the cash on the coffee table by the pizza box.

“Sure that I work at a coffee shop?”

“No, sure that you got it?”

“Heather, come on.” Heather took a piece with pepperoni, which bothered Lauren just a little because she had got the cheese side with Heather in mind. But, then again, she’d never actually explained that to Heather.

“So why did you break up with Will?” Lauren asked.

“I don’t know,” she said and smiled as though she were satisfied at the thought. “I just wasn’t very happy anymore.”

“Were you happier after you broke up with him?”

“Not really,” Heather paused and stopped smiling. Lauren had only met Will once. He had curly, mopy hair that fell in his eyes and he looked young, younger than Heather did.

“I think,” Heather said, “if this whole thing hadn’t happened, I would have ended up calling him. Probably.”

“Huh,” Lauren mumbled. She almost said, “That could be for the best,” but stopped when she realized it probably wasn’t.

“When are you going to tell Mom and Dad?”

Heather’s face crumpled a little. She held the piece of pizza in front of her face just like she had held the mug, as though blocking her mouth offered some sort of protection.

“I don’t know,” she said in a high voice. “I think right now I’m mostly embarrassed about it. Because I don’t know how to look at it yet. I haven’t thought about it enough.”

“Okay,” Lauren said. That was a strange way to put it, but it made sense, she supposed. Maybe Heather had to see her problem from every possible angle, figure out all that it could mean. It felt abstract to Lauren now, too. She knew it was sad, but she also knew it was something a little far off from her understanding. She hadn’t had anything close to a baby urge. When she saw a pregnant woman, she usually studied her clothes and tried to judge how much extra fabric it took to cover the woman’s stomach. Maybe that was just an immaturity in her, not to want that small, compact feeling she imagined pregnant women had.

“Is it genetic or anything?” Lauren asked. Heather straightened up and lowered her pizza.

“No. Don’t worry.” Heather dropped the piece back down into the box and pulled her knees up.

“Sorry,” Lauren whispered. She hadn’t meant it like that. There was another pause and somewhere outside a dog barked. Lauren tried very hard to think of something to do, maybe a game. Heather always beat her at board games, even simple ones like Clue.

“You have ‘The Princess Bride’?” Heather asked, looking straight ahead at the shelf by Lauren’s TV.

“Yeah,” she said, glad Heather changed the subject.

“Can we watch it?”

“Um, sure.” Lauren got up and went to the television. When they were children, they used to watch the movie every year at Thanksgiving after dinner, with their parents. This past year, they hadn’t watched it—Heather had had to get back to Chicago that night and Lauren fell asleep on their parents’ couch after one too many glasses of wine. She started the DVD and went back to the armchair. Heather spread out on the couch. The living room was much colder now.

“Do you want a blanket?” Lauren asked.

“I’m okay,” Heather said but Lauren stood up again and went across the room to retrieve an afghan on the floor. It was magenta and covered with hair. She tried to shake it off as best she could. She took it to Heather.

They watched the movie in silence. Lauren got cold, too, and went into her bedroom to change into her pajamas. Without meaning to, she picked a pair covered in small stars, the same kind as Heather’s heart pants. Their mother had given them each a pair for Christmas a couple of years ago. When she came back, Heather was still lying down, but she didn’t seem to be focusing on the movie. It was the scene with the quicksand, when Princess Buttercup falls in and Westley grabs a vine and jumps in after her. As children, she and Heather used to try and hold their breath for as long as the characters were under the sand, to see if they could make it. That was one thing Lauren had beat Heather at—she could hold her breath longer than anyone, but Heather had always panicked after less than a minute and dramatically clutched her throat, dragging for air.

“Are you okay?” Lauren asked as she sat down.

Heather nodded and then sat up.

“Lauren?”

“Yeah?” She’d turned off the lamp so now the only light in the room came from the television screen.

“Do you remember that time we went to Disney World?”

“What?” Lauren said. “What do you mean? I kind of remember that trip. I mean, I was like, five.”

Heather had wrapped the blanket around her body and her head. Lauren’s first thought was that she looked like a kid playing some sort of peek-a-boo game.

“What? What is it?”

“You might not remember, I mean, I hope you don’t remember. But I was just thinking about it and how I never told you. I just—we were in the gift shop and Mom and Dad were outside waiting for us and they said we could look but we couldn’t buy anything, do you remember that? They were in a really bad mood because, well, you know, it’s Disney World and taking two little girls around a park like that is exhausting and probably not really that fun, right?”

Lauren stared at her. Heather had wrapped herself up even tighter. There was so much space around her. It was hard to understand her because her mouth was blocked by her knees.

“And I grabbed that thing, that stupid lion figurine, do you remember? And I made you hold it and walk out of the store with me and no one noticed us but when Mom and Dad saw you holding that, they flipped out. And started yelling and then they were fighting with each other about which of them should take you back in to return it and you started crying and I just stood there and they never knew and then Mom grabbed you, I remember how she grabbed you, and yanked you back inside.”

“I don’t remember that,” Lauren said. She really didn’t. She tried to think back, to see if any of those images were there in her head. She remembered the trip but only the long car ride

and a vague picture of a giant Pooh Bear hugging her. She remembered that, the long, yellow arms wrapping around her. She had expected the costume—she did know it was a costume—to be rough and uncomfortable, but for the sunny fur was soft, like a new stuffed animal, and she hadn't wanted to let go.

“And then later,” Heather went on. “Back at the hotel. I remember you were still kind of crying, like sitting by the window sniffing, and Mom and Dad were somewhere, I don't know where, maybe out getting dinner, whatever. And I came up to you and I told you, I told you that they loved me more. That Mom and Dad loved me more than you and it was so obvious. I mean, God, I was like seven, eight? But I remember so clearly the look on your face and how sick it made me feel, but I said it anyway. And I have no idea why. No idea.”

The room went still. Heather closed her eyes and Lauren looked away. She did not remember that night, or at least she didn't think she did. She remembered Winnie the Pooh and the hot asphalt in the parking lot and something about an elephant ear. She did not remember the hotel room. She couldn't picture it no matter how hard she tried. But she did remember her sister the way she was then, the sister who pushed her down and put gum in her hair, but also the sister who taught her how to write her name in chalk on the sidewalk, the sister who helped her pick out an outfit for her first middle school dance, the sister who always French-braided her hair, even once Lauren learned to do it herself. She still liked to have Heather braid it, to sweep Lauren's mousy hair off her face and into something elaborate, something beautiful.

“Heather,” Lauren said and her voice cracked a little.

“I'm sorry,” Heather spoke. “I'm just really, really, really sorry. I mean, I've always been sorry. Not just for that, but for everything. For everything I've done to you and to Mom and Dad and Will. I'm sorry I even met Will. I just don't know. Fuck.”

The ‘-ck’ in ‘fuck’ came out of her mouth sharply. It was very strange to hear Heather swear, to see Heather here, in the living room, with a half-eaten pizza in front of her. Heather in her pajamas and socks, Heather wrapped up in a dirty, ugly blanket. Lauren walked to her awkwardly, and bent down to try to hug her sister. It was sort of like hugging a package of a person, a carefully arranged and wrapped package.

“It’s okay, really,” Lauren said. “I’m glad you’re here.” Heather still said nothing but she started shuddering a little, with Lauren still holding on.

“I’ll do whatever I can for you, okay? Whatever it is,” Lauren said then, not really knowing what she meant, but knowing that she had to say it. That was why Heather had come here. She held on for a long time.

“Lauren,” Heather said after a moment. “I think I’m too tired to watch the movie.”

“That’s okay,” Lauren said. She offered her own bed, but Heather insisted on the couch.

“No, I’ve intruded enough,” she said. “The couch is fine.”

But the couch wasn’t fine. The couch was old and filthy and people had probably had sex on it. However, Heather would not be dissuaded and so Lauren brought her another blanket from her bedroom and watched her sister curl up and disappear under the folds.

“Is it okay if I stay up for a little bit?” Lauren asked. “I’ll keep the TV down low.”

“Of course,” Heather murmured. She was already drifting. She fell asleep faster and easier than anyone Lauren knew. She didn’t really want to watch the movie without Heather, but she didn’t want to leave the room where her sister was. She sat down on the floor in front of the couch with her legs under the coffee table. She turned the DVD off and settled for flipping channels, finally leaving it on the Discovery Channel, which had a show on the star cluster of the Pleiades. It was midnight and Lauren felt tired, but she wanted to stay awake. The light of the

television blinked on and off in the dark room, brightening when the screen filled with stars and darkening when those pictures faded away.

Lauren sat there a long time, watching the computer-animated stars spinning in and out of focus. The narrator talked about how far away the cluster is and then about the legends people had created about it. The Blackfoot tribe believed the stars were orphans whom no one would care for, and so they were put in the sky. The images were very beautiful.

Part of her wanted to crawl onto the couch with her sister and go under the blankets, try to fit beside her. She thought of how, when they were small, their mother used to tuck them into bed at night and sing lullabies. She tried to remember the words to some of them, but she couldn't, not even the ones that were the most familiar.

Driving Out Of Michigan

The night before his sister's wedding, Matthew tried to leave the rehearsal dinner early. He was worn out from traveling and wanted to get away from the crowd of his sister's glittery friends, maybe go have a drink in his parents' kitchen before heading upstairs to his old bedroom. But Jennifer caught him at the door, as though she knew he'd try to leave and was waiting to catch him. She came from behind and grabbed the elbow of his jacket just as he reached for the door handle.

"Where are you going?" she asked. Matt wasn't used to seeing his sister in so much make-up. In the dim lighting of the restaurant lobby, her features were unfamiliar, like a stranger's.

"I'm just tired," he said. "I'm going to head back to Mom and Dad's, I think."

"Matt, it's nine-thirty." She smelled like roses and smoke and she had had a few drinks, making her eyes look glazed and shiny. "Come on, come to the bar with us, just for a little bit."

Outside of the restaurant, the air was hot and humid. A couple dressed in black came through the doors and let the heat in with them.

"Jenny, seriously," he said and began to pull away from her grip.

“Hey, I’m sorry about Katie and the accident and everything,” Jennifer said, tugging back. “It must be harder for you than we realized. I mean, I thought you were over her. Or something. I mean—” she stopped.

Matthew looked down at his sister’s fingers around his arm. Her wrist was very tiny and he pictured himself snapping it. The thought flipped his stomach. He yanked his arm free.

“I have to go,” he said, and then he went out the door.

When he came home the day before and his mother told him about the accident, not five minutes after he pulled into the driveway, everything dulled, all at once. His ears were blocked and the noise, her words, bounced around outside of him. The kitchen smelled like lemon dish soap. Watching his mother drying her hands on her pants, he felt his body go numb and shaky, his hands and feet tingling. His mother’s kitchen suddenly became Katie’s kitchen, from years before, where the light of the winter sun seeped harshly into the room. He saw Katie, sitting at the table with her head in her hands, her hair the color of polished cherry wood. He saw her look up at him, at his face, and she opened her mouth to speak. But then she was gone, and he was back in his mother’s kitchen in Novi in the middle of summer, the weekend of his little sister’s wedding.

“It’s a great tragedy, really,” his mother had said. He sat at the table and her hands reached over and covered his, but he couldn’t feel them.

“The driver just lost control of the car. It was raining, but it’s still not clear what happened,” she said. “Right off the bridge, you know, on M-14? Into the river. Everyone killed.”

She was quiet for a moment. Out in their lawn, the sprinklers turned on and for some reason, the sound made Matthew's throat close and he looked down at the table. It was shiny and when he squinted, the tabletop became blindingly bright.

"I'm sure this is hard," she said. "And that you don't know how to react. But you have every right to grieve. Losing anyone close to you is always difficult. Don't ever think otherwise."

It hadn't occurred to Matt that it might *not* be okay for him to grieve. This was Katie, Katie whom he had loved and wanted to marry, and even though things had gone bad, he realized right then that he'd hoped things weren't really over. His mother patted his hands again. He felt in her touch that she maybe wanted to say something else, something to remind him that this tragedy was poorly timed and that as hard as it all was for him, his sister's wedding was tomorrow and no one had planned things to happen like this. But he glanced up at her and then back down and she said nothing and then the phone rang. It was Jennifer, panicked about the florist, and as he listened to his mother speak to her, he felt himself sinking into the table, his elbows pressed onto the surface. It was a long time before he stood.

It had been close to two years since the break-up and over six months since they'd even spoken. But now he clearly recalled their first date, their first kiss. They met at a house party, during finals week in their freshman year, surprised to find that their hometowns were high school rivals. He remembered the way Katie had held her cup against her chest when she leaned in to hear him speak, careful not to spill any of the beer, and how she turned her head so her ear was at his lips. He remembered the smaller things, things he hadn't thought of since they'd split up. The first time they talked about moving away together, about kids' names. The time she cut her hair off and he hated it but couldn't tell her. The time they went to the beach and got such

awful sunburns that they had to spend the rest of the summer indoors. He recalled so many things, all at once, that he wondered if they were all real and had actually happened. That mole on Katie's knuckle. The way she laughed so loudly in the movie theatre that he always got embarrassed.

On his way home from the rehearsal dinner, he thought of his mother's hands and Jennifer's wrist and, with difficulty, Katie's fingernails. She only painted them for special occasions, like Valentine's Day and their anniversary, but he never liked it. The smell of the polish stayed with him for days at a time. When he got home, he sat at the kitchen table. His mother had left the newspaper out, carefully flipped over so the headline did not show. She probably assumed he would want to read it. He didn't, but after a moment of staring at it, he turned the paper over. Katie's face was there, her college ID photo, but it was blurry and black and white and not too hard to look at. The funeral was on Sunday, the day after tomorrow. That thought panicked him, the realness of a funeral home and its flowered wallpaper, its faded furniture. As his eyes skimmed the article, looking for her name, he considered getting a bottle of scotch from the cupboard, even though he didn't like scotch much. But then he thought that might not be right. Did he deserve a drink? He shouldn't even be sitting here, reading this article, feeling something he could not even begin to understand, something that weighed awfully on his shoulders. It was the night before his sister's wedding. He should be with her at the bar, or at least with his parents and their family, talking and laughing and being the sort of person he had always assumed he'd become. Not like this. He didn't expect to be like this.

A car pulled into the driveway. It was his parents returning from the rehearsal dinner. Matthew stood up from the table, embarrassed to be sitting at the kitchen table like this. He moved to the stairs as his parents came in the front door.

“Oh, Matt,” his mother said, as though she were disappointed. Both of his parents looked like they’d come back from a long trip, their shoulders hunched in exhaustion. His mother had been planning the wedding with Jennifer since she’d gotten engaged six months before. Her hair, a bright, smooth gray, was drawn into a ponytail at her neck. She was a realtor but the market was bad and she spent most of her time on wedding details.

His father looked at him too, but said nothing. They were the same height, although his father’s back was broader. They looked exactly like father and son: younger and older versions of the same person. When Matthew was a boy and his father took him to his office, everyone exclaimed and patted Matt on the head, saying over and over, “the spitting image, the spitting image.” Now they were rarely confronted that way, but they were also rarely together. His father seemed to have gone mute to him. When Matt called, he was immediately handed over to his mother. It was not unkind, exactly. His father always asked how he was doing and Matthew returned the question and then there was a pause, after which his father called for his mother to pick up the phone. The only thing that had changed over the last couple of years was the length of the pause, which kept getting shorter and shorter.

“I’m just going to bed,” he said. “I left the dinner a little early. I’m pretty tired.”

“Honey,” his mother said and took a step towards him. She wore heels, which was unusual for her, and the sound of them clicking on the hallway floor made him think of holidays, of the rare days they went to church. She only wore perfume when she wore heels and the smell of her, a weak berry scent, came over him.

“I’m fine,” he said. “Just tired. Really.” She was looking at him the way she had when he was a child and she suspected he was hiding something. But he wasn’t hiding anything. He had nothing to hide. He climbed up the stairs with his parents below him and went into his bedroom. He stood in the darkness until his eyes adjusted and he could see his bed and then he

went to it, but he stayed awake for a long time after, listening to the sounds of his parents moving downstairs, feeling the stillness as it settled over his body.

He had believed they would get married. He had sincerely believed this, that one day they would move into a small apartment together, probably in a big city, and he would work for an office while she taught at an elementary school within walking distance. She had believed in this idyllic dream, too, or at least she said she did. They talked about it on long car rides, like the time they drove to Florida for a week in February of their junior year of college. They were in Georgia, near the Florida border. It was four in the morning and they'd been driving for almost twenty hours. Finally in warm weather, they'd let the humid air seep into the car. It was before she cut her hair and she had rolled down the passenger window. Her hair blew in her face and she kept smoothing it back till he asked if she wanted to close the window but she shook her head and lay back against the seat with her eyes closed.

"Let's go to Florida for our honeymoon. Just like this," she'd said. Her skin, pearl white, seemed to glow in the darkness.

"Honeymoon, huh?" he'd said. They had been dating for two years and never talked about marriage before. He felt his foot pressing harder on the pedal, his throat filled with giddiness. He'd driven the whole way worrying about nodding off, but now he was wide awake.

"Yeah, just like this. Like, we'll start off in Michigan and drive all the way down and go from somewhere really cold to somewhere really beautiful."

"Michigan can be beautiful," he said.

"Well, sometimes, but you know what I mean. It'll be fun to go somewhere new, somewhere different," she said. Then there was a pause, the only sound the road rolling beneath them. The highway was empty except for the occasional sweeping headlights heading north on

the other side of the median. The air, although they were hours from the ocean, tasted salty already.

“So you would want to get married in the winter?” he asked awkwardly.

“Oh,” she said. “I don’t know.” She sat up and opened her eyes. He could hardly see anything in the car, but wanted to pull over and look at her, listen closely.

“Maybe,” she said. “What do you think?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t thought about it a whole lot. I mean—”

“No, yeah, me either.”

“It’s nice, though,” he said. “To think about.”

“Yeah, it is,” she replied and then closed her eyes again and, after a few minutes, fell asleep. Matt felt tired, too, but also exhilarated, jittery. This was it, this was it. The girl he was going to marry was in the seat right next to him.

He had even thought about proposing then, on that trip. But he wanted it to be special, to be planned. So he waited. He’d even gone to a jeweler’s once, just to look. But still, he waited. Then there was graduation and he had the job offer in Chicago and she’d already been accepted into the University of Michigan’s graduate program. They talked about it and decided that for the time being, at least, they needed to pursue their own goals. Their own hopes. Too young for commitments. It wouldn’t be fair for one of them to have to make a choice, a sacrifice. That was the word they used. Sacrifice.

There was a change in the first few months they spent apart, a coolness to her voice, a frustration in his. Their phone calls were either polite or angry, she was either tired or busy. Once he had just asked her, straight out, if she was still happy.

“No,” she’d said. “But you must have known that.” He had been insulted then, furious that she was blaming him for whatever situation they were in now. They had both made their

decisions. No sacrifices. Still, he wished they had just done it, disowned the rationality that was separating them and chosen each other over something else, because then they wouldn't have gotten fed up and distant and different, and he wouldn't have just given up on the whole thing. And then she'd still be here, next to him, because there was no way she would have been in that car on that bridge, there was just no way.

The ceremony was dull, but Matt had been bored long before that. Before the actual wedding were the pictures and before that, another rehearsal. Jennifer and the rest of the wedding party were droopy and hung over. Matt walked down the aisle with a girl named Tina whom Jennifer had met the same time she'd met Chad a year before. She worked at the same restaurant as Jennifer and Chad, a place not quite as nice as where they'd had the rehearsal dinner. Jennifer's workplace was closer to a pub than a restaurant, with a smoking section larger than non-smoking and fried fish specials every Friday. Chad had mentioned more than once that he planned to open his own place one day, one with a huge bar. The night before at dinner, he'd grilled their waiter on their beer selection and then ordered a Bud Light.

He and Jennifer had never been especially close. They were family, which counted for something, but they weren't at all similar, which counted for more. He had been away from home so long that it seemed both obvious and horrible that he didn't know anyone in his sister's wedding party.

Tina was taller than Matt and probably twenty pounds heavier. She smelled like baby powder and sweat and her thick blonde hair looked streaked and greasy.

"You look tired," Matt had said to her while they were waiting in the church lobby for the ceremony to begin. She stared at him.

“Yeah,” she said. “So what?” She didn’t sound angry, but she didn’t smile. The girl next to her, a tiny redhead, poked her arm.

“Wanna go smoke real quick?” Tina nodded and they walked away. Matt’s parents stood nearby. His mother wore a firm smile as they greeted the guests filing into the sanctuary. His father’s face was filled with wrinkles.

He let himself think briefly about what it would be like if Katie were there. Maybe she had been invited. Matt actually didn’t know. She had been friendly with his mother while they were dating, but never with Jennifer. He was surprised that he hadn’t thought about her being invited before. He wondered what it would have been like standing here, thinking that she might show up, that after two years since he’d seen her face, she would appear in the entryway of the church, her hair pinned up in that elaborate way he’d never been able to figure out, in a dress, maybe a yellow dress that ended just below her knees. Maybe she would have smiled at him. Maybe they would have talked. Or maybe nothing would happen at all.

The break-up had been his decision. He was the one driving back and forth, he was the one living alone in a big city. She was surrounded by familiar things: their college town, her own family not far away, her friends who hadn’t moved away. He thought it might be easier for him to get over it, because he would be far off, in a new setting. She would be the one to walk the streets they used to walk together every day, to pass the coffee shops and the bars they visited every weekend. It would be harder for her. And he felt bad about this, but he made his decision and carried it out anyway.

He had been sitting at her kitchen table in her small apartment. It was mid-morning on a Saturday, a time of day he never knew what to do with. It was November. They had woken up early because they’d gone to bed early and they’d gone to bed early because they’d had a fight. It wasn’t the first argument, just one in a series. It was about their plans for Thanksgiving,

whether they'd go to his family's or hers or whether they'd go separately and why they hadn't fought about this for the last three Thanksgivings they'd spent together. It was right after she'd admitted she was unhappy over the phone and he had yet to address that, to ask what she wanted to do. He was afraid to. That morning, instead of fighting about where to go for Thanksgiving, they'd started arguing about who should drive. Matthew didn't want to take his car because he was already driving back and forth from his new job every other weekend. Maybe they had said something about how she felt left behind or about how he felt neglected because she hadn't visited him once, or about how they were just purely sick of each other. Maybe they'd said something about the fucking weather. It just didn't matter anymore. What he did remember was how he saw her then, in that early morning light, not as Katie, but as some person he knew well but was distinctly apart from himself. He saw in that moment that he could do without her and he would.

“This isn't worth it anymore, is it?” he'd said, and then she looked up at him, took her head out of her hands. He was unnerved when he saw her face, the way it shifted into an expression of rigidity, hardness, closing him off. He considered taking the words back but instead he turned and left without saying anything else. It was only when he got outside into the frigid, raw November air that he noticed his hands were shaking. He had to sit in the car for ten minutes before he could drive away to his parents' house, but he did drive away.

He hadn't expected it to be so easy, like ripping off a band-aid. It was so simple, he thought that day. All he had to do was leave and she never called him again. The first few weeks felt like swimming in an ocean. Cold and refreshing and relieving in some ways. There was the threat of the depths below, but he was keeping his head above the waves. He thought about her constantly, but mostly to compare what life was like without her, without her name appearing on his phone, without her name in his inbox. He could, he believed, stay afloat.

But he was wrong. Days afterwards, he realized with slow but solid regret that he missed her and he missed her awfully. It was like a hunger. And when he finally broke down and called her two weeks later, she did not answer. She did not answer when he called the day after that, or the day after that. She sometimes responded to his emails. She wrote to him that she was enjoying her program at Michigan and that she wondered if it was colder in Chicago than in Ann Arbor. She wrote that she was going to Seattle for a summer job and then later she hoped to move there after she finished her Masters. And then she had wished him a Merry Christmas and signed her email with “much love,” and then, only six months later, just as he was trying to figure out what that meant, she was gone.

The reception was worse. The reception hall was the same sort of place used for high school reunions and proms. Jennifer and her new husband greeted friends with squeals and high fives. Besides family, he knew hardly anyone there. This was his own sister’s wedding, but instead it felt like he was there in the place of someone more important who hadn’t been able to make it.

Matt sat at the head table with the other bridesmaids and groomsmen. He watched his parents at their round table nearby, talking to one of their old neighbors. His mother, when she was taking RSVPs, had asked if he’d be bringing a date. He hadn’t given her a straight answer then, but now that answer was an obvious no.

He had dated a few other women since Katie, one of them a woman named Caroline who had curly hair and a tiny mouth. She went to the same coffee shop that Matt frequented. Used to frequent. After the second date, when she mentioned that she belonged to a book club, he decided to find another coffee shop. It wasn’t that he especially disliked her or book clubs, but

he just didn't see himself with someone who was in a book club. Katie wasn't in a book club. Katie read books on her own.

The only slightly serious girlfriend was Beverly, who lived in the same apartment complex as Matt. She was in law school and got into the elevator to go outside for a jog the same time in the morning that Matt left for work. They had even slept together, but Matt believed it happened only because she lived down the hall and didn't have to stay the night. She was nice and smart and sometimes funny, but when he heard a hard knock on his door and looked through the eyehole, every single time he hoped it was Katie, surprising him in Chicago to make amends. But it was always Beverly and she must have seen how, as he opened the door, he looked as though he were swallowing something large.

Matt sat between Tina and one of the groomsmen named Alex who took off his suit jacket as soon as they took their seats. Matt could see the tattoo of a tiger peeking out from under his t-shirt sleeve. The spinach lasagna tasted gritty, at least to Matt, the meatballs were cold, and the mashed potatoes—mashed potatoes?—were too wet. Everyone else seemed to be eating happily and not only eating, but drinking, too. Jennifer and Chad had already done six shots, one for each month they'd been engaged. Matthew's mother and father were sharing a gin and tonic, but his father had gotten up to refill the glass at least twice. Matt had downed a glass of Chardonnay but he felt the liquid sloshing around his stomach with the meatballs and didn't want any more. He did have to admit Chad was a good bartender. The way he handed Jennifer her cocktail with both hands made Matt want to smile, but he didn't feel like smiling, so instead he just stared at his plate of cold lasagna and potatoes.

The DJ played a Michael Jackson song and Jennifer and her friends screamed and ran to the dance floor. One of the bridesmaids tripped in her heels and fell against a table. Matt

wanted to put his hands over his eyes and let out a sigh, but as he watched another girl pick her up, laughing, he only felt worse to be sitting alone.

The whole room was green: dark green tiles on the floor, heavy green curtains, fake plants in every corner. Matthew looked over at his parents. The music from the dance floor thumped throughout the whole room, and he saw his father's foot tapping in its polished black shoe, kicking into his mother's white heel. She pushed her foot back playfully. Matt felt drunk and disoriented, even though he wasn't. The smell of the food, dull and yellow on his plate, was nauseating. He wanted badly to leave.

Then Aunt Brenda appeared. Before he knew what was happening, she had his hands in her fingers and was exclaiming.

"Matthew! Well, look at you. You just looked so handsome walking down that aisle today," his aunt cried. She wore a purple blazer with shoulder pads and had a white flower pin on her lapel. Her lips were covered in a pink lipstick that had smudged onto her front tooth. She looked nothing like his mother, this woman with her large eyebrows and moles dotting her cheek.

"Pretty soon you'll be walking down that aisle, huh? Where's that pretty girlfriend of yours?"

The lights in the room seemed to flicker for a moment, and Matthew focused on the flower on his aunt's jacket. It flickered too, turning into a white blur. His hands were sweating and he pulled them from her grip. Her nails were painted purple to match her blazer but they'd already begun to chip and each nail was a different length, jagged and broken. Katie would never have let that happen. She took good care of her hands. She kept everything in order.

"She—," he started. "Well, we broke up. A little over a year and a half ago. Thanksgiving before last."

“Oh!” Brenda said. Her eyebrows seemed to leap off her face and Matt had to look away from her. “I’m sorry! I didn’t know that. It’s been quite some time since I’ve seen you. I’m sure you’ve got some other special someone lined up.”

Matthew had no response. He realized then, as though a camera up in the ceiling had zoomed out to look down on him sitting there, just how pathetic he was. He needed to go. He needed to leave Novi and Michigan and go back to Chicago. He needed to be away from this place. And besides, if he was still here tomorrow, Sunday, he’d have to go to the funeral. there would be no way around it. And he absolutely could not do that. Katie wouldn’t want him to, he thought as he stood. She would want him to be where he belonged. Not here.

“I just saw your cousin Paula last weekend and she is such a doll,” Brenda continued. “Did you know that—”

“I need to go,” Matt said then. “I’m sorry, Aunt Brenda, I need to go.” He pushed up from the table and went to his parents. His aunt stood up too, but he did not turn around. She was still talking.

“I’m leaving,” Matt said once he was behind his parents. They both turned around and looked at him. It was not Matt who looked like his father anymore, it was his mother. They resembled each other in a way relatives never could. It was in the way they moved their eyes to him at the sound of his voice. If he didn’t leave right then, he was going to be sick.

“But Matt,” his mother said. “What about the toast? How can you leave?”

“I’m sorry. I—tell Jennifer goodbye for me.”

“Where are you going?” his mother asked. “What do you mean?”

“I’m sorry,” Matthew said.

“This is your sister’s wedding,” his mother said. “I know this is hard for you, but—”

“Let him go,” his father said. His father looked at him then, right in his eyes, and although he looked disappointed, or even angry, Matt knew he wouldn’t stop him from leaving. Jennifer would not notice his absence until later and she would understand, hopefully, or not care. His parents would understand too, even if they didn’t right this minute. He just had to get out. It was pitiful, he knew, but the longer he stayed, the more pitiful he felt himself becoming.

The parking lot was steamy and heat came up from the asphalt. Chicago would be cooler by at least ten degrees, right on the lake. He was thankful he’d driven himself to the reception instead of riding with his parents. It was only eight o’clock and the sky was irritatingly bright. He got into the car.

Before he knew it, he was on the expressway and then in Indiana and then Illinois. He drove without the radio on until he came to the Skyway and then he began to fidget, to need to be out of the car. He thought about what Jennifer might say when she realized he’d left, but most likely, she won’t even notice. It was still probably wrong that he’d left. But he’d had to. He had to feel something moving around him, the wheels of the car, the highway flowing underneath like a river he couldn’t resist. He found a rock station that was playing a Nirvana song, turned it up loud and left it that way, even when the station went to commercials. When he finally pulled into the parking structure for his apartment, the radio screamed with an ad for an appliance store.

He remembered then that he’d left his clothes and shaving kit back in Michigan. But he had his keys and he went into his apartment on the twelfth floor. Before he even turned on the lights, he threw his suit coat onto the couch. It was a tiny apartment, with a small kitchen that opened into the living room and then a small hallway that led to the bedroom and the bathroom. Even though he’d lived there for close to four years, it still looked empty. He’d never hung pictures on the cream walls, he’d never replaced the torn shower curtain, and he’d never even unpacked two boxes under his desk in his room. They were full of old things, like programs

from plays he'd seen in college and postcards from friends who'd travelled in Europe. He had no use for these things now, but he had nowhere else to put them.

The apartment was stifling. He walked to the living room window, still in the dark, and switched the air conditioner on. It was nearly midnight. He stood there for a moment, listening to the hum of the air. Below in the glow of streetlights, cars and figures moved about, slower, it seemed, than they did when he was down there among them. The twelfth story was not very high and if he looked up, the view was just as busy, with lights flickering and shadows shifting in other apartment windows.

He could go out. He could go have a drink in a bar somewhere, maybe the British-themed pub down the street. Or he could just go to bed. He was tired. Or he could read. He could go on his computer, he could catch up on e-mails, he could just stand there at the window all night. But he wanted none of these things. He wanted Katie. Maybe he should have stayed for the funeral. Maybe that would have helped.

Then he thought of the forgotten shaving kit back in Michigan, with his toothbrush. He'd go buy a toothbrush, he decided. Do something with a specific goal. He left his suit coat behind and went down the elevator in his white dress shirt and tie. It was a yellow tie, dyed to exactly match the tulips in the bridesmaids' bouquets. He got out on the street and didn't pay attention to which way he turned. He walked past a group of teenage girls in strapless sparkly shirts and denim skirts. A breeze hit him and he felt cooled. He came to a Walgreen's sooner than he meant to and went inside. The lighting was so bright that the place was startling. The high shelves of shiny hula hoops and beach pails in the front of the store reached to the ceiling. Mathew glanced at the attendant, a middle-aged balding man. He was reading a magazine.

Matthew turned down an aisle. Then he turned down another. He wanted to be lost, to need to find his way out so his mind was occupied, to not find what he needed too quickly. He

came to the beauty and hair care aisle. Without thinking, without even pausing, his hand reached out and yanked a set of hair ties from the wall. They were the same kind Katie used to wear, to hold her hair back in the summer or in the mornings when she woke and it fell in her face. They were black and plain and cheap, but they were hers. He could picture the logo on her dresser. Then he saw a headband, the stretchy cloth kind. Purple. He grabbed it.

He walked down the aisle and came to shampoo. He spotted her brand too easily, as though it were set there to grab his attention. She used mango peach, in a pink bottle. He didn't want to because he knew it would hurt, but he did it anyway: he clenched the headband and ties in one hand and opened the shampoo bottle and smelled it, took in as much of the scent as he could and she hit him so hard then, her smell and her hair and her body surrounding him. His throat clenched painfully but he kept going. He went into the snack aisle and grabbed a bag of Bugles and two Snickers bars and those root beer gummies that she loved and he could hardly carry things so he headed to the cash register. On the way, he walked by the tampons and, nearly dropping the shampoo, he made himself grab a box, the kind he thought she used. The details got blurrier and blurrier the harder he thought about it. Everything he held in his arms seemed too bright, the colors throbbing.

He got to the cashier, who stopped reading his magazine and looked at the items Matt dropped in front of him.

“You need a bag?” the cashier asked and Matt nodded. He handed the man a twenty and once he had his change and the bag in his hand, he wanted to run back to his apartment. What was there to stop him? There were stranger things in the middle of a city than a man running down the street in a dress shirt and a daffodil-colored tie with a shopping bag at midnight. But still, he controlled himself until the elevator opened on the twelfth floor and then he leapt down the hall to his room.

This time, he flipped on every light he could find. He spilled the plastic bag open. He'd forgotten to get himself a toothbrush, but that seemed unimportant now. He put the hair ties and headband on his dresser. He opened the bag of Bugles and set it on the table. In a moment of inspiration, he put the Snickers bars on top of the fridge, exactly where Katie would have kept them, out of sight and hopefully out of mind. But her sweet tooth would've caved in and she'd have eaten them in a day. When everything was unpacked, he fell back onto the couch, which was soft and he sank into it. The lights were blazing. Somewhere in the building, a shower turned on. Somewhere else music pounded through the floor. He waited. And he waited.

Matthew was nearly asleep when there was a knock on the door. At first he thought he had imagined it, but it came again. Knock. Knock. Knock. He leapt up and whacked his hand against the coffee table. He froze, his hand cradled against his chest and his legs caught in the small space between the couch and the coffee table. The knock came again, sharp, sharp, sharp. Matthew hoped, he hoped so hard that he began to believe it. But he didn't believe it enough to go to the door and see, because he knew that really, there was nothing to hope for. He sank back into the couch. He closed his eyes. He waited. He sank deeper and deeper, slowly, into something both trembling and still, something like a great expanse of water with a low, rumbling current. He tried to think of everything there was to think about except for the knocks, and then, softly, there was the sound of footsteps retreating down the hallway.