

I Brought All the Flies to Your Funeral

A Collection of Five Short Stories

by

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*As I wrote these stories,
I realized that, more than anything else,
my writing reflects a state of mind
shared by my characters and myself.*

*This collection is dedicated to anyone else
who has ever shared this mindset as well.*

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Abstract

This collection of first-person narratives intends to explore the lives of people who have become marginalized within the different American communities they inhabit. At some moments, they are quite aware of their circumstances. At other moments, they are not. All of them, however, are trying their best to navigate through the modern world and all the baggage and all the privilege that comes with being an American.

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The Story of Aimless Emmett

Even after I became captain, they still called me Aimless Emmett. Not captain, not Emmett, but always Aimless Emmett. The name came from my Little League days when a youth coach saw me lamely throw the ball. He decided to encourage me by taunting me with the name. Every time I threw, he'd pitch a fast one right back at me and then order me to do ten pushups.

"You're going to thank me for this later, Aimless Emmett" he said, standing over me as I counted to ten.

I shaped up soon after, my muscles growing thicker and my aim more precise, but the name stuck with me through senior year. We were the Branhill Buccanneers back then, dressed in green shirts and pants with white stripes. We were the best varsity baseball team in our district, legends in the hallways at school.

At the end of our first day of practice that year, Coach Hedge announced that I would be captain. Nobody but me seemed surprised. Marvin patted me on the back while Eddie gave me a firm handshake, and that night, to celebrate, the three of us met by the swings in Lanark Park and killed a bottle of wine. There were old oak trees planted near the swings that always hid us from the cops, that shaded us from the moonlight.

"Of course he made you captain," Eddie had said, sitting on the lowered half of a seesaw, the bottle in his hand. Marvin was off in his own world as usual, up and down on the swing next to me, his blond bangs swooshing in the darkness.

I wasn't swinging. I was dallying, dragging my feet through the tanbark, listening as Eddie leaned back on the seesaw and looked up at the branches and leaves. With his jean jacket and paint-stained trousers and his crew-cut red hair, he looked both menacing and trustworthy.

“Let’s be real man,” he went on. “Coach wouldn’t trust any of those other faggots. You don’t dick around as much as they do, and that’s what the team needs.”

Coach Hedge put it a little more politely. As he sat in his La-Z-Boy in his plain, concrete-wall office, an offshoot from the locker room, he told me I was a listener. He told me leaders can’t act without weighing others’ input first, and doing so would help build the team.

“We’ve got some new kids, and we’ve got some juniors and sophomores who still don’t know what it takes to play a varsity sport,” he said, and he hunched in toward me and placed his palms on his knees. “You’re holding everybody together. From now on, when you speak, people are going to be listening to you.”

He talked up the job, but nothing felt different. I still put up with jeers and jokes in the locker room, still got caught off guard by Eddie’s fakes and fastballs, still raised my glove and snatched the ball in the air whenever somebody yelled, “Catch it, Aimless Emmett!” and I’d throw the ball right back at them, throwing it faster than it came.

And in the evenings on weekends, Marvin and Eddie and I would still meet at Lanark Park, where I’d listen to them bitch and moan about girls and how they couldn’t get with them. I couldn’t either, but I didn’t complain as much as they did. I’d sit on the swing and pump my arms and slowly push myself higher, up toward the leaves and the branches of the oak tree. If I closed my eyes in the moment before I peaked, I could imagine I was flying up, could imagine I would continue flying up above the leaves and the trees, heading up toward the moon.

I only had sex one time in high school. It was in a randomly-assigned motel room the night before the state championship, and it wasn’t consensual.

I awoke to a sculpted arm draped across my body in a relaxed pose, as if it belonged there as much as the comforter or the bed banister or the TV set. Just another object, but no, it was more than that. In my sleep, its hand had pulled down my boxers with its sticky fingers and smothered my mouth with its wet palm. The arm's owner scooted up close till he'd reached the point he wanted, till the ends of his dangling blond hair tickled my shoulders, till his lips fell on my scalp, till the smooth skin of his stomach flattened against my lower back.

My muscles tensed, but I couldn't move. I only felt his breaths on my neck, his arm weighing down on my side, his small, hard dick desperately prodding and poking in and out, in and out, but my dick felt hard too even though I didn't want it and don't want it and would never want it but I'm not moving and I can't move even though I want to, even though I feel nauseous and blind; I can't see the floor.

"You stopped snoring."

His voice rasps with the grit of a man, and he speaks deliberately, like a teacher lecturing. Only then do I realize the owner of the arm is David, our short stop, the self-proclaimed hick who listens to Garth Brooks and always wears a cowboy hat to school. This is everything I've known about him until now. He transferred in this year and is in the grade below me.

"Aimless Emmett? You awake?"

I don't speak.

He taps my ear with the tip of his tongue and whispers tauntingly: "Captain?"

I push him off me and slide out of bed, tugging down on my t-shirt to cover my genitals as I tip-toe to the bathroom, past the two other guys assigned to our room, both of them fast asleep. I shut the door and lock it and thank god there's a lock and thank god there are other guys in the room because he won't dare follow me, I think.

But the guys in the room can't help me and I can't help myself and I can't confront him or yell or even react because I'm their captain and the game's tomorrow, so what the hell am I supposed to do?

I collapse on the toilet, panting, my eyes watering. The faucet has a drip, and everything's bright and white, fluorescent lighting like a hospital. I sit and shiver and cover my eyes and that's when I make a decision.

Nothing happened.

Yes.

Everything was just a nightmare. It didn't really happen, and in my nightmare, I wasn't even being myself. No, I was being some boy, some other boy who's young and weak and trying to be a man, and if I muster up all the strength I have, I can help this boy; I just need to figure out how.

So right now, hypothetically, this boy is sitting on a toilet in a motel bathroom bawling his eyes out because he's scared to leave the room not just because David waits outside. No, there's a world full of Davids, Davids he'll have to stare down with a forced, neutral expression as he articulates what happened and how it's made him feel and how he fears it might have changed him.

But what doesn't kill me only makes me stronger so I have to stay strong as captain, right? So where's my strength? Is a boy still strong if he lets himself get used? What kind of boy lets that happen? What kind of boy gets a hard dick out of letting that happen to him?

The boy has to stay strong and has to stay certain and to do this, he can't be a victim. He must fight the weakness by pretending, to be determined in brushing aside the tears trickling past his knees, down the toilet rim to the bathroom floor, and to prove his strength to himself and

anyone that knows—to God, to the cosmic forces that pushed him into that position, to David—by not telling anyone at all.

For just a moment, boy, stop, think, listen: who would tell anyone this? David? No. He fucked you in secret for a reason. Keep the secret and no one will know. No one will question your strength if they don't know how. Boy, even if you stay like this forever, fighting to hush your tears and gain the composure you need to stand up straight in the world, you will still seem the same to all around you. Who would know better? Nobody will question your silence because you've always been a quiet one. Nobody will call you a fag unless they thought so already for an unrelated, stupid reason. To everyone, you'll keep on being captain. You'll keep being Aimless Emmett.

I inhale, dab a washcloth across my eyes, and return to the bedroom. *The boy stays on the toilet, the boy stays in the bathroom*, and I slip my underwear back on and climb beneath the comforter. Thinking to protect myself, I lie on my back, but David is already fast asleep.

We won state championships the next morning. We dogpiled our pitcher on the field and dumped a cooler of ice water over Coach Hedge's head. I gave Eddie and Marvin each a big hug as we strutted off the field like victors, and that's when David walked up to me.

“Can I have a hug too?” he asked.

Marvin and Eddie turned and looked at David, startled by his presence. I glanced at them, and their eyes seemed to gleam with curiosity, a curiosity I couldn't ever feed.

I forced a smile and laughed.

“Sure man,” I said casually, “Why not?”

And I leaned into David and hugged him half-heartedly, making sure to keep a distance before pushing back and walking away. Marvin and Eddie ran after me.

“Dude, what was that about?” Eddie asked.

“I don’t know,” I said, and I kicked at the sandy ground. “The kid’s a weirdo. Ask him.”

Marvin and Eddie paused, but I kept on walking. I could imagine them behind me, staring at each other, knowing this wasn’t like me and wondering what might be up, but I won’t say anything. I won’t say anything at all.

We headed toward the locker room to get ready for the medal ceremony, and I tried to think about how I’d be home in Branhill that night, how we’d all be on the bus in a matter of hours, but somehow I didn’t feel fully there.

I didn’t see much of David for the rest of the school year, but I still had to avoid him on campus, had to pick out his cowboy hat and flannel shirt and jeans from half a hallway away, giving me the time to compose myself before striding on past him as though he wasn’t there. He’d glance my way, and once or twice he waved, but for the most part, he avoided me, too.

I didn’t see much of Marvin or Eddie, either. They would call me on weekends, asking if I’d found a date for prom or if I wanted to go to Lanark Park, but I’d make excuses—too busy with homework, with final exams. I skipped prom and sleepwalked through graduation and focused on the end prize of getting away from Branhill, getting on to better things in life.

But in the summer, when Eddie’s parents left for a weekend and he threw a party, I had to be there. I had barely seen my two closest friends in three weeks, and I couldn’t disavow them for good. So I soon found myself on the back porch of Eddie’s house, overlooking his backyard. Most people were inside, and only Marvin was sitting on a picnic bench with two decently drunk

girls whose names I didn't even know. The girls were laughing belligerently, stumbling around the yard, slurring their words in a too-loud conversation, and Marvin sat quietly, politely laughing occasionally, but never doing more than eyeing them. I sipped on a Heineken as I watched the scene below, and then I looked up at the moon. It was full, casting light down onto the girls. The glitter in their lip gloss sparkled.

The door to the backyard opened, and I turned to see him and his blond hair, his bright green eyes. He was hatless and dressed in a blue collared shirt and black slacks, and he had a red plastic cup in his hand. Even though he wasn't graduating, even though he barely knew Eddie, he was there, a few feet from me, his breath reeking of alcohol.

"Want some?" David asked, and he pushed his cup toward me. He smiled and ran the fingers of his free hand through his hair.

"No," I said coldly. Then, fearing Marvin might overhear, I added, "But thanks, man."

David nodded and walked to the edge of the porch. He leaned against the railing and stretched his arm alongside it, toward my back. I turned around and looked away, returning my focus to Marvin and the two girls, both of whom were now yelling at each other about something. I wondered if I could risk joining them or if David would then follow me. Marvin sat watching the girls, laughing at them. Just try to be like him, I thought. Play it cool.

"Hey, so I haven't heard from you since the season ended," David said.

"Right."

He said nothing more, then walked around me, circling around me to my other side, as if he were sizing me up.

"So, Captain, you wanna hang out some time?" he asked. "Just to chill and, you know, maybe talk?"

He clasped his hands together and rested them on the railing, and my hands started to shake. I set the bottle down on the railing and looked out at the moon.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’m pretty busy these days.”

A grin broke across David’s face, and he laughed. “Doing what?”

He inched toward me, and I took a step back, ready to bolt inside the house, but the back door opened again. David and I turned to see Eddie step outside, he staring right at the two of us.

“What’s going on?” Eddie asked, offering a polite wave.

Before I could answer, he was running down the steps to join Marvin, leaving David and I alone. I could see Eddie talking to the girls, somehow relaxed, confident. David had fallen silent and was watching Eddie too.

I picked up my Heineken and looked David in the eye. I sipped my Heineken and set it down again, then crossed my arms.

“Honestly, David,” I said. “I’d prefer it if we just didn’t talk anymore.”

He smirked. “What you mean?”

I stayed focused on his face, forcing myself to withstand his dumb grin, his glowing green eyes, and the movement of his hand toward mine, a slight movement as though he were a magician, confident he could pull a trick.

“I don’t know,” I continued. “I guess, I don’t really know you, and, to be honest, I just don’t really care to know you. So why pretend we’re friends, you know?”

David’s eyebrows slanted down into a glare, and he laughed once again. He glanced over at Marvin and Eddie and the girls in the backyard, then looked back at me, and suddenly his hands were on me and he was leaning in close, his nose inches from mine, the two green flames

of his eyes flaring with passion mixed with anger, a hint at a goal, a dream, a fantasy he'd stop at nothing to make happen. I backed up against the railing.

"I get what you're trying to do," he said, a mutter, an attack. "You think I'm stupid, huh? You think I'm pathetic and going nowhere and you're too good with your college-prep mumbo-jumbo to waste time with shits like me, right? Well, fine. Go ahead. Walk all over me. I dare you to think you've somehow got the upper hand here morally speaking. I don't care, because you don't know what shit I've been through and you don't know how it feels and you don't know what it's like to be me, you spoiled, stuck-up, waste-of-life prick."

His breaths blew against my forehead and his palms held my shoulders. His pelvis pressed against my stomach, and I could feel his small dick again, pushing hard against my waist. My eyes started to water and I was panting, panting uncontrollably, sweat dribbling down my neck.

He pushed me away, and I heard the clunk of footsteps coming onto the porch.

"Everything all right here?" Eddie asked.

"Yeah man, we're good," David immediately said. "We're just having a talk."

I looked up toward the moon and away from Eddie. I told myself it was okay, that if Eddie asked I could make up a lie, but I didn't have any lie planned.

"We're thinking of going to Lanark," Eddie went on.

With a heavy slap, David put his arm around me.

"Yeah!" he said. "Let's all go to Lanark and have ourselves a good time!"

I could see his grin from the corner of my eye, and I lowered my gaze to the lawn. I could already feel myself on the swings at Lanark, pushing up into the air and crashing back down, and

my stomach contorting itself into a knot at the very idea of falling back down, of never quite breaking through the trees.

“Aims? Aimless Emmett? You okay?”

I could hear Eddie’s voice but I couldn’t see him, didn’t want to see him, until I realized the arm wrapped around my body didn’t belong to David anymore. At some point, David had left, and now Eddie stood next to me, his arm wrapped around me. He was looking up at me, could see the water in my eyes. I looked to the right and saw Marvin and the drunk girls climbing up the steps towards us.

“I’m fine,” I finally replied, “but I think I’m going to pass. I think I’m going home.”

I stepped away from the railing and headed for the door, but Eddie grabbed me.

“Dude,” Eddie said, “you can be honest with me. What’s the story with you and David?”

“Nothing,” I said, and I wriggled myself free and pushed my way through the house, down to the street, into my car, where I sat without bothering to ignite the engine and finally began crying again, knowing that I couldn’t tell Eddie the story with David and me, even if there was a story to tell.

But there is a story. It’s the story of a boy still locked in a motel bathroom in Des Moines, hunched over the toilet with just a t-shirt on, still crying an endless stream of tears, and he hears the faucet dripping and dripping little drops of water, filling up the sink until it overflows, and he doesn’t know what is water and what are tears anymore.

And a part of this boy wants to leave, but he can’t because of me. I keep the door locked, and I won’t let him to leave. I don’t know how to allow it, don’t know if I could stand seeing him step back into the motel room, into a world where people’s words will eat away at his intellect, shrivel his self-esteem—*Fag! Pussy! A real man wouldn’t let it happen.* I am the boy in the

bathroom and the one who's locked the door, and we must keep the boy hidden because it's the only power we have left. We'll never let him escape. We'll never let the boy go.

A knock sounded from the passenger-side window of my car. I kept staring through the windshield, and then I heard Eddie's voice.

“Emmett, can you hear me? You okay?”

We mustn't let him know we're listening. We mustn't let him know we care.

I Brought All The Flies to Your Funeral

You knew I'd arrive late, I figured. You never showed me the way up through San Jose along Highway 85 to Saratoga. During the three months of what may or may not have been dating, you never brought me to your hometown. I could make up many reasons for this—my skin looked too brown to be white, and I obviously wasn't Asian. If we'd strolled past your peers from high school, maybe they'd have eyed us from their regal redwood chairs outside the Blue Rock Shoot, the hippest coffee shop in all four blocks of your tree-lined downtown. Their eyes would've gleamed like diamonds, the uncut kind. I imagined Saratoga as something like this as I veered into the church parking lot in my brother Emilio's red, beat-up Accura, but I wouldn't know the truth until the evening after your funeral, until I experienced it myself.

I wore black heels from Target—modest and classy, close-toed and two inches. I'd worn them around the house that morning and had worn three-inchers at my cousin's wedding in May, but my balance still felt off. You liked me as a sneakers kind of girl, in jeans not dresses, and I wondered why I was doing this, who I was trying to impress.

Well, I hardly made an impression anyway. The church, a Presbyterian one, was overflowing with teenagers—the boys wearing black pants with matching polo shirts, the girls in black dresses or skirts, all of them huddled in clusters, murmuring to one another. Sure, a few people stood out—a tasteless blonde in a lavender top and a Latino-looking boy in jean shorts and a navy blue t-shirt—but their presence didn't make me feel like less of an intruder. These were your high school friends. I recognized nobody from San Jose State, but even if I had, I doubt I'd have wanted to see them.

I sat in one of the plastic chairs set up in the church's courtyard—the inside was full—and pretended to text someone, but the boy in the t-shirt didn't catch my cue.

“Is this taken?” he asked, gesturing to the seat next to me. He had a chirpy voice, strangely upbeat for a funeral.

“No,” I replied, and he sat down, resting his feet on the legs of the chair in front of him. Only then did I see he was wearing white Air Jordans—the real ones, not imitations—and I wondered if he belonged here more than I initially thought. He looked around, as if searching for a lifeboat while desperately splashing to stay afloat in the icy Atlantic, but no one except me could save him from the loneliness we seemed to share.

“How did you know Tony?” he asked casually, attempting to sound emotionless.

“We were friends,” I said, because it's what you really were. Because a simplification of the truth still is the truth. Because if I'd suggested to myself that you were anything more, I'd have only felt even more regret.

The boy went on to recount the hours you two had marched around your high school football field in band, both of you trumpets. I wondered how much you actually knew about him, but then his eyes watered as he spoke. He said he and you had no mutual friends, and I said yes, same with me.

Before I could get his name, your service began with the pallbearers, six teenage boys in all-black suits attempting to walk solemnly through the church doorway, their lips shut and their heads high as they lugged your heavy oak coffin. The coffin bumped against one of the boys and he stumbled, fighting to regain his balance, but he quickly recovered and then they vanished around the corner, leaving those of us latecomers outside to struggle to interpret the muddled voices echoing from the chapel's speakers.

What's the use? I thought and decided to remember you through silence, through my thoughts, through memory. I closed my eyes and pictured us sitting on your couch, taking a break from video games, you and your tan skin and your buzzed-off hair, dressed in your gym shorts and your green sleeveless tee and your San Francisco Giants baseball cap, I in my long sleeve shirts, my glasses, a joint in my hand, and my head tilted back toward the ceiling—a foolish, beastly, brown-haired girl who didn't know what she was doing in your apartment.

While I recalled this image of us, the first fly arrived. It hovered by my nose, and I opened my eyes and swatted it without much thought—there are always flies on hot days in California. But as I did, another one buzzed past my ear. I tried swishing it away too, and for a while it lingered by the boy next to me, but soon the fly returned, and soon came a third, all dancing around me, exploring my armpits, the creases in my dress. I wondered why God was cruel—why He'd make me suffer when I was already attending the funeral of the closest thing to an ex-boyfriend I'd ever had, a boy I cared about but barely knew.

I met you through Jill, and Jill smoked weed. Apparently, this detail was enough to make us think we all had something in common, although I was an amateur who'd started smoking freshman year. You, on the other hand, were a pro who rolled blunts and owned two bongs that you hid under a pile of dirty clothes in the corner of your room, in case your Mom came over. Jill was a pro, too.

“Why aren't there any movies about girl stoners?” she asked once. We'd been playing Grand Theft Auto, during which Jill had stolen eight cars and fucked and murdered a hooker. She cached out her piece, a glass orange one smaller than the palm of her hand, and set it down on your white coffee table. She had five different colored bowls to match her different outfits.

That day, she wore a white dress with a bright orange belt. She'd bought both at Salvation Army when we'd gone shopping there two weeks ago, but quality of fashion wasn't the kind of thing you really cared about.

"There are millions of movies with guy stoners," she went on. "Why not some for us girls?"

"Because you're supposed to be good girls," you replied, and you leaned back in your brown leather office chair and grinned proudly. "Good girls don't smoke weed."

Jill rolled her eyes. "Oh, and you're such a bad boy then for smoking us down?"

You shrugged. "I'd like to think I'm not," you said, and you raised your eyebrows and grinned. "But then again, if I was, could you tell?"

This was the moment when I started liking you.

I think Jill liked you too, but I didn't hang around her enough to know for sure. She and I were cursory friends who met in a biology lecture, and when you threw a party in your apartment three blocks from campus, she told me to tell Chad that she was having a sleepover, when really we went to your place. You didn't even stick in my memory—maybe because of the tequila shots—but from then on, she acted like the three of us were best friends. We could show up and game on your Playstation or Nintendo any day after class. I'd play until around six, then head to the library, where Chad would pick me up.

There is another memory I have of you and your couch. We were passing a blunt while we waited for Jill's return so we could restart a game of Super Smash Brothers, but Jill had smoked too much and gone to your roommate's bed to crash—your roommate was gone for the

weekend. I'd been sitting on your warm, fuzzy carpet, my back pressed against your wall, when you looked down at me with curious eyes.

"Come sit up here," you said, gesturing to the spot where Jill had been sitting.

I shook my head and flinched, not because I liked the floor. Your voice and your words reminded me of my mother when she was lying in her bed like a beached whale, her brown curls like tentacles as they stretch across the bare mattress, her head tilted back as though she's gasping for air, and I remember her looking down at me from the bed, her breasts poking up toward the ceiling.

Come sit over here, she tells me, gesturing to the edge of the bed. But no, I think I like the floor.

"I'm okay," I responded to you, thoughtlessly.

A quiet 'tssch' sounded from your mouth, and you smirked. "You sure?"

With effort, I pushed myself off the floor and walked over to the empty seat. My muscles tensed.

"Are you okay?" you asked, clearly oblivious. You probably were wondering if I was a virgin. I took a deep breathe and forced a smile as I picked a controller off the floor.

"Yeah. I'm fine," I said, and I looked the other way and wondered about my mother lying naked on the bed, the room dark and humid from the steam of the shower.

There's nothing to be afraid of, she says. *It's just the female body*, and I eye her too suspiciously so she takes my left hand and places it on her left breast and rubs it in, giving me a full grope. I want to pull away, I remember, and I don't want to touch, but she pushes my hand up on her breast and grabs my other hand and makes me push hard as though she's teaching me how to knead dough because I'm old enough to know. I'm only six years old.

One day, she says, smiling, you'll have big breasts like mine.

“You got something on your mind?” you asked. “You’ve got that far-off look.”

I laughed and told you I was thinking about my mother, which, technically, wasn’t a lie. Telling the truth let me explain how I live with my step-father Chad in Gilroy and commute to San Jose because my mother vanished—just vanished—when I was fifteen.

You shook your head and grunted with disgust. “That’s so California,” you said, your voice squeaking on “so.”

I laughed. “What do you mean?”

You looked away, toward the TV, and bit your lip before speaking. “I don’t know. I just feel like people always do what they want here, and, you know, sometimes that’s a good thing, I guess. But, sometimes it’s not.”

You never had a way with words.

We began hanging out more after that, and you started inviting me over when Jill wasn’t around. As I got to know you better, I found you were the California I hadn’t known growing up. We had so much in common, but at the same time, we had nothing in common at all. We were biracial, but you were Vietnamese-Korean, and I was Mexican and whatever my Mom was. Our parents were both divorced, but your Mom and Dad had split peacefully when he left for Taiwan, while my Dad fled to Los Angeles when I was six because my mother was a “fat, lazy white whore,” and it said so in the court papers.

We had been in high school marching bands—mine with 50 kids, yours with 200—and both had older brothers—yours at UCLA, mine at the Starbucks in Gilroy’s Outlet Mall—and we both just wanted to sit in your apartment, to talk, to smoke weed, and to play video games.

Nothing more. Nothing less. You told me about your hometown, how you liked to hang out at the Blue Rock Shoot and get bagel sandwiches with friends, then sit on the café's back balcony and stare out at the redwood trees in the nearby park. I told you it sounded like a nice place to eat, but you didn't take note of this.

I remember the time you complained about your Dad.

"He thinks I'm doing nothing because I'm not at a UC," you said after a round of Mario Party, a game I hadn't even heard of growing up. "He wants me to transfer."

You were rolling a blunt, and your fingers worked with the dexterity of a pianist, neat and swift and cautious in your movements, as though the whole thing were an art.

"Does your dad ever get angry with you about it?" I asked.

You shook your head. "Nah, he's, like, too old and small for that. Sad little man."

I thought about Chad, trying to see him as a sad little man, but he isn't. I pictured him at home, looming above Emilio and me as he storms about the house in a white wife beater and red boxers, focused, determined, but not going anywhere, a fish in too small a fishbowl. He enters his bedroom, then rushes out and enters the T.V. room. The bright red sunburns on his neck and arms stand out against his wife beater.

"My Dad's a businessman with a background in computer engineering," you continued, your voice drifting into the background as my mind began to dwell on memories of Chad. "He tries to be tough, but he doesn't have the balls for it. He's always putting on an act."

I'm watching the commercials on television when I'm ten-years-old and Chad's darting around. He enters the hallway, and I hear him yell, *Don't speak that shit in my house*, and I cross my arms and lie down on the couch, but he keeps yelling at Emilio, *I said don't speak that shit! Not on the phone, not nowhere!*

A pause.

I didn't buy a phone for you to talk to some gangbangng shits. I bought it for your safety, so speak English.

There's a hush, then a squeal and the sound of feet thumping and Emilio yells in his pre-pubescent voice, *Give it back!* and thumps and shouts and the beating of arms.

Don't touch me, Emilio.

Give it back!

I said don't touch me, Emilio.

Give it back!

I said don't fucking touch me!

And a slam and a scream and a thunderous smash and I cringe on the couch and Emilio is yelling and I try to dig my toes into the plastic cover on the couch but they just glide across the surface, searching for a crack to fit into.

You saw me cringe. You could tell I was lost in my thoughts again.

“Really now, Megan,” you said insistently, “What’s the matter?”

I spent five seconds staring at your controller, a purple device shaped like a spacecraft. In hindsight, the controller was the best thing about video games. We focused on the buttons, the joystick, and the screen, and to everything else, we were desensitized.

“Nothing’s the matter,” I replied.

You set your controller down and leaned back in your chair.

“It’s late,” you said. “We should get dinner.”

“I don’t know,” I said, and I stood up. “My step-dad’s picking me up.”

“We should another time,” you said as I took my stuff and headed for the door.

“I don’t know, Tony,” I replied. “Maybe another time?”

Then I opened the door and walked out into the hall.

During your funeral, as I recalled how I ditched you in your own apartment, I smacked the side of my head. Sitting in the metal chair in the church’s courtyard, in the middle of the ceremony, I threw my hand in the air and gave myself a giant slap, a reverberating thud. A few faces turned, startled, but only briefly, and the ceremony continued uninterrupted. The boy next to me, whose name I still didn’t know, glanced at me but didn’t say anything, and when he did, I caught a glimpse of his eyes and the coat of tears glazing over them.

I didn’t cry during the ceremony. I didn’t feel a need to cry. But when I closed my eyes and felt the damn flies that were still circling my head like vultures, eager to consume the remnants of my memory of you, I felt like I could have cried if I really wanted to. Instead, I wanted my mind to wander, to see the moments when you could have meant something more to me if I’d known how to let myself go.

The suddenness of my exit from your apartment left me embarrassed and cold, and while I wanted to make it up to you, more importantly, I wanted to make it up to myself. So I texted you the next day and asked about dinner and a movie. I told Chad I was sleeping over at Jill’s again, a lie he believed because he didn’t know any better.

We ate breadsticks at Olive Garden in the Oakridge Shopping Mall and then saw a movie in the theater, where you wrapped your arm around me and kissed my cheek, which I found cute, and then kissed my neck, which made me giggle, but in the moment, something still felt off—the way your arm weighed down on my shoulder, the way you sped in toward my neck like a

woodpecker digging for bugs—so I pushed you away and said no, and, once again, you asked what was wrong.

“Nothing’s wrong,” I lied. “Really. I’m just trying to watch the movie,” and you gave me this stunned look that made me think I should say more, but I didn’t know what to say and didn’t want to. I returned my attention to the screen, pretending I wasn’t petrified with a fear of what might happen if I looked anywhere else.

When the movie finished, we walked into the mall’s fluorescent light, and I felt dazed, as though my body might at any moment twist into a gigantic human knot.

“So, what do you want to do?” you asked. “You want to go home?”

“Yeah,” I said softly, and I crossed my knees thinking, well, this isn’t like with Robert. You are sober and can drive me home, but you did both play trumpet in band.

We walked out to the parking lot and climbed into your Lexus, and I kept thinking about him, the scrawny white boy with blond hair curled into wavelets and startlingly green eyes and a mini van. I remember Robert’s smiles, always smiling at band practice and taking the freshmen boys off campus to lunch despite being a well-respected senior. The other girls, the ones with pink nail polish and the screeching voices of Harpies, they gossip about how cute he is, but I’m the tomboy he actually talks to, the girl in band who will take the SAT and go to college, and I’m wishing I had told you all of these details, that I’d explained myself to you as we sat in your Lexus with the engine turned off.

I looked at you and I smiled. Here was this Korean-Vietnamese-American boy with only a few acne scars on his face, with the kindness to drive the half-an-hour to Gilroy, and enough respect to stop macking on me when I asked, just like Robert stopped when I asked. But you’re not Robert. You’re Tony, and I want to like you that way.

“You know, you can come and just sleep on the couch at my place,” you said.

I lied and said Chad wanted me back home tonight.

“Are you sure he’d mind?” you asked.

And with tears in my eyes, I said yes, not because I didn’t like you or because I was afraid, but simply because in that moment, sitting in your Lexus and thinking about Robert, I just didn’t feel good, except it had anything to do with Robert really because part of me wanted to tell you to ignore it. Just ignore it. Listen, please, just ignore everything I’ve said and all my mixed signals. Just realize that tonight, I’m being weird, and I really want to go home with you, so, please, let’s just go to your apartment and be done with it.

But what I really wish I’d said is that there’s an abandoned barn across the valley from my house in Gilroy, a barn with mounds of dirt and remnants of hay where the seniors in marching band congregate every spring to sing, dance, and drink. I don’t drink even though Robert does, and the others go off into the fields, leaving him and me alone.

Robert sips his whiskey. I sit on the ground cross-legged and only offer a yawn.

He turns to me with a playful grin. *I don’t know if I should drive.*

I can drive, I say. *Give me your keys.*

He stands up and stumbles. I stand up and grab his shoulder.

Woah, I say, laughing, *you okay?*

He laughs off my concern, and I hold his hand as I guide him through the fields of dry grass, out to the road where his minivan is parked. He mumbles drunkenly something about the end of marching band, but I’m too busy pulling him along and don’t listen.

Do you have the keys? I ask after hauling him to the passenger door.

And he moves in and kisses me, passionately, pushing me up against the car door, until he pulls back five seconds later, and I laugh. I've never been kissed before.

Robert—

But he moves in again, pressing me against the car door with his chest, his lips smacking my cheeks as he tugs at my jeans. He kisses me and digs a hand in my jeans and feels my right thigh and kisses me on the neck and presses his fingers down hard as a child does when leaving handprints in wet cement. I close my eyes and can't move but don't ask why because in a moment of clarity everything makes sense. He steps back, unzips his pants, and reaches for the button on my jeans, when finally I let myself speak.

Robert, stop, I say plainly, more like a statement than a command.

He looks up, his pants sagging around his legs, and slowly he registers my words.

Hey, he says quietly, *I'm—I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do anything wrong.*

I watch him and don't move. I see a boy with a changing face, from innocent to shameful to guilty, eyes widening, eyebrows rising. He rests his hands on my shoulders.

It's okay, he says, as if he must to convince me before he can convince himself.

Can you give me the keys?

He fishes the keys out from his pants pocket, but he doesn't hand them to me. He holds them by his side for a moment, and I look away, but then he grabs my chin.

I didn't do anything wrong, did I? he asks, stammering.

I look at his eyes, and they're nervous, determined, as if I have the power to make lightning strike him, smiting him for the sins he may or may not have committed.

No. You didn't do anything wrong.

But he holds my chin a moment more, making me face him. I worry I might cry.

Then he hands me the keys and lets me go. I run around the car and climb into the driver's seat, but I don't even know where to drive. He directs me to his house, the scent of garlic piercing through the air, and after parking his van, I return his keys and walk up into the hills to Chad's house, all the while repeating to myself in my head, *He didn't do anything wrong, he didn't do anything wrong, he didn't do anything wrong, and I'm fine.*

The night of the movie, you drove me all the way down through San Jose to Chad's house in the foothills outside Gilroy. You said it was a nice house. Then you killed the engine and I unbuckled my seatbelt and we looked at each other. Nobody said anything at first.

"You just want to be friends, don't you?" you finally said.

I bit my lip and tugged at my jacket's sleeves. "I don't know. I guess so."

You sighed and looked away, then: "Well, we should keep hanging out, I think."

"Yeah, I think I'd like that," I replied, and I felt a hopeful spurt of relief.

And I got out of the car and you drove off, leaving me standing in the starlight in the dry grass outside Chad's two-bedroom house in the middle of the foothills surrounding Gilroy, alone, with nothing for me to do, with nowhere to go, with no one to talk to, to listen to, to connect with, to open up to in any way at all.

My eyes watered and I kneeled on the grass and I smacked the side of my head and screamed. Then I punched my chest and I punched my chest before pulling at my hair and crying, bawling, knowing I had messed everything up. I hit my head with my fist and clawed at my cheeks and laughed and yelled and cried because I know there is nobody to blame but myself. I know that nobody has hurt me. I know that nobody has abused me. I know that nobody has molested me. I know that nobody has raped me. I know that nobody has done anything of

significance, and I can't complain—I don't want to complain—because nobody has done anything except leave me alone enough to convince myself of the miserable, pathetic nature of my worthless life, to convince myself of my worthlessness until I could never see a way to get it all undone, a way that things might be better, and nobody can change things except me.

I fell over in the grass, the thistles sticking their spikes into my cheek, and I lay there until Chad finally came outside, a bottle of Bud Light in his hand, his leather boots inches from my forehead. He looked down at me.

“I thought you weren't here tonight.” he said. He swigged his beer.

“I came back early,” I replied, promising myself I'd never move, that I'd never enter his house again.

He took another swig, then wiped his mouth with his wrist.

“Get up and come inside,” he said. “It's cold out.”

Then he turned and walked away, and eventually, I followed, and, eventually, just before summer began, I got the guts to call you and ask if you were free to hang out. But you had found an internship in New York, and I was stuck in Gilroy. We agreed to meet up once again when school started, to hang out and play video games just as we used to, but then in August, you died, a vein mysteriously bursting in your brain.

Everyone suddenly stood up to form a line to enter the chapel. I had to ask your marching band friend what was going on, and he explained they were viewing your body. He didn't think he could stand to see your corpse, though, so he turned and walked away to go straight to the reception. And when he walked out, a fly trailed after him.

I decided to view your body and had to stand in line for ten minutes before I could even get inside the church. The cool air from the stone wall's insulation rushed to my skin, little goose bumps popping up all over my body. I realized then I had to do this, had to see you one last time before you left my life forever, to take a moment to see if you could have maybe been the boy I would've fallen in love with. But when my turn finally came and I stepped up to the coffin and looked down inside, all needs disappeared.

Your hair had grown out and you were wearing a tuxedo and your lips were too red with lipstick and your face too pale and your hands gently folded down by your pelvis like you'd spent your whole life praying and reciting poetry and smiling at babies. I stopped and kept glaring at you, and I heard your family—your mother and your brother whispering in Korean—and I later imagined they were asking *Who is that girl?* or *Who is that Mexican?* or even *Who is that tramp with the heels from Target?* but I didn't care at the time because all I could think was how you didn't look anything like yourself, or really, how you just looked dead.

The night of the movie was easy to get over; it only took a matter of days. Your death was different. When I saw the "RIP" postings on your Facebook wall, chills ran up my arms, and my intestines became meat on a skewer, spinning and roasting over a giant open flame. Here I was again, alone in Gilroy, stuck in Chad's house. I paced through the hallway, passing the bedrooms, back and forth, going nowhere. I called up Jill to let her know, but she already knew about your death and didn't want to go to a funeral.

"It's too weird, you know?" she said. "I don't think I can do that shit."

Everything was weird—even the phone call. I hadn't seen Jill in close to six months. She sounded high on the phone, and I hadn't smoked all summer. It gave me nostalgia for you and your apartment, for Super Smash Brothers, for your couch.

But being at your funeral and seeing your body only left me feeling drained, as drained of your life as your body had seemed. I sat in a corner at the reception, eating through a plate of crackers. I thought about eating, food moving through my body and filling me up, and I wondered if I'd become either more or less empty because of you—if all along, I had only been hoping something could happen between us. Maybe nothing was actually there the whole time, and that doesn't make me a bad person.

So when your friend Carlos, the boy in the t-shirt, talked to me at the reception and told me more about his and your fun times in high school, I just felt complacent, and when he told me how you'd often gotten lunch at the Blue Rock Shoot during weekend band practices, I asked him if he could show me where it was located.

In my mind, how or why or when seem irrelevant, but of course that's never the case. Timing is everything, and the timing of my request felt impeccable, felt less like a rebound from death and more like sincerity. Carlos's soft tan hands led me up the street to the café, and when I saw the eyes from the faces you'd have found familiar, those uncut diamonds, I realized their attention wasn't fixed on my race or class or any supposed victimhood I might embody, but on the presence of something different, something that's never wrong to be.

Part of what I want to tell you is that yes, when Carlos asked for my number, I gave it to him without any shame, and yes, when he hugged me goodbye, I held him close and took a step back to get a good look at him. In that, there's nothing wrong.

And yes, I kissed him—and I chose to kiss him. I leaned in toward his chin and pecked him quickly, a dash in and out, and then stopped and stared into his brown eyes before going in for a kiss on the lips, one lasting more than just a few seconds, with his hand on my shoulder and my fingers on his cheeks and a desire to keep it going forever.

I stepped back and walked away, blushing, waving goodbye, and Carlos yelled after me that he'd call me tomorrow, which he did, but that has nothing to do with you. What concerns you most is how as I headed back to the church's parking lot, I imagined you looking down, watching with a grin on your face, shaking your head and laughing and saying *That's so California*. I have nothing to be ashamed of, I think, and if you were here, you'd agree with me, nodding, your arm wrapped around my shoulder, saying yeah, babe, it's totally fine.

Visitors

Above our fireplace hangs a painting, a *nihonga* imitation of a pale-cheeked, kimono-clad woman. She holds a tray while looking over her shoulder. On her tray rest two small, porcelain glasses, likely filled with green tea, likely for a husband or a master, to be delivered in the most silent and submissive of manners.

As I sit on our grey suede couch, my feet propped up on the edge of our glass coffee table, I imagine a conversation with her.

“Hey sexy,” I say in a deep, intentionally gruff voice. “What you doing tonight?”

She laughs flirtatiously but remains completely poised. “Oh, you know. The usual. Bringing the tea. Balancing the tray. Keeping an eye on my husband. Yourself?”

I lift my feet off the coffee table and sit cross-legged on the couch.

“Oh, nothing really,” I reply. “Just waiting for laundry to finish.”

I don’t mention how the laundry includes the nice white linens for the lower bunk of my room and the grey set for the guest bedroom. Kate, a childhood friend, will sleep in my room. Jeremy, my son, will sleep in the guest room. My room used to be Jeremy’s and I used to sleep in the guest room, but Jeremy is gone now. He’s an hour-and-a-half away, at UC Berkeley, and visits rarely because he’s too busy dancing on the white sofas at the houses of young, beautifully tan girls—or at least, that’s what Facebook’s photo albums show me.

Facebook is also how I stay in touch with Kate these days. When we were 14, she moved with her mother to Texas, where she went to college and law school and now works in a firm in Austin. She visits San Jose rarely, and is in San Francisco for a conference this weekend. She only plans to stay one night.

I don't mention any of this to the woman in the painting because I know that for a little while, my life will be more exciting than hers. I wouldn't want to make her jealous.

"And how's your husband doing?" the woman asks.

I glance through the doorway to the TV room, where Larry watches Nancy Grace rant about the mother of the latest white girl to go missing in Georgia. He's wearing black basketball shorts and the white t-shirt from a 5K last March that he proudly finished in one hour and seventeen minutes, but he still hasn't gone to the gym today, even though it's five o'clock. Cable news has been a kind of sustenance for him ever since he lost his job. In August, despite record profits in 2006, the CEO of the software company Larry worked for decided to outsource everything to India and lay everyone off, leaving us to live off credit cards, some savings, and an incomplete retirement fund, leaving Larry to lie on the couch and watch Nancy Grace.

"Larry's doing fine," I accidentally mumble aloud.

Larry leans forward, his large black eyes squinting to see me. "Did you ask of me something, Amy?" he yells.

He sounds hopeful, as if I'm supposed to "ask of him" for help; as if, after nineteen years of marriage, there's a whole lot left to ask for. When we first met, I had plenty to "ask of him"—security and trust in a Japanese tech nerd who drew comics and rode a Vespa motorcycle and could hold me up against a shower wall in a way that made spontaneous sexual encounters feel more romantic than rehearsed. But to "ask of" these things now feels like a cruel joke, and not because of Larry's weakening upper-body strength or the Vespa's busted engine that's too costly for us to fix. Forcing one's mind to endure monotony, to sit staring at a painting while waiting for laundry to finish, is the real challenge.

"No, I didn't," I answer with a sigh, and I return to face the painting.

I can't find a job either. I went back to school to get a Master's in environmental management from San Jose State—I was going to influence environmental policy. But then the economy went downhill and all the good jobs in Silicon Valley were taken. I began sending resumes to any position, completely desperate—park rangers, office managers, human resources assistants—but rarely did I get a response. One time, a woman emailed me back saying I was “overqualified.” I immediately deleted the email and climbed into bed to brainstorm a list of ten reasons why I would've actually hated the job while simultaneously knowing it would've been better than sitting here at home—sitting on a couch, staring at a painting, and overhearing Nancy Grace criticize the mothers of lost daughters.

“There is so much in *the media*,” Nancy Grace says with a note of disdain, “telling young women they can go out and party and do what they want, as if they don't have a responsibility.”

Larry nods his head. I roll my eyes and wonder why the woman was a single mother in the first place.

I could pretend I forgot something when grocery shopping and go for a drive up into the mountains. I could read a book or a magazine or watch Nancy Grace with Larry. I could dance across the living room's cold hardwood floors, two-step past the vases in the china cabinet and the upright piano Jeremy used to play, but all this would be temporary relief; there wouldn't be anywhere to go. I would still be stuck here in San Jose, alone with Larry and the woman in the painting.

The washing machine buzzes, and I go to move the sheets to the dryer.

When I grew up in San Jose, a city half its current size and lacking the culture of San Francisco, the only fun I ever had was at Kate's house, a large, two-story one made of oak wood

in the middle of an apricot orchard her family owned. I was the second-youngest of five in a crowded house, so biking over to Kate's became my escape. While older kids from the neighborhood halved the apricots and chucked out their pits—"cuttin' cots," they called it, and it paid well—Kate and I played hide-and-seek among the trees, climbed up into their low-hanging branches, or dug in fresh dirt around the roots, searching for worms.

On summer days, we'd get ice cream from a cart that wheeled by at noon. We'd indulge on scoops of vanilla in waffle cones and rest under the shade of a great oak at the orchard's periphery. We'd lie there for hours, talking.

"When I have a family," I remember Kate saying on one such day, when we were about ten, "I want to have lots of kids. I want have eight of them."

"Why?" I asked, scowling. Even then, feminism flowed through my blood.

Kate's eyes gleamed with eagerness. "Because I want to see them playing here, just like us. Don't you think that would be fun?"

Her parents got divorced two years later, and her Dad sold the land in the early '80s, when Kate was in law school. It's an apartment complex now. She's single and lives in Austin, Texas.

I was the one who ended up with a family, and Jeremy was a lot to handle. I was working part-time from home and had turned our current guest room into my office. As a baby, Jeremy would cry and cry and I was trying to work with deadlines and projects and a presentation at the office but, no, Larry couldn't be home and, no, we shouldn't hire a full-time baby sitter because it's good for a baby to be with his mother, even if it's not what the woman wants.

He had a cradle, a nice wood cradle left by my parents before they died, and when I had to focus on work, I pushed the cradle to the master bedroom at one end of the house with Jeremy

in it and locked the door and went and worked at my desk in the guest room. But he would still cry, and I would still hear him. I'd pace back and forth in the hallway, agitated, until finally I would fling open the door to the master bedroom and look down in the cradle and tell him to stop but he wouldn't, and I'd tell him to stop, but he kept on crying, so I'd grab him from the cradle and hold him in the air and shake him and yell at him to stop, but he kept on crying and I'd start crying and ask him what he wanted but he couldn't tell me. He was just a baby.

I wasn't a good mother. I knew it back then too but didn't want to admit it, didn't want to acknowledge anything but a sense of injustice, of being victimized, of days spent drifting, feeling myself move as my eyes fall out of focus, and I look up toward the white ceiling. Everything's the same even now. Only three things make the circumstances feel different from before—that there is no baby crying, that Larry is at home to watch, and that every inch of our house somehow reminds me of my mistakes over the years, how I've done wrong and will never be forgiven.

The next day, in the morning, I step out onto the brick patio in the front of our house. A fence encloses the patio, a fence of thin, sun-bleached boards with a lattice running along the top. Branches from the pine in the front yard reach over, forming a patch of shade by the round, white plastic table. The table is surrounded by six white plastic chairs, covered with dirt and grime acquired during the winter. The sun shines, and I hear a voice in the gentle breeze that tells me to relax. Everything will be fine if I relax.

I go back inside and walk into Larry's room. He's still asleep, half-naked in bed and resting on his side. His thick chest hair pokes out from the white sheets.

"I need to buy some things for dinner tonight," I lie.

He doesn't respond.

"Can you go get Jeremy from the BART station?"

Larry moans and nods, and I decide to take the response as a yes. I walk back outside, out through the patio's gate and into the driveway, into my car, and drive to Safeway to make the lie believable. I get a shopping cart and wander the aisles aimlessly, my eyes glossing over the rows of snacky snacks and ho-hos and processed meat and sugar cereals until I finally reach a gigantic wooden rack, full of bottles of wine.

Jeremy probably drinks by now, I think, and I search through the rack for the cheapest shiraz. We've never drunk alcohol with Jeremy, though I offered him a beer at dinner one time when Larry was working late. He was a junior in high school at the time.

"I don't want to," he'd said, sitting at the dining room table with a bowl of spaghetti and a glass of milk he'd poured himself.

Attempting to sound as fatherly and supportive as I could, I explained how it might be beneficial to practice drinking responsibly, how doing so might prepare him for college.

"Yeah, well it's responsible not to start," he shot back, and he played with his spaghetti between bites, chewing diligently.

So I drank two Michelob Lights over the course of dinner and bitched to him about Larry. I whined freely about Larry despising his parents for "neglecting" him and his sister when they were children and how this then became Larry's excuse for letting his sister, a no-good alcoholic, use him for money.

"You see? You have to be critical," I explained, and I swigged some beer. "Nothing's inherently bad. You've just got to know bad when you see it."

Jeremy listened, but I could see his eyebrows furrow. He was fuming, and at the time, I loved him for it. I figured he would remember our conversation and, eventually, would learn from it—learn the difference between right and wrong, knowing how to sympathize with the wrong, to question the right. I'm still hoping he might learn that lesson one day.

I pick out a shiraz with a green label and a picture of a vineyard surrounded by pastoral hills. I put the bottle in my shopping cart and head for the checkout, imagining the four of us—Larry, Kate, Jeremy, and I—sitting in the patio tonight, a scent of pine in the air, cups of wine in our hands, laughing, drinking, and talking to each other.

After purchasing the wine, I take a fifteen minute drive through Cambrian Park and Campbell to reach Saratoga, a wealthy suburb on the outskirts of the city, to the public library there. It's a tall building made of wood, surrounded by an orchard full of mustard flowers and rows of apricot and cherry trees, the trees blooming with pink flowers. The Santa Cruz Mountains that line the west side of the valley loom down over the orchard, their faces covered with the deep green forests of redwood and oak. The sky is clear and blue.

I park the car and walk out into the orchard, my feet crushing little mounds of tilled soil with every step. Somebody continues to work in the orchard, to fertilize its soil and harvest it for crops, but I have no idea exactly who.

I walk to the middle of the orchard and close my eyes and try my best to tune out the sound of traffic from nearby Saratoga Avenue, from the voices of children in the library, their griping and whining disrupting any calm I could possibly feel. The orchards of modern day San Jose will never compare to the orchard at Kate's childhood home.

To my left, I hear a dog barking, and when I open my eyes, I see a scruffy gray dog leaping through the mustard flowers, heading straight toward me, and a young girl with brown skin chasing after him, yelling after him in a language I don't recognize. The girl looks about eight years old, dressed in a white t-shirt and jeans, and her curly black hair flies back in the wind as she runs after the dog. She holds a leash in her hand.

The dog runs up to me and paws at my knees, sniffing and panting with his tongue hanging out. I reach down and rub the dog's head, and the girl slows her run to a walk, eventually stopping a few feet short of the dog and me. I look up at the girl and smile.

"What's his name?" I ask.

The girl doesn't say anything. She first glances over her shoulder, toward the sidewalk that runs along Saratoga Avenue, where I can barely make out the blurry figure of what could be an adult.

The girl looks up at me and replies in a quiet, nervous voice: "Mom says I shouldn't talk to strangers."

The dog keeps pawing at my knees. My hand strokes the top of his head a few more times before I reach down and grab his collar, then hand him over to the girl.

"It's okay," I say, and I offer another smile. "I understand."

The girl grabs the collar and attaches the leash to it, then hauls the dog through the orchard, on back to the sidewalk. I turn around and begin to walk back to my car, and I look at the library once again. It's big and bulky and surrounded by concrete pavement, and I decide I hate it after all.

I drive back home and put the shiraz in the fridge and step outside to clean the patio. I'm spraying the plastic chairs clean with our hose when Larry pulls up in the Honda Accord. Through the holes in the lattice along the fence, I get a glimpse of Jeremy. At five-foot-eleven, he's a full four inches taller than Larry. His forearms are bigger than before, I notice, and the kid who once had the dreamy, quiet look of a shy American boy now seems manlier. His black hair mixed with decidedly Caucasian features and my bright hazel eyes has given him an ethnic uncertainty that makes him look exotic. The girls must love him for it.

This is the boy with a 3.9 GPA at Berkeley, studying pre-med and microbiology.

This is the boy with hundreds of friends—over 800, according to Facebook.

This is the boy I don't know anymore, don't see. That I haven't spoken to on the phone since late March. That I haven't seen in person since February.

I turn the hose off and walk toward the gate, barefoot. Larry and Jeremy are lugging suitcases out of the trunk—there are only two. Jeremy plans to head back to Berkeley in a few weeks to search for a summer job.

Before I can say hello, Larry wheels a suitcase over to me.

"I have to go," he says casually. "Jane just left rehab."

Jane. The mere mentioning of the name sends a chill up my spine, and I freeze.

"Wait, wait a minute," I finally say, my hand rubbing my forehead. "Jane is...she's done with rehab already?"

Larry nods and raises his eyebrows. "She called me today, earlier."

Jeremy walks past us both, lugging his other suitcase into the house and setting it down in the hallway when his iPhone rings. I shake my head, at a loss for words.

Larry's sister, who has gone by Jane since moving to San Francisco two years ago, drank sake and plum wine like a frat boy in Japan and didn't stop when she came to America. It's the kind of thing I might've found cool back in college: a forty-eight-year-old Japanese woman downing tequila shots at a dive bar, slurring her broken English as she rants about her hatred of Japanese culture or her hatred of American culture or maybe even her hatred of Japanese-American culture; it depends on her mood and what she remembers at that particular moment. She came here with hopes for a new life, thinking she could spend time with her younger brother, but Larry worked long hours and, to my knowledge, she never found work. All she found was the disrespect and racism that follows an old Asian woman, even one who's trying to act young.

Larry explains that Jane needs a place to stay to recover. I explain that I don't give a shit.

"Do you actually believe she's gotten any better after three weeks of rehab?" I yell, and I close my eyes and run my hands through my hair. My fingernails dig into my scalp.

"She needs two months at least. Then I'll maybe consider letting her stay here and go through our liquor cabinet like last time."

When I open my eyes, I see Larry, scowling, arms crossed like he's just been punched in the gut. The hair on his arm stands on end. He takes a step back toward the car.

"She's my sister, Amy," he says.

I close my eyes again and rub my forehead, desperately searching for an excuse, any excuse. "Well, there isn't anywhere for her to sleep," I say calmly. "Kate's coming down from San Francisco in two hours."

Larry glances down toward his cargo shorts, his black socks and his brown sneakers, wrinkled from being worn too much, before looking up again with a desperate, terrified stare.

“I was thinking,” he says in a quiet, innocent voice, “if Kate and Jane shared your room, you could sleep in the master bedroom.”

His true intentions hang in the air, letting the rustle of a breeze through the needles of the pine dominate the space between us. Larry doesn't want sex, and he probably doesn't want intimacy either. He just wants something tangible, something physical, the comfort of knowing there's a body next to him in bed. The thought makes my stomach churn with distaste, and I'm about to respond when Jeremy yells from behind.

“You guys, it's fine. I'll sleep on the couch. And I might not even be here tonight.”

I spin around to see Jeremy, sitting coolly on his suitcase, still staring down at his iPhone.

“Where will you be?” I ask, my hands on my hips.

“A friend's,” he says without looking up. “I'm getting picked up in half an hour.”

I turn to Larry to get his disapproval, but he's already walking toward the car, his back turned to me, his posture as straight and confident as that of a surgeon rushing to reach the E.R.

I decide to put Jeremy's stuff in the guest room, but he refuses to unpack. He shoves his luggage under the bed, plugs his laptop into an outlet, and sends a few more texts.

“So how was the rest of your semester?” I ask, and he looks up hurriedly, panicked, the way he'd have looked if I caught him talking to a stranger at the age of six-years-old.

“It was fine,” he says.

He returns to his phone, and I wonder who he could be texting so much—if maybe he's just playing with his phone to avoid a conversation. I sit on the sofa bed I previously unfolded and pull my knees up to my chest.

“Did you and your friends do anything exciting?” I ask. “Any big parties?”

He lets out a small laugh and, without looking up, says, “No. Nothing special.”

He walks to the door, tripping slightly—he’s always had an awkward gait—and soon I’m alone in the guest room, my fists weighing down on the grey sheets that I laid out on the bed for Jeremy. I sit there for five minutes, staring at the white wall across from the bed, before Jeremy reenters finally.

“They’re going to be here soon,” he says, hesitating only slightly. “My friends. I’m going to be outside.”

“Who are your friends?” I ask in a whisper, trying to hide my mounting fear that this might be the beginning of a trend, but Jeremy turns away, pretending I didn’t speak to him at all.

A few minutes later, a black SUV pulls up and takes Jeremy away. I shift my thoughts away from Jeremy and try to focus on preparing dinner, but once the chicken’s in the oven, I’m left with nothing to do.

“Kate will be here soon,” I say out loud. My voice echoes off the cabinets, the refrigerator’s grey metal exterior.

“And Jane and Larry too,” I add as an afterthought, and I inhale quickly in desperation.

It’s nice to be alone in the empty house. I walk back to the living room and pace around the coffee table, past the couches, and then sit on the piano bench and rest my elbows on its keys. A jumble of notes fills the room.

I turn around and look behind me, up at the painting above our fireplace. The woman is still striking the same pose.

“You see?” I say to the woman. “They don’t care about me. Larry. Jeremy. None of them.”

“But do you care for them?” she replies.

I cross my arms. “No,” I say, admitting guilt. “I suppose I don’t care for them.”

“Why not?”

Well, why?

Jeremy used to take an interest in me, not too long ago. The doses of honesty I’d given him throughout his upbringing had finally seemed to rub off on him, and, by his junior year, he was starting to seem like an actual person. He’d take time off from studying for the SATs and running track and field and being treasurer of the Associated Student Body to stand in the kitchen while I assembled frozen food dinners and ask me about my past.

“What did San Jose used to be like?” he asked once.

I told him it was prettier with fewer people and more trees, which made him laugh.

Then, another time, he bluntly asked, “Why don’t you and Dad sleep together anymore?”

I told him Larry snores.

“Is that really the reason?”

As if there was ever just one reason, one single problem that spurred all evil in the world and could be solved by popping a pill or a therapy program or a baptism leading to eternal salvation as promised by the gurus from Hindu sects that advertise free lectures on the bulletin boards in coffee shops.

I didn’t answer his final question, and he didn’t push it. He just stood there, watching me peel back the plastic film of the frozen dinners and stir the rice and roasted vegetables before I put them in the microwave again.

“I mean, if I ever get married,” he muttered, “I’d want us to sleep together all the time.”
I made sure not to cringe nor shake my head. I just told him that I hoped he would, too.

Unfortunately, Jane arrives before Kate, taking away any chance for me to explain the situation to Kate. Jane arrives with nothing but a small backpack and two plastic bags. Her hair is uncombed. She’s wearing black sandals and jeans and a green halter top. A bright red zit sits on her curved nose.

“It’s so good to see you,” she says, embracing me gently and cautiously, and I smile and hug back, mainly to appease Larry. I tell them I have to cook, and Larry and Jane go on to the guest room, Larry carrying her plastic bags.

For the next half-hour, I stand in the kitchen, listening to them talk in Japanese. They speak in deep voices, their resonance filling up the house.

Kate will be here soon, I tell myself again, and I lean down to look into the oven, watching the chicken sizzle in the oil, plotting how I’ll have to handle Kate. I could go out to greet her as soon as she comes in and just tell her my crazy sister-in-law is here. Or, I could remain calm, as I’ve always tried to be, and the voice from this morning comes back to me: relax, relax, relax, and soon the truth shall be told.

Finally, she arrives.

Kate arrives fifteen minutes late in a rental car her job pays for. She explains her conference in the city lasted longer than anticipated and apologizes.

“Everything smells very delicious,” she says as soon as she walks in. She untucks her silk shirt so it hangs loose around her belly, her skinny jeans. Her fashion sense hasn’t changed since the 70s, but the throwback feels comforting. She hugs me and smiles, just like Jane did.

“How have you been? It’s been, what now, two years?” she asks.

I look in her eyes. They’re still glowing with hope and excitement as they did when we played hide and seek in the orchard many years ago, and a part of me wants us to go in the backyard and lie on the lawn and look up at the stars, forgetting Larry and Jeremy and Jane.

I tell her I’m fine and to come and take a seat in the dining room.

Larry has been watching TV, but he comes and welcomes Kate. Jane enters from the guest room soon after. She’s showered and covered up her zit with some makeup, her hair nicely combed. I briefly introduce Jane to Kate, who politely shakes her hand. Then I let them talk while I hurry back and forth between the dining room and the kitchen, putting out all the various items: the roasted chicken, an almond sesame salad, the gyoza I bought from Trader Joe’s.

And then I remember the shiraz.

I go to the fridge, where it’s been chilling since this morning, and stare down at the bottle, its label with the green hills and vineyards. I know I want it to stay there, but I’m thinking about it. I’m thinking about pouring Jane a glass and goading her to drink it for the sake of proving a point. I’m thinking about Larry, his eyes wide with horror, watching his sister spiral out of control as she gives in to desire. And I’m thinking about Kate, head rested on her fists and elbows on the table, listening to Jane’s rants and raves and gradually growing uncomfortable, slowly seeing the reality of the present circumstances, the circumstances she should already see.

I grab a packet of powdered iced tea and some ice cubes from the freezer and fill a pitcher to serve.

When I return to the dining room, Kate and Larry are laughing, and Jane is finishing a story, something about a llama at a petting zoo. I can barely understand it as she plods through the words, her accent heavy. They're already seated. Kate looks up at me and sees the iced tea.

"Darling, darling," she says dramatically, her arms reaching out to me, "don't you have anything else to drink?"

I look over at Larry, who's staring at me, his shoulders raised up toward his cheeks. Jane looks at both of us, sensing the fear, and chimes in.

"She does it for me," she says, waving her hand. "I don't drink anymore."

"Oh," Kate says, a note of surprise, and she smiles back. "Okay. That's fine."

I put the iced tea on the table, and Jane immediately pours Kate a glass, then herself, then Larry, then me, all while griping about George Bush, which Kate takes to immediately.

"He changed unemployment statistics to exclude a bunch of people and make the economy look better," Kate says with a furor as she cuts a drumstick off the chicken. "I'm ashamed. I'm ashamed he's from my state."

Larry and Jane nod with a vengeance, and Kate smiles at them as she launches into a rant, too pleased with her audience for my liking. I sit back while she rants and raves and sip on my iced tea, trying to listen, but actually continuing to wonder about the shiraz in the fridge. I wonder what would happen if I slid under the table, if Kate and Larry would notice at all. I wonder what would happen if I took Larry's motorbike and sped off to someplace, without even wearing a helmet. And I sense a desire in me to spark an argument, yelling profanities, tossing the table over—to make the evening mean something to me, to do more than sit and watch people talk about a world I'm barely a part of.

Kate's rant ends and there's a moment of silence. Jane looks across the table at Kate. Even though she's plastered on makeup, Jane's wrinkles stand out in the dining room light, and, for the first time this evening, I feel she looks old—old and dried up and weary.

“Technically, I am not unemployed,” she says cautiously, pronouncing every syllable with care. “I stop a search for work long ago.”

Kate leans forward and folds her arms. Larry cuts his chicken, focuses on his food.

“What were you doing before?” she asks.

Jane sighs and glances out toward the window that gives a full view of the patio. “I help make computers,” she says. “The chips. I put them on the boards.”

“You soldered computer chips onto mother boards?” I ask.

It's a detail I didn't know; during her two years in the Bay Area, Jane only ever mentioned bars she frequented and boys she danced with and cocktails she knew how to make. I look over at Larry, who looks away, ashamed, as though somehow it's actually his story.

“We have fifty women,” Jane went on. “All Asian. And we stand in line and the boards come and we each solder one part on. Then, they move to the next.”

She stutters on the word “solder” but keeps looking at Kate, calmly, confidently, certain.

“They say we have good fingers,” she says, laughing. “But then, they fire us all.”

“That's very...strange,” Kate says, and she sips her iced tea. “I didn't know they made them like that.”

Jane nods and looks over at Larry, who's biting down on his lower lip as though the revelation of Jane working hard for a living were the equivalent of a bomb going off, but Kate keeps gazing at Jane with her head tilted down and her hands now in fists, resting on the table. It's a gaze I've seen Kate make many times before. It's a gaze that looks like sympathy.

After dinner, Kate agrees to help me clean dishes. She scrubs as I dry, and she talks about her conference and the other lawyers there and the specifics of different cases until finally I interrupt her.

“There’s a shiraz in the fridge,” I say.

Jane and Larry are watching CNN again and can’t hear a word. Kate keeps scrubbing, giving the comment little thought.

“I wanted to serve it at dinner,” I add, “but Jane then showed up.”

Kate keeps scrubbing and doesn’t say a word.

“She just got out of rehab today,” I go on. “Jeremy was supposed to be the fourth person at dinner, but he left to go to a friend’s house. Right after arriving today.”

Kate turns off the faucet and flicks the soap suds off her hands then grabs a dish towel to dry them. She doesn’t quite look at me—she looks at the cupboard to the left of my head—and she forces a smile on her face.

“Well, that’s a load done,” she says. “Do you want to take a walk?”

As soon as we leave the house, Kate lights up a cigarette, and she offers me a hit, but I decline. We walk through the neighborhood, to nowhere in particular, just through the mess of suburbs of San Jose, an endless stream of houses. They stand next to each other, independent and unrelated. If I didn’t know the area, we’d get lost with ease.

Neither of us says anything. Kate keeps smoking her cigarette.

“You know, work’s hard to find,” she finally says, uncertainly, as though she’s been debating which topic to bring up first. “Larry is trying his best.”

“I know,” I say, and I focus on each step I take and nothing else. “I’ve been looking for work, too, you know.”

“Right,” Kate says. The word trails off in her voice. I imagine she’s conveying some subtle point to a jury, a point the witness on the stand might not pick up on.

We keep walking in silence without saying a word.

“But, I don’t know,” I say with a laugh. “I shouldn’t complain. We still have our house, and Jeremy’s doing well in college. I mean, it all depends on your perspective, right?”

I glance over at her. Her slim body bounces with every step she takes, her thin chin pointed toward the ground, walking like a model.

Kate doesn’t say anything at first. Then, she says, “I think you’re looking at this the wrong way,” she says. “I mean, it’s not a matter of perspective. It’s a matter of how you feel.”

Yes, she’s right, I think, and I think about Jane standing by a conveyor belt with computer chips, her hands covered with gloves with burn marks and safety goggles over her eyes, hunched over thousands of motherboards all day.

“How do you feel, Amy?” Kate finally asks.

I don’t answer. I don’t want to answer. I don’t want to tell her I feel like shit because I don’t love Larry and I don’t want him to love me but he’s the only person I know I can talk to and I don’t want to go to restaurants or coffee shops without good cause because unemployment checks mean little when the family income was \$100,000 and the best I can do is flirt with a painting or pry words out of my son or dwell on brief memories from the past, like the time in seventh grade when we were in the orchard sitting under a tree and you asked if you could kiss me and I told you well okay and you put her hand around the back of my head and pulled me in close and, yes, your lips felt like the skin of my grandmother’s old flabby cheek and, yes, I

pushed you away with a squeal of disgust, but we laughed about it after and you put your arm around me and you said you loved me! You said you cared about me and you loved me and I might not want your kisses but I want you beside me, your arm around me, next to me in bed, someone to cuddle with and be close to and to rub my head up along your neck to the tip of your pointed chin. You have always been with me, Kate, whether you realize it or not, and I don't think I could survive without you, even if the you I used to know is gone, even if I have nothing anymore.

“Are you okay?” Kate asks.

She's seen my eyes tearing up, my disconcerted disposition. I swallow a gulp of saliva that's been building up in my mouth and say, “Yeah...I'm fine. Sorry.”

“It's okay,” Kate says. “Just don't beat yourself up over this stuff.”

I want to tell her I'll be fine. I want to tell her I can learn to be happy and independent just like she's done for herself, but I don't know if it's possible. I don't know what's possible anymore.

Jane goes to sleep in the guest room and Kate goes to bed early in my room and Larry stays up watching CNN until he finally goes to bed too. But I can't sleep.

It's 3 a.m., and I'm upset about something. It's the furniture, I decide, but I know it's not the furniture but I tell myself it is anyway because I want to know what's wrong and knowing what's wrong will make me feel better even if it's wrong and I don't know and I don't care.

I go to the living room and look at all the stuff: the grey suede couch, the puffy brown armchair, the white coffee table, the piano. I can't stand them, and I get the sense they want to be moved. They want me to move them.

I first push the couch to the right, back toward the sliding glass doors leading to the patio outside. Then I pull the coffee table forward, turn it around so its longer side stays parallel to the fireplace. I push the couch back, rotate it, then step back. I'm still not satisfied.

I am shoving the armchair away, towards the end of the table opposite the fireplace, when I hear the front door open, and then, "Mom, what are you doing?"

It's Jeremy. I don't look at him, and keep pushing the armchair away, pushing and pushing until it's at the end of the table. I'm still not satisfied.

"Mom, what the hell?" Jeremy says, and he walks into the living room. He's left the front door open, but I don't say anything. "Why are you rearranging the furniture?"

I look at him. He's wearing a swim suit and a white T-shirt and both are dripping wet. He has no coat to cover himself up, to keep himself warm. I can see the hint of a sculpted six-pack through his t-shirt, some muscled pecks. He's working out, I think. He's taking good care of himself, and I wish I could see him as a seventeen-year-old again, when he still seemed willing to listen, when he didn't seem certain he was strong.

"You're dripping water on the floor," I say.

"Okay, yeah, I'm sorry," he says, and he rubs his forehead. "But really, Mom, what are you doing? Are you all right?"

And I stand there, frozen, trying my hardest not to scream. I want to scream at him for doing well in school, for getting into a good college, for doing well in his classes and forming a social network and obtaining 829 friends on Facebook and friending me when I requested. For fighting his way into society. Even though I haven't met a single one of his friends. Even though he only talks to me when he thinks I'm not doing okay. Even though he doesn't call home unless he feels it's overdue. You don't show emotion or compassion and avoid assistance and avoid

dislikeable people and I can't fault you for any of it because there's nobody to say it's wrong. You're my nightmare child gone right. You're the signs of the oppressor, the signs of a saint. You don't smoke cigarettes. You don't smoke weed. You don't smell like alcohol when you come home at 3 a.m. There's nothing to fault you for.

"Was it a pool party?" I ask.

Jeremy takes a step back and holds his hands at his sides. "Yeah," he replies. "It was just a small party."

"Where was it?"

He takes another step back, his eyes narrowing and his lips hanging open as if I were about to hit him in the face. "My friend Ilana's. You don't know her."

"Tell me about Ilana," I ask.

He shakes his head. "I don't know...she's smart. She goes to Berkeley. We went to high school together."

"Is she hot?" I ask, and I laugh. Jeremy takes another step back.

"What's wrong?" I ask. "I just want to know if you're fucking her, that's all."

"Mom!" Jeremy yells.

I sit down on the armchair and burst into laughter. "Oh, that's gross! That's so gross! Don't treat me like an idiot. You're fucking her and I know it, so why don't you just go ahead and say so already?"

And I laugh at myself, laughing loudly, unabashedly, with the hope of waking up Kate and Larry and Jane, but they don't appear, and Jeremy just stands alone, lost as to what to make of this old, bitter, selfish, disdainful woman who rearranges furniture at 3 in the morning, who's laughing, crying, falling back into the armchair because she doesn't know how to care anymore.

By the time I calm down and open my eyes, he's gone. The front door is open, and I start to wonder if he was ever really there. I look up above the fireplace, at the woman in the painting, and ask, "Well, just tell me, do you think it's all my fault or what?"

But she doesn't say anything. She's just a painting, and I'm the woman of the house.

In the morning, after I wake, I find Jeremy asleep on the couch in the living room. When I enter the kitchen, I find both Jane and Larry are already up, making pancakes. Jane's spooning batter into a single pancake in a smaller pan, while Larry is tending to two in a larger one. They have a stack of four or five already.

"Did you see?" Larry immediately asks. "All the furniture moved last night!"

He flips one of his pancakes over, while Jane frets over her single pancake, which has collapsed into an amorphous blob.

"I think Jeremy moved things around so he could be more comfortable," I lie.

Larry believes this and doesn't bring it up again, not even when Jeremy wakes up. And when Kate wakes up, she apologizes but says she can't stay for pancakes because she has to get to San Francisco by noon—there's an important lecture she needs to attend. Jane seems disappointed, and when we do eat breakfast, she laments.

"I wish Kate could stay longer," Jane says, pouring maple syrup to form a puddle on her plate. We're eating in the patio, under the pine. "She seems very nice and smart."

Jane knifes into her stack of three pancakes, cuts off a slice, and dabs all three into her maple syrup. Jeremy devoured his earlier and has already begun texting on his iPhone again, having the decency to step away from the table and go inside. Larry takes little notice of Jane's

comment as he takes feeble bites of his food. Only I notice the hopeful look in Jane's eyes. It's a feeling I once felt, but don't feel anymore.

After Larry finishes eating and goes back inside, I look over at Jane.

"So what are your plans for today?"

Jane laughs. "Who knows. What is in San Jose that I can do?"

I think for a moment, struggling to brainstorm the mildly-entertaining tourist attractions the city has to offer—Santana Row, the Tech Museum, the Winchester Mystery House—but before I can complete a mental list, an idea comes to mind.

"I want to show you a place where I like to go," I say.

Without telling Larry, I take the Honda and drive with Jane to the public library in Saratoga. A few clouds still linger in the mountains this morning, covering stretches of green with a grey mist, but the sun still shines on the valley. We park the car and walk out into the orchard, through the mustard flowers, past the cherry trees, and with my hand, I gesture around us.

"This is what San Jose used to be like," I say, "when I was kid. There were orchards all throughout the place."

Jane raises her eyebrows, but doesn't speak. She reaches down and touches the buds of one of the flowers, picks it, and holds it in her hand.

"It's very pretty," she says. "It looks like Japan."

"Kyoto?" I ask. "You have orchards in Kyoto?"

The bud droops low as she twirls the flower's stem in her hand, and she looks straight into my eyes. "No, not Kyoto," she says. "The flower. We have the flower in the country. And the tree."

I cross my arms and nod and look away from her. The orchard only stretches a couple hundred yards, until it reaches a creek with plain trees shading its banks. On the other side of the creek is a community center, then a middle school, then houses and houses and more houses, until one finally reaches the mountains.

In the ten seconds that I stare through the orchard to the creek, I reflect on my whole life. I remember Kate's orchard and the ice cream we ate. I remember the bike rides up into the mountains around the valley. I remember the festivals and farmers markets, the summers spent at a stand selling cherries, and the gatherings I had with my family—all seven of us, going for picnics in Vasona Park or skating in the ice rink in San Pedro Square every Christmas season. My parents died long ago. My siblings moved elsewhere, just as Kate and Jeremy have, and now when they come back, they don't belong here. They are visitors. Only I have stayed, alone here with Larry and a million other people in San Jose, all of us watching the world change from generation to generation.

When I turn back around to face Jane again, I see her down on her knees. She leans toward the ground, pressing an ear to the earth, holding her pose for a number of seconds. Then, suddenly, she springs back up again, dusts her jeans off, and smiles.

"Sometimes," she says before I ask, "I listen to the earth and hear what it say."

I look at her, confused.

"You see?" she goes on, with a proud grin. "It say nothing."

I am too tired to make myself to laugh, to smile approvingly, to nod, but if I could, I would try. I am of an age when I can talk to strangers if I want to, especially when that stranger is just another woman forcing her way through the rest of her life.

Something Else

Miles sits cross-legged at edge of the dock, staring down into the lake, his sunglasses on, and he's patting his knees in beats of six, regularly, consistently, as though the breeze were whistling a tune. But there is no music besides the music running through his head. No one else knows.

The sun is at noon and the sky has clouds casting shadows on the lake and the forests on the other side, patches of light that mesh with patches of dark. When darkness falls across the dock, he doesn't notice. He just pats his knees and stares at the water. When a motorboat passes, he nods, intently, knowingly. Then he returns to the music he is imagining, to drumming his fingers on his knees. He has curly black hair that bounces with the beat. He has the posture of a hunchbacked elephant, his neck sticking out and his head leaning forward. And he sits without speaking, entirely detached from the world.

I watch him from twenty feet back, lying on a towel spread out on the grass as I glaze over yesterday's Detroit News. Colleen is splayed on her own beach towel next to me, bikini-clad. Her gorgeously long legs stretch out into the sun as she tans, and I'm certain she'd go topless if Miles weren't around. According to my watch, for the last sixteen minutes, she's been staring at the same picture of Heidi Klum in a strapless purple dress in her copy of Glamour magazine. She rests her finger on the page then runs it through the red highlights in her brown hair. Then her finger returns to the page.

We'd go in the water, but we can't. There are zebra mussels in all the lakes in Northern Michigan, and stepping on them can cut up your feet. Earlier, I'd suggested to Colleen going out

on the rowboat by the dock, just for some alone time, but she wouldn't. She wouldn't want to leave Miles alone with Susan because "the situation might get uncomfortable."

"You should go talk to him," Colleen says. She runs her finger through her hair, and Miles taps his knees. "Ask him what he wants to do."

"We talked earlier," I say.

Colleen pushes herself up with her elbows, her chin rising above my shoulder, and looks up at me. "He's been sitting there for an hour now," she says. "Doesn't that worry you?"

I bite my lip and refrain from rolling my eyes. I've known Miles since we both attended St. Joseph's, a small Catholic elementary and middle school. Back then, Miles would wander along the fence at recess, mumbling to himself until he finally ran into someone and gave them a random thought, asked them a random question: *Why do we call them Native Americans when they immigrated too, just before us?* Some of the kids avoided him and made up stories, claiming he was descended from vampires or Jafar in Aladdin, the blood of a villain, while others, like me, would just laugh it off. But he never truly worried anyone. Nobody gave him trouble, and he didn't trouble anyone else.

But Colleen doesn't know this history. She just sees Miles as my troubled college friend, a guy struggling to take care of himself.

"It doesn't worry me," I say.

Colleen sighs and rests her hand on my chest. Her fingers run through my few sprouts of chest hair, tickling them. I look out at Miles. He pats his knees—*one, two, three, four, five, six!*

"A guy like *him* shouldn't be left alone like that," she says. Her fingers run back down my chest. "What do you think his doctors would say?"

I let out a small laugh. "Doctors? What doctors?"

Colleen glances up at me, annoyed. “I don’t know...the doctors he saw at the hospital. Shouldn’t he be seeing a therapist or something?”

Over the course of eight months of casual dating, this has been the biggest struggle with Colleen: She’s certain in her ways and thinks she knows everything, and if she doesn’t know something, she invokes the name of an authority or a source that she deems irrefutable, even when she doesn’t know what her sources would actually say. I pick her hand up off my chest and hold it in mine and look down at her red-highlighted hair, the freckles on her face.

“I don’t know what doctors he’s seen,” I say bluntly. “I don’t know what they’d think, and neither do you.”

“You said he was histrionic!”

I shake my head. “No. I said he *might* be something *like* a histrionic. Just try to relax and give him some space. Okay?”

Colleen grimaces, and she wriggles her hand free from me.

“God, Matt. You don’t have to be such an asshole.”

“I’m just saying what needs to be said.”

Colleen scoffs, but doesn’t say anything more. I return my attention to the Detroit News. Colleen returns to Heidi Klum and Glamour magazine, her finger back on the page. Miles pats his knees—*one, two, three, four, five*, six! The breeze subsides, and I close my eyes. I want to take a nap. I just want a twenty, twenty-two minute snooze, enough time to dream I’m someplace else, anywhere else but here, but I have to keep an eye on Miles.

I glance at my watch. It’s half past noon.

Susan walks over from the tents. She’s wearing a light, white summer dress that sashays with her steps. She stops and looks down at us.

“Hey, party people!” she says. “How about that boat trip we talked about earlier?”

The breeze picks up and blows through her blond hair. Colleen keeps staring at Heidi Klum, and I don't say anything. The lakeside property we're on belongs to Susan's uncle, and he has a pontoon at another house's dock, but I don't want to make the trek over there.

“Well, what?” Susan then asks. She looks out at the water and sees Miles, and, still peppy and upbeat, asks: “How's he doing?”

Colleen flips a page. “Oh, Miles? Well, Matt here thinks he's fine.”

The sarcasm seems totally lost on Susan, who stares at Miles. He pats his knees and nods his head. Susan nods too.

“Yeah, he seems happy,” she says, and she smiles. Then she adds: “If he's up for the boat ride, will you guys come?”

Without looking up, Colleen says, “Sure. If Miles is game, I am too.”

“Okay,” Susan chirps, and she sprints down to the dock.

Colleen keeps staring down at her magazine. She runs her finger through her hair again.

“I don't think Susan gets that Miles isn't normal,” she says.

“I don't know if Susan gets much of anything,” I deadpan.

Colleen shakes her head but doesn't say anything. Down by the dock, Miles stops patting his knees. Susan and he talk a moment, her expression a grin and her gestures full of glee. Miles nods, and Susan looks up at us.

“Matt, you game too?”

“Boat ride it is,” Colleen whispers, and she closes her magazine and walks to the tents. I keep lying on the towel for a moment, stretching one arm out into the grass, and as Susan and

Miles walk up from the dock, Miles takes his sunglasses off. When he does, he squints, but for a second, I think he might've winked at me.

I didn't know Miles well in middle school. However, his mother and my mother were friends. Miles's parents divorced when he was eight, his Dad leaving them for good, circumstances that appealed to my Mom's sympathies. My Mom would pick Miles and me up from school, and he'd stay at our house until his Mom got off work. When she arrived, our mothers would sit in the dining room and chat about life, giving Miles and me more time to play.

He didn't play like most kids did. He enjoyed creating his own games, such as taking our spare key and locking me out of the house until I found all the clues he'd hidden in the yard, which, when combined, revealed a password.

"This is stupid," I finally said one time in fifth grade, squatting on my basketball in protest. "Can't we just play HORSE?"

Miles crossed his arms and stared down at me.

"Come on, Matt. You have to *try* for it to be fun!" he said, clearly frustrated that I wouldn't dig through the ivy in my backyard to find a pair of shorts he'd snatched from my room earlier that, when you looked in its left pocket, contained a cryptogram. "Can't you just *try*?"

"No!" I yelled. "Your games are stupid! You just like seeing me struggle!"

"No I don't!"

"Yes you do!"

"No I don't!"

"Yes you do!"

Eventually, I told Mom, who talked to his Mom, who then reprimanded him in some way. Soon, he became content with playing HORSE or soccer, and as we got older, we began to talk about girls and sports and the latest action movies.

Then, before sixth grade, Miles's mom got promoted, and he began attending a private school. Our friendship slowly dissipated from there, until we somehow both ended up at Michigan State. Freshman year, we met up for coffee a couple of times, but he'd grown his hair out and looked like a hippie and was always babbling about social justice issues such as Darfur or government wiretapping. I'd listen quietly, marginalized from the conversation until he'd ask me about rushing frats or football games—not my parent's own divorce, not the breakup with my high school girlfriend, not even how I liked my roommate. Unable to reestablish the bond we once had, we drifted apart once again, neither of us making an effort to keep things up.

I don't remember when I learned about his suicide attempt—at some point last winter, Mom must have mentioned it on the phone as she recounted everything she'd heard about the kids I knew growing up: “Laura's gotten pregnant again and now is engaged to Brad...and, oh God, didn't you hear? Miles tried to kill himself! He swallowed 80 pills of ibuprofen!”

The incident seemed troubling, but not like a real attempt. Other things from sophomore year felt more significant—my cousin dying in Afghanistan, or the freshman still new to my frat who drank too much in February and passed out in the snow, hypothermia leaving him hospitalized. People hurt themselves every day, I thought, and at the time, Miles's attempt just seemed like a stab at death that didn't work out in his favor.

But when I returned this August from my internship at Procter and Gamble in Columbus, Miles was all Mom talked about—how his Mom said he was lonely, how he wouldn't speak or sometimes eat, how he might not be well enough to enroll in classes next term.

“There must be something you could do for him,” she said one time. We were eating some Pork Chow Mein she'd brought on her way home from my old high school, where she now worked as an academic advisor. She snagged a piece of pork with her chopsticks and popped it in her mouth. “You and him should just get together to talk,” she said as she chewed. “Get lunch or something.”

So all right, I figure, the guy needs help. I'll take him out to Panera or something and just listen to him blab like before.

But when we finally sat down in a booth with chicken salad sandwiches and pops to drink, he didn't say a word. I asked him about Obama and if he was glad he got elected, and Miles shrugged and confessed he hadn't even voted last November.

“It doesn't make a difference really,” he said, ripping the crust off the edge of his bread, his face empty and dry and void of emotion like a chaplain's at a funeral. He'd cut his hair, a return to his short black curls.

I sat back in my chair and bit my lip. The comment had caught me off guard, but Miles remained nonchalant. He rested an elbow on the table and slumped against his fist while he ate his crust, stringing it out before him like a telephone wire, connecting to nowhere.

“What do you mean it doesn't make a difference?” I asked.

Miles set his bread crust down and placed his hands flat on the table.

“Not counting professors,” he asked, looking straight at me, “when was the last time you talked to someone who worked for the government, Matt?”

I thought for a moment, but couldn't remember. I told him I didn't have an answer.

"When you think about it," he continued, "the government doesn't do anything directly, really. It's just this distant entity that people choose to accept. We don't have to, necessarily."

Then his head slumped forward, and Miles looked down at his hands dejectedly. "But, a person can only do so much," he added.

Here was the boy whose brain seemed bursting with passion and creativity and energy—the boy always bristling with ideas and designing intricate games, now sitting under the glow of an incandescent light bulb at a Panera restaurant, hunched over half a chicken salad sandwich without any crust and some pop in a cardboard cup. He sat so still I could see his chest rising and falling with his breaths, and I wondered what he'd been doing all day since dropping out of school.

When he asked me what my plans were for the rest of the summer, I told him Colleen wanted to go camping somewhere before school starts, that maybe we could make some plans.

Colleen at first wouldn't agree. She had been imagining a different kind of trip—one with more people, a crowd of ten or twelve guys and girls who could all go swimming at a beach on Lake Michigan or bar hopping at nights in small Northern town before going back to our tents to sleep. But I knew Miles wouldn't like that, that he would find such an environment intimidating.

"Don't you want to go somewhere peaceful for a while?" I asked her as we sat on the bed in her room. Colleen lived two towns over from me, in Bloomfield Hills. The back half of the third floor in her parents' white, Victorian-style house had been all hers growing up. Having no siblings, she'd never had to share a room, giving her the right to coat her bedroom walls with bright green and yellow splashes of paint. She felt it gave the room an exhilarating, modern feel.

“Yeah, of course,” she said, and she leaned back against the puffy pink pillows on her bed. “But this Miles guy hardly sounds peaceful. I mean, he tried to kill himself six months ago!”

“He’s never been violent,” I quickly shot back.

Colleen pulled her knees up to her chest. “Okay. But since when was it a good idea to go camping with a crazy person?”

“He’s not crazy!” I exclaimed. “Why do you have to keep calling him crazy?”

Her head lay against the pillows, looking out toward the window by her bed. The August heat remained outside, only a few strands of light slipping into the room.

“Colleen, I promise,” I went on. “He’s not going to do anything crazy. He’s just someone with a lot on his mind, and he needs help.”

Colleen squeezed her eyes shut and sighed. “Okay,” she said, “I’ll do it, but I’m telling you that I don’t feel good about it. People like that...you can’t trust them. You can only do so much for him before you have to worry about yourself, you know?”

I nodded and told her I agreed, told her everything would be fine.

Colleen suggested we bring along someone else, someone who could remain calm and cheer up the mood if necessary. Susan was the obvious choice. Aside from having access to lakeside property in the Upper Peninsula, she’s the social chair of Colleen’s sorority, the kind of girl you’d expect to break an awkward silence with grace and ease.

But as we drove up to the site in Colleen’s Subaru SUV, awkward silence was all we got out of Miles. He sat in the back with Susan, from where she talked with Colleen as she drove. Colleen tried to direct the conversation toward Miles by mentioning cues—that both Susan and Miles lived in the same dorm freshman year, that they had both been anthropology majors, but

Miles had dropped anthropology for philosophy or sociology or maybe something else, and he didn't seem interested in conversation. He stayed silent, staring out his window, watching the terrain change from the Detroit exurbs to empty farmlands and, later, to the forests and small towns and wilderness left for lumberjacks and moose.

Only once during the entire drive did Miles speak, as we were crossing the Mackinac Bridge, speeding past the vast blues of Lake Michigan and Lake Superior. Susan was recounting to Colleen the details of her recent breakup with her ex-boyfriend when Miles turned away from the window and interrupted her, asking the entire car, "Why do you think we have relationships, anyway?"

Nobody said anything. Susan sat doe-eyed and surprised. After a moment's pause, Colleen glanced away from the road and looked at him.

"I mean, no offense, but I'm not sure what you're asking, Miles," Colleen said. "People like being with someone else. It's just what people like to do."

Miles kept staring through the windshield, out toward the bridge before us, and Susan sat watching him. "Yeah, you would think so," he said. "But it doesn't always show, does it?"

Nobody answered his second question. Instead, Colleen began talking about her own ex-boyfriend, which seemed to make Susan feel only slightly more comfortable and made Miles quiet once again.

Later, as we assembled the tents, I meant to ask Colleen what she thought of the comment, but thoughts had already drifted elsewhere.

"It's weird how he doesn't seem interested in Susan at all, even though she's totally available," she said as she clipped one pole to a pin on the canvas's corner. We were assembling

the boy's tent, while Miles and Susan did the girls'. We'd decided to stick to gendered tents to make things less awkward to Susan, although I might've preferred sharing a tent with Colleen.

"Do you think he could be gay?" Colleen wondered aloud, and she glanced toward the other tent, where Susan and Miles were whacking the stakes into the ground with heavy rocks, each completely apart from one another.

I scoffed and thought back to middle school, those conversations while shooting hoops where we talked about girls at school and rated them in terms of hotness.

"He's not gay at all," I said. "Trust me."

Colleen clipped the last pole in, then stood up and wandered in the direction of the lake.

"Just let me know if he makes a move for you tonight," she muttered under her breath as she passed.

He didn't, of course. But that night in the tent, as we lay stretched out in our separate sleeping bags, immersed in darkness, he returned to his previous *modus operandi* and began to ask me questions.

"Don't you find all this weird?" he asked.

"Find what weird?" I asked back.

"This. The fact that, after, like, seven years of barely seeing each other, we're now camping in Northern Michigan together."

I shook my head. "Not really, man. I think it's just cool that we can still hang out."

"Right."

Miles paused for a second, and I heard him drum his fingers on the ground, heard him breathing heavily—*one two three (in) four five six (out)*.

"Don't you have any questions to ask me?" he asked.

“Questions?”

“Yeah, I don’t know. Any questions at all?”

Of course I had questions! I wanted to know what was on his mind, what he was thinking about when we began driving up North, and then later, when he asked about relationships. I wanted to know what was on his mind when he made the decision that life wasn’t worth living and swallowed 80 pills of ibuprofen. But questions like those can’t be asked so easily.

I glanced at him and put on an innocuous grin. “You’ve been seeing any girls lately?”

Miles chuckled, as if a punch line were in there somewhere. “No, man. Sorry. Have not.”

I lay there, awake, for another ten minutes, wondering what he was getting at, if Colleen was right, if maybe he *was* gay and in denial and that’s why he’d been struggling, or if maybe he was going through something entirely different, something he didn’t have the words to express.

“Is that it?” he asked suddenly.

I paused, wondering what he wanted from me. “I don’t know,” I replied. “I guess so.”

Silence. Then the sound of Miles rolling over onto his side. “Okay, then that’s it,” he said, and five minutes later he was snoring.

A ten minute walk along the lake leads us to the pontoon: a large, rectangular craft about the size of a mini-van. Its main deck rests on two big, blue buoys running along its bottom. The deck has a white overhang, with plush, white leather seats beneath it, and a small white table in between. My watch says 1:10. Clouds are accumulating in the sky, but a bit of sun still remains.

Susan takes the driver’s seat, and I untie the boat from the dock, pushing us off. I then take a seat next to Miles under the overhang, while Colleen spreads her towel out on the deck to catch the last few rays of sun. She rests her head on her arms, and she rubs the underside of her

right foot with her left foot's toes, slowly, over and over again, easing down along the ball of her foot, then back up to her ankle. I keep watching her feet, counting her left foot's strokes—*up one, down one, up two, down two*—until I finally look away.

We bounce over the lake's wavelets as Susan drives it for ten minutes, taking us out into the middle of the lake. She then kills the engine, letting the boat drift, and leaves the wheel to join Miles and myself on the leather seats, where we've popped open some Coors Lights.

"I don't know if today's a good day to go in the water," she says as she reaches into our thirty-pack and pulls out a beer. "It seems like it's too cold."

The curve of Miles's lips shifts into a sulk, and he crosses his arms. His sunglasses hide his eyes, and he sits back, looking straight at the sun and nodding his head occasionally, again seeming to follow a beat—*one, two, one two*.

I tell Susan that it's fine, and then we fall silent. Colleen's toes stroke her feet once again—*up one, down one*—and I gaze out at the water, the blue wavelets splashing against the boat, running all the way to the rocky shore on the other side.

"The last time I came up to the lake, with Kyle," Susan says, referring to her ex-boyfriend again, "we didn't go in the water either, but that was because he flat out refused."

"Really?" I ask. I take a sip of my beer, and she nods. "Why was that?"

Susan rests her can on the table. "Oh, I don't know," she says offhandedly. "It was complicated. It sounded like there was some fear of water he had as a kid. He mentioned how his Dad used to throw him in the pool and yell at him to swim."

Colleen shifts on her towel, and Miles nods his head—*one, two, one, two*. The waves ripple against the shore.

"Damn," I say after another moment of silence. "That actually sounds pretty serious."

Susan glances away. Her voice hints at a note of disdain. “Yeah, well, Kyle’s family is kind of messed up. His Dad’s a total nut. I sometimes think Kyle might’ve been abused by him as a kid or something, just from the way Kyle treated me.”

“I was abused as a child.”

Colleen’s feet freeze. Susan and I turn to look at Miles, who’s staring across the lake, out into the woods. His sunglasses are still on. He speaks confidently, but in a low tone, just above a whisper.

“My Dad beat my Mom and me all the time,” Miles adds, “but we never talked about it. Mom didn’t want to, and after he walked out on us, it didn’t seem worth bringing up.”

Colleen turns over on her side, facing away from us. Susan maintains a blank stare.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Susan says.

Miles glances away from the forest and back at Susan. “Oh, don’t worry. That was nothing. He also molested me.”

“What?” Colleen yells out. She’s turned back around to face Miles, and her mouth hangs open in shock. I sip my beer and try to avoid eye contact, to look out at the water.

“Yeah, it was kind of bad,” Miles continues nonchalantly. “But I think I’m over it now. I’ve talked about it with a lot of people now, so it’s not really a big deal to me anymore. He made it seem like a game. If I’d been good, he told me he’d reward me, and then he made me suck his dick.”

We all look at him, all of us seemingly frozen for a second or two, and Miles returns to staring off into the distance. I think back to my Mom and all the time and energy she put into helping Miles’s Mom. I try to think what she would do in this situation, how she would respond, but I simply don’t know how.

The silence lingers for a few seconds longer before Colleen takes a stab at a response.

“That’s really messed up, Miles,” she says, slowly, careful with her words. “But I hope you know it wasn’t your fault. And I think it’s very brave for you to share that.”

“Yeah,” Susan chimes in immediately, her voice faltering. “It’s very brave.”

Miles shakes his head. “I don’t know,” he says. “I don’t think I’m brave.” Then he looks around the pontoon, absorbing all of our expressions, before his eyes finally rest on me. He grins.

“So, what do you make of that, Matt?”

I inhale a big breath of air and set down my can of beer.

“I don’t know, man,” I reply, and I’m looking down at the table, unable to meet the gaze of his sunglasses. “It sounds pretty messed up.”

I glance over at Colleen, who looks mortified. Her toes are rubbing her feet more quickly now—*up one down one up two down two*—and she sucks her lips in, as if she’s struggling to hold her thoughts back.

“I guess I’m wondering,” Miles adds, “how it feels to know that all of that was going on while you knew me back in elementary school.”

I sit up in my seat and look into Miles’s dark lenses. “I don’t know. I think it’s messed up. I mean, obviously, I had no idea—”

“Yeah, you wouldn’t have any idea, would you?” Miles asks dryly.

I pause, my mouth hanging open, too taken aback to reply. Then I let out a little laugh.

“Yeah, Miles, I don’t think I would,” I say, and I fold my arms. “It’s messed up, and like I was *about* to say, there’s no way to know these things unless someone says them. So I thank you for telling us.”

As soon as I'm done speaking, I regret my tone. Miles stares blankly at me, a state of shock with parted lips, and I realize he's covering up something. He's covering up being hurt. I unfold my arms and slowly hinge my mouth shut before looking away. Susan's seems lost in her head, as though she's gone completely catatonic, and is staring at a spot on the pontoon's deck. Only Colleen has the confidence to take action. She stands up and picks up her towel.

"You know, with all these clouds, it looks like it might rain," she says, her voice squeaking a bit, and she smiles. "We should head back and rest a bit. Maybe we can start a fire?"

"How does that make any sense?" Miles blurts out.

"What?"

Colleen looks down at Miles, staring at him with a caught criminal's eyes. Miles lifts his sunglasses off his nose and looks at her, smiling.

"How does it make any sense to start a fire if it's about to rain?" he asks.

Colleen doesn't answer and just stands there, looking down at him. Miles smirks, then puts his sunglasses back on.

"It's fine," he says. "I'm sorry. I get what you mean. Let's go back and make a fire."

Colleen turns away and goes back to the deck, where she puts her towel back down. Only then does Susan stand up and quietly return to the driver's seat. She reignites the pontoon's engine and steers us inland, and Miles looks out across the water, his head still nodding in time—*one two, one two...*

"I don't care if he's troubled!" Colleen barks as she and I collect fuel for the fire. She's carrying a bundle of sticks in her arms and crouches down to grab another off the forest floor. We're a couple of hundred feet into the woods by our camp site, and Susan and Miles have gone

off individually to get some more. “Miles is being a jackass, and he’s just trying to make other people feel guilty.”

I shake my head, reaching down to pick up a large branch that splits into two arms like a Y. It’s too big to take back to camp, and I’ll have to break it in two.

“I don’t think it’s quite that simple with him, Colleen,” I say.

Colleen drops her sticks and stands up. “Are you *kidding* me? Are you seriously going to keep defending him after this afternoon? He’s a sociopath! He was *trying* to make the boat ride so uncomfortable! He was doing it *intentionally*!”

Her eyes are watering, and I realize it’s going to ruin her mascara, but then I wonder why she brought mascara with her at all. Why is she wearing makeup when camping?

“He was just trying to talk about what was on his mind,” I go on, still holding the branch in my hand. “I know he didn’t go about it in the best way, but I’m telling you. He’s always struggled to talk about the way he feels, so he wouldn’t go ahead and bring that stuff up for no reason. He did it because he wanted something from us.”

“Exactly!” Colleen yells. “He was trying to get a reaction!”

“No!” I yell back. “He was trying to get support, okay? He was trying to get our support!”

I rest the branch on its side and push down on one of its arms, trying to snap it off, but it’s too thick. I reach down to where the branch splits and try bending it, but the arm holds strong, only splintering a little. Colleen watches without saying a word, until I finally stop and look up at her.

“Can I get some help?” I ask.

Colleen shakes her head. “You’re an idiot,” she says. “Are you actually dumb enough to think you guys can keep on being friends?”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

She crosses her arms and presses them against her chest. “He’s crazy,” she says. “He’s crazy and needs to see a psychiatrist, and you know it! Maybe you don’t want to admit it, but deep down inside, you know it’s true!”

I drop the branch.

“I don’t think he’s crazy, Colleen,” I scream, stepping toward her, and I can feel the blood rushing to my head and my eyebrows furrowing in anger. Colleen steps back away from me, and I wave a finger in her face. “Don’t tell me what I think, and don’t tell me he’s crazy!”

“Then *why* are you yelling at me?”

Colleen’s voice echoes throughout the forest. Her fists are clenched, and she’s breathing heavily. I close my eyes and press my hands to my temple, staying quiet for a second before speaking.

“Look, I’m not going to waste time arguing over this,” I say as calmly as possible. “But at the end of the day, we’re here, we’re camping, and whether he’s crazy or not, we’re with Miles. And while I get that he’s not your favorite person in the world right now, can you please *try* to ignore his weirdness as best as you can and just give the guy a damn break?”

I open my eyes and look at Colleen. Her tears have spilled over onto her cheeks, smudging her mascara.

“Don’t you think you can try?” I ask again.

“I just don’t want anyone to get hurt,” she says, and she sniffles and wipes her face with her hand. “I don’t think this is going to end well, and I’m worried, Matt.”

My hands fall on my hips, and I inhale deeply. Then I step forward and give her a hug. “Here, it’s okay,” I say. “It’s going to be fine. I promised you before that everything will be fine. And if Miles continues to make things worse, we’ll leave a day early, and you’ll never have to see him again. Okay?”

She wipes her cheeks again, takes a step back, and nods. “Okay,” she says. “Okay. I’ll try.”

She looks at the sticks now scattered around her and crouches back down to recollect them. I crouch down next to her.

“Here, let me help you some,” I say.

“Okay,” she says again, nodding, but she doesn’t seem confident in her words.

I pick up the sticks and carry them under my left arm, then take hold of the larger branch with my right. We head back to camp, I trailing Colleen, dragging the branch behind me.

That evening, at 8:14 p.m., as we sit around the campfire we’ve made, everything seems some kind of normal at first, even though Miles is there. With his Swiss Army knife, Miles sharpens the two arms of my large branch and sticks a marshmallow on each end to make s’mores. He also tries to melt a bar of chocolate on another stick, but it falls into the fire. We laugh as we see the bar dissolve into a turd-like lump, and only Colleen remains reticent. She sits on a log with her arms wrapped around her legs, wearing my Michigan State sweatshirt.

“I haven’t made s’mores in ages,” Miles says, smiling, and he licks the remaining chocolate smudges from his fingers. “Probably not since summer camp in eighth grade.”

“Really?” Susan exclaims. “I make them every time I go camping! It isn’t a camping trip without them.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” I say, and then I look over at Colleen, sulking on her log. “What about you, Colleen? When was the last time you had s’mores?”

“Colleen shakes her head. “I don’t know. Probably eighth grade at summer camp.”

Miles cranes his head to the right and grins. “You went to summer camp too?”

“Yeah,” Colleen says, “Chippewa Woods. It’s somewhere outside Traverse City.”

“Really?” Miles says, and he rests his hands on his hips. “I went to Northern Oak. That was like twenty minutes away from you.”

“Huh, that’s funny,” she says, and she stares at the fire. “Who knew we had so much in common.”

“Oh, I’m not surprised. We’ve got a lot more in common than just that.”

Colleen looks up, and Miles is smiling. Susan sits up, as if ready to face a blow.

“What do you mean?” Colleen asks.

“I don’t know,” Miles goes on. “Just that we’re not so different when you think about it. We’re both from Detroit suburbs, both upper-middle class, both at State, both take Prozac—”

“How do you know that?”

Colleen stands up and storms around the fire toward Miles, who lurches back, stunned. She glares down at him and continues to yell.

“How did you find that out? That’s personal information, and you have no business knowing it! Did Matt tell you?”

I stand up at the mentioning of my name. “Wait a minute, what—”

“Matt told you, didn’t he?” Colleen says, and her eyes are swelling up with tears again.

“He thinks I’m crazy loon just like you, doesn’t he?”

“Colleen,” I interrupt, yelling, “you never even *told* me you were on Prozac!”

“Don’t Colleen me!” she screams, and she whirls around to face me now, her cheeks flushed red. “Don’t talk to me like I’m stupid! You knew! You’ve seen my pills before, so you had to know! And you think it’s okay to say everything about someone, so you don’t think twice about how it might affect people! What else have you told him about me? Huh?”

Colleen keeps staring at me, and the rage from before resurfaces in her expression, but her tears keep falling fast. Susan looks down at the ground, seemingly embarrassed, but Miles sits with his back straight, his shoulders held back confidently.

“I saw them in your bag, Colleen,” Miles admits in a whisper. “When we were unpacking the car, I saw them in your purse. Matt didn’t tell me anything.”

Colleen’s entire body begins to shiver, and she squeezes her eyes shut.

“It’s really not that big of a deal,” Miles continues, and I immediately want to stop him before he goes any further. “Everyone’s taking meds of some kind these days. I’m on Prozac! You’re on Prozac! Susan’s taking Depakote! It’s not uncommon.”

Colleen glances back at Miles.

“So you snooped through Susan’s stuff, too, huh?” she asks.

“I told him, Colleen.”

Colleen spins around to face Susan. “What?”

“He didn’t snoop through my purse,” Susan says plainly. “I told him.”

Susan stretches her hands out toward the fire. Colleen glares at her.

“Why the hell would you tell *him* something like that?”

Susan shrugs and rests her hands on her log. “I don’t know. It just came up in the conversation. We were talking about psychiatry, and I mentioned it. It was while we were setting up the tents yesterday.”

“What’s Depatoke?” I ask.

“It’s for bipolar,” Susan replies, and she heaves a big sigh. “I have bipolar disorder.”

Standing by the fire, all alone, Colleen looks at the three of us one by one: Susan, me, and Miles. Susan looks down at the ground, nervously, waiting for Colleen’s next blow. I stand to Colleen’s left, my arms swaying by my side. But Miles has fallen into the background, stretching his legs out as he sits on his log, a smug look on his face. Colleen rests her eyes on him.

“This is exactly what you wanted, isn’t it?” she yells at him. “You brought that up because you wanted to make me look bad!”

Miles leans back and raises his eyebrows. He looks like he’s trying to hold back laughter. “I’m sorry, but I don’t know what you’re talking about. I just said we both take Prozac. That’s it.”

Colleen stays standing for a second, speechless. Then she pulls off my Michigan State sweatshirt and throws it at me.

“I’m going to bed,” she says, her arms falling to her sides. “And we should leave first thing in the morning. Okay?”

Before anyone can object, she wanders off toward the tents, swaying as she stumbles over rocks and branches. I sit back down on the log facing Miles, and nobody says anything at all. For two minutes, Miles, Susan, and I stare at the fire in silence, until Susan finally looks up at me.

“You should probably make sure Colleen’s okay,” she says.

I shake my head. “She’ll be fine in the morning,” I say, but even I know that’s a lie.

Susan stands up. “Okay, fine then. I’ll go,” she says, sounding annoyed.

She tramples off into the woods, the same direction as Colleen.

I look over at Miles. He reaches over to the bag of marshmallows and sticks two more on the ends of Y-shaped stick.

“You should apologize to Colleen in the morning,” I say. “It would make her feel better.”

“What am I apologizing for, Matt?” Miles asks. He holds the stick out directly into the flames, making them roast quickly.

I lean forward, resting my elbows on my knees. “I mean, I don’t know,” I say, “but you did kind of provoke her by bringing up the Prozac thing.”

“That’s more her problem than mine,” Miles says flatly.

And then he snickers. He pulls the marshmallows in from the fire and pulls one off the stick. It’s burnt on the underside, a crusted black mixed with the white gooiness. I look back down at the ground.

“Colleen isn’t crazy, Miles,” I mutter.

“I know,” he replies. “But based on what she said, it sounds like you think I am.”

He pops the marshmallow in his mouth, crunching as he chews. I look back up at him.

“I don’t think you’re crazy, Miles.”

He smirks. “Oh, come on. Yes, you do!”

I shake my head. “No, I don’t!”

“Yes, you do!”

“No, Miles, I don’t!”

Miles gazes into the fire. He plucks the other marshmallow off his stick.

“Okay, so if you don’t think I’m crazy, then what do you say about me when I’m not around? What did *you* tell Colleen about *me* that made her think I was crazy from the get-go?”

He stuffs the second marshmallow into his mouth and chews. I look into the fire, thinking of all the things I've said about Miles to Colleen and others: the times I'd said he was troubled, then emphasized that he was sane; the times I said he'd seemed strange and different, but then added he'd been a good friend; the times I'd defended him, even when I've felt as though I were just making excuses for him. My thoughts on Miles seem too complicated, too conflicting to articulate, and I realize I'd rather explain nothing at all.

"We're friends, Miles," I say. "What does anything else matter?"

But he doesn't respond. He continues to stare into the fire between us, his head hunched forward as always, his elbows rested on his knees. I keep looking at the ground because I don't want him to see the tears in my eyes, don't want him to think I feel guilty, don't want him to think I've done anything wrong.

"Whatever," he says with a scoff. "I'll try to apologize tomorrow."

I don't say anything. I just keep looking at the ground and nod slightly.

For the next few seconds, I only hear the crackling of the fire. Then I hear Miles stand up.

"We should put the fire out," he says. "I'm going to bed."

I close my eyes, and I don't look up. Eventually, I hear Miles dump water on the fire pit. I hear him stomp out the embers and wander toward the tents, his shoes snapping a twig.

When I finally open my eyes, there is only darkness, and I don't know what I want to do. I don't want to go to sleep in the tent with Miles. I don't want to go get Colleen and apologize to her. I don't want to get in the SUV and drive away, leaving everyone behind. All I want to do, I realize, is strip off all my clothes and wade in the lake by myself in the moonlight, as if it were allowed.

What I've Been Doing With Myself Lately

Yeah, just as I expected, we've got thugs again today. For some reason, in the last few months, packs of them have been coming to Crosby's Diner after the lunch rush on weekends. It's the only business Mom and Dad get at the time. They come in here with their shorts sagging and their hair gelled back and their dress shirts unbuttoned over tight t-shirts that make them look muscular and cool. Apparently, it's the look for teenage boys in Obego these days. I'm pretty damn sure we've got more boys in my grade dressing up like thugs here in the middle-of-nowhere, Texas than they've got in Harlem or Detroit.

This afternoon, Ty walks in—no, I mean, he strolls in—or no, no, Ty *tromps* on into the diner, his hair freshly buzzed and his back straight as though he's ready to take a punch, his mates Willy and Jeffrey moseying on in after him. By far, Ty's the biggest of the three, already at six feet even though he's a sophomore, and the vertical white stripes running down his navy blue shirt let his stature show. He looks fierce, not like Willy and Jeffrey, who seem as if they're trying too hard. Willy's got on an upside-down visor—yes, *an upside down visor!*—that hardly compliments his red curls, while Jeffrey seems to have taken up all the different bands he can find: headbands, wristbands, even a band around his ankle, all of them a clean bleach-white fresh from his Mom's wash, as if his goofy grin wasn't bad enough. You have to wonder how long it'll take before those two realize that by hanging around Ty, they're just making him look good.

The three thugs plop down in a plush red booth on the other side of the room, and Ty looks over toward me as I stand behind the counter, filling a cup with water and ice.

“Yo,” he bellows, “Where my Kelly-girl at?”

On cue, the cute little blond girl trots out from the kitchen, tying her apron behind her back, and Mom walks out behind her. Mom stands next to me behind the counter and, crossing her arms, watches Kelly flash a smile at Ty, a big smile that says *Hello, I'm the server who serves you with my services so what can I serve you today?* Kelly hands them some menus and tells them the lunch specials, but Ty just stares up at Kelly, his lips held shut and his cheeks sucked in tightly as if he's thinking, *Thugs don't need no lunch specials! I don't wanna hear no lunch specials! Just gimme the fries and gimme a milkshake, and hurry up about it, woman!*

Oh, I don't mean to degrade the thugs! Sometimes, I'd even say I'm amused by them, but not in a condescending way. I only think of them as "thugs" because that's what they want to be thought as—brawny, tough guys who can get what they want and don't take shit from nobody. They brag about the pranks they've played and the girls they've felt up and the alcohol percentage of the liquor they got their hands on. You take that away and strip them of their style, and all you've got left are the sad, pathetic, lonely bodies of a bunch of high school boys, no different from all the others stumbling around town.

But when guys like Ty and Willy and Jeffrey come in here on weekends and make a mound of salt and sugar and smear butter packets across the tables I have to bus, I think I have every damn right to be pissed, which creates a problem—how to let them know I'm not pissed because they're so "fly" but because they act like assholes. It's like I was telling my online friend Simone just the other day when we were chatting on MSN:

Jamie: If I do anything that shows I'm upset with them, they'll just think I'm jealous.

Simone: And you're not jealous?

Jamie: No! Of course not! I just want them to show respect for other people, you know?

Simone: That sounds like a losing battle. Maybe you should just stop caring?

I try not to care, but it's not easy with the thugs. Even Mom seems to get annoyed by them. As Kelly writes their orders on her notepad, Willy and Jeffrey look up at her chest and Kelly's big, round lumps. Then they glance at each other and snicker, and Mom rolls her eyes.

"Boys will be boys," she mutters to herself, and she heads back into the kitchen.

Mom's grown bitterer since she and Dad bought Crosby's eight months back; when they heard the old Crosby diner was going out of business, they decided to quit their jobs and buy the place, once again lighting up the neon chef's hat of the innocent, rosy-cheeked "Crosby" who stands next to the sign out front. They always had their spats long before buying Crosby's, but during the last two months especially, my sister Veronica and I have noticed it's been getting a lot worse. They fight over nitpicky things—laundry, politics, whether to watch CNN or Fox News—and I can always hear it from upstairs, where I'm usually on the computer.

The other day, when Veronica and I were walking to school, I asked her, "Do you think Mom and Dad might get divorced?"

She shook her head and laughed. "Just let them deal with their own crap, Jamie," she said. "It's got nothing to do with us."

Yeah, that's easy for her to say. During the week, Veronica's locked in her room, doping herself up on Adderall and studying for four hours straight, avoiding their fights entirely. She used to wait tables at Crosby's on weekends, giving me company to endure Mom and Dad's tension, but school started a few months ago, and Dad decided she should quit because she's a senior and should focus on her studies and getting into a college for next year. She eagerly agreed, and, soon, Veronica's shift was taken by Kelly, a girl who barely acknowledges me.

Kelly throws her head back and laughs as she walks away from the thugs, and she comes over by me at the counter.

“They all want water,” she says.

“I know,” I say, filling up the last glass. “I already have them here. Because I’m supposed to give them water even if they don’t ask, you know?”

“Okay,” she says, still smiling, and she reaches back to tie her hair into a ponytail. “Well, I just wanted to make sure you got them their water. That’s all.”

Kelly then walks back toward the kitchen. I finish filling up the last glass, hold all three of them in my hands, and shuffle shuffle shuffle on over to the thugs. The glasses clunk down on the table. Ty looks up at me.

“Hey, man, listen” he says, and a smirk pops up on his face. “Your friend Kelly. You like that ass she got?”

What? Kelly? I scrunch up my face in disgust and shuffle shuffle shuffle back toward the counter and hurry on back to the sink because I’d rather wash dishes than deal with their antics. I can hear Ty and Willy and Jeffrey hooting in the front. Whatever. I just pick up a dirty plate and get to scrub-a-dub-dubbing. None of these thugs know real work.

Back in middle school, I knew Ty and a bunch of the other thugs from the basketball team, though they weren’t thugs yet at that point. They were thugs-in-training, talking like rappers and threatening to start fights, and Ty was by far the worst. In the locker room after practice, he’d get up in my face and yell at me just because he wanted somebody to yell at for his shitty dribbling and air balls.

“Why the fuck you play basketball when you suck so bad?” he screamed at me after we lost a game once.

With his fists clenched and his elbows bent, he glared at me from the locker room entrance. He was only an inch or two taller than me back then, but even in eighth grade, Ty was getting decidedly manly. One or two *petite* white chest hairs sprouted up over the top of his red jersey, and they seemed to stand on end from fear. You could tell he was cursing because he thought it made him tough.

“Because I want to,” I replied, as coolly as I could. I finished tying my shoes and stood up and pushed past him through the door.

I could put up with crap like that, but I didn’t really want to. Sure, some days, I’d hide in a bathroom stall to change clothes in peace, but I tried to not let Ty or anyone else get to me by searching for friends with a greater sense of respect for people—friends like Simone.

Simone is a thirty-three-year-old mother of four who lives in a suburb outside of Melbourne, Australia. She has a love for sci-fi novels, raises two dogs, and has just gone back to law school, and I have absolutely nothing in common with her except for the fact that we both post on the Internet forum at TVFreaks.Net and then started chatting on MSN. Neither of us even watches TV anymore, but we both keep posting on the forum and talking to each other. When I get home from school, she’s usually online, and we gossip about other people on the Internet or share tidbits about our daily lives, our philosophies, the futures we envision. A typical conversation might go something like this:

Simone: I have a 2,500 word paper due in 10 hours on the relationship between racism and other systems of social inequality, and I’ve written about 500 words. FML.

Jamie: Umm, don’t you normally do your papers at the last minute? And if it makes you feel better, I haven’t started any of my math homework.

Simone: Okay, but do you have to wake up and take your kids to school at 8:00 a.m?

Jamie: Noooo...but I do still have to clean the bathroom for my Mom! :)

Simone: Touché. ;)

This is how it is with people on the Internet. We can just be ourselves and talk about life, and I might know nothing about raising kids or “systems of social inequality,” but we can still relate. We’re all human. We’re all living life, and great friendships form when you have a little bit of empathy and a willingness to listen and learn. People talk freely online, more freely than anywhere else, about families and recipes and hot girls and hot guys because everybody’s bisexual on the Internet.

Correction: Everybody’s bicurious on the Internet. Like this one kid Alex, or rather, he called himself Alex—alexekhart1995, to be exact. Who knows, he might’ve not even been a he, but, at the alleged age of 15, he claimed he was gayer than a rainbow. In chat rooms, he would write in pink font and use heart-shaped emoticons and would send guys private messages asking if they wanted a cyber blowjob. I always declined because, I don’t know, I’m just not into that stuff. Alex, on the other hand, seemed to be into anything and everyone, until one day, totally out of the blue, he posted a three-page rant on a message board telling everyone he’d found a girlfriend, that he and she were going steady, that he thought we were all “dickwads,” and that he didn’t have time for this bullshit anymore. He blocked all of us and wasn’t heard from again.

At the time, I was stunned, but when I talked to Simone, she didn’t seem fazed:

Simone: Honestly, I think I saw that one coming. He never seemed to be that gay.

Jamie: You think he was pretending the whole time?

Simone: No, not necessarily.

Simone: He probably was telling the truth.

Simone: You have to understand. Sexuality is a complicated thing. A lot of times, the ones who think they’ve got it all figured out actually have figured out the least. That can go both ways.

And this is why I love Simone especially: she’s smart and can see through other people’s bull. If I tell her about a problem, she always knows how to handle it and can give the wisdom I need to get through the day.

So this is how things have been since school started: monotonous weekends working at Crosby's with Mom, Dad, Kelly, and the thugs, weekdays at school and coming home to chat with Simone and other people on the Internet and inevitably hearing Mom and Dad fight.

But ever since I got my driver's license two weeks ago, everything's changed! At work, Mom and Dad will sometimes give me the keys to the white Crosby's van and send me on errands to pick up extra eggs or napkins or milk. I've been taking every opportunity to head over to Highway 20 and go speeding along with my iPod plugged in and the windows rolled down, Lady Gaga blasting out into the desert. Then in the evenings, if I get the chance, I'll make up an excuse to use our Honda and head to the Albertson's downtown, just to wander their aisles and try any samples and stick my head in their freezers because they're there and they're cold and they're open till eleven and there's nobody to stop me from doing it.

Okay, fine, so it's not as exciting as it sounds, but when you're stuck in a place like Obego, it's better than the alternatives. You can go out to the pump jacks twenty minutes outside town and watch them rise and fall and rise and fall for hours on end, or you can waltz your way down to the little shops on Main Street and go see a movie and stop by the Starbucks for some coffee. Or you could go out in the desert and drink, but—I don't know, that's just not my thing. Not that I've got something against drinking; I just have a gut feeling that if I personally did it, I'd end up being one of those shaggy-bearded guys you see smoking inside the pool hall downtown even though they graduated years ago. Call it a hunch.

Fun's so scare in Obego, you've got to take what you get, which is why when Mom comes back to the sink and tells me to stop washing dishes and go get two dozen eggs, I say, "Hell yeah!" I grab the keys and a ten dollar bill from the register, hop in the van, and next thing

you know, I'm cruising along Highway 20 with the windows rolled down and Lady Gaga blasting full volume, heading out into the desert and looking for some eggs. Man, you have no idea how hard it is to find some eggs in this town! I could be gone for hours.

After ten minutes cruising up and down Highway 20, jamming to the pounding beats of "Bad Romance," I head back into town and buy the damned eggs, taking few minutes to examine the nutrition facts on a box of Eggo Waffles in the Frozen Breakfast aisle and sample some cheddar cheese. But even after that, I still have time to spare, still don't feel my time's fully been used. So I use the change from the eggs to go to Starbucks and get a latte, and, who knows, maybe I'll run into somebody. I like running into people, even when it's awkward and I don't know what to say and hustle on after a brief hello-goodbye. It's just nice to connect with people, good people, and know good people are in the world.

Sure enough, on a bright orange couch in the back corner sit our high school senior class royalty, Anna and her studly boyfriend Greg, a linebacker on the football team. I maintain that I have no interest in guys, but let me confess that if I were bicurious, I'd be curious with him. Greg has that smooth, jutted chin you always see on underwear models, and the body to go with it too. Anna is a nice girl, though, and sharp too—she can casually answer math problems while playing with her hair. If people gave her more respect and focused less on her blond hair and big boobs, she'd probably stand a chance at going places.

"Hey! Jamie!" Anna says as I walk in, and she sits up a bit on the couch and waves and smiles. I wave and smile back.

"How you doing?" I ask.

"Good," she says. "You?"

“Good too,” I say back.

Greg says nothing, and they get back to talking. But see, just like that, I already feel better. It’s good to have people around who know your name!

Once I get my latte, I snag a copy of the Midland Daily News and sit by the window in the back. Boy, this paper has gone downhill over the last few years, but you can always read the classifieds and obituaries if you’re really getting desperate. Unfortunately and generally, somebody interesting has always died.

Anna and Greg talk loudly, and I overhear bits of their conversation.

“You sure you’re not coming?” Greg asks.

“No, not tonight.”

“Come on, Anna. Everybody’s gonna be there,” he goes on. “Beth. Sam. Michael.”

I slouch in my seat and sip on my latte and try not to listen anymore. Yeah, yeah, they’re going out in the desert tonight and pumping music from their stereos and dancing and drinking and doing all the things you expect kids to do. Yeah, well, that’s what they do, and I’m fine with it. I really am. But I can’t help but wonder sometimes what the world would be like if everybody actually was there, out in the desert, Anna and Beth and Michael and Greg and Kelly and myself and Veronica—hell, even Ty could come! We’d just play my iPod and lie on the ground, sprawled out on the rough earth, staring at the stars, or maybe standing up and dancing and laughing as though the world meant nothing at all...

The sky is reddening and I sit up with a stir, only then realizing that I’ve dozed off in the armchair, the Midland Daily News folded on my lap. I put the paper back where I found it and hurry out to the car and hop in, worrying, wondering how long I’ve been sleeping. Mom can

tolerate half an hour, forty-five minutes if I'm lucky, but she'll have noticed by now that I've been gone way, way, *waaaay* too long.

But when I pull up into Crosby's back parking lot, I see both Mom and Dad are outside, and I can tell they've been having an argument. Despite saying she quit years ago when she first got pregnant, Mom's smoking a cigarette, and Dad is pacing back and forth, talking expressively, his hands waving in the air. They don't seem to notice my return until I've gotten out of the van and am walking toward them, the carton of eggs in my hands. Dad looks up at me and stops.

"Where have you been?" he asks.

My cheeks burn and my shoulders hunch up. "I was getting the eggs," I say, and I glance over at the diner's large glass window, the one panel on the side of the building. Kelly's inside and doing my job, clearing the table Ty and his crew were sitting at just an hour and a half ago.

Mom throws her cigarette on the ground and stomps it out with her foot.

"Jamie," she says, her voice making a squeak, "Your father has something to tell you."

Dad presses a hand to his forehead and looks down at the ground. "Not now, Erica—we haven't talked this through yet."

Mom rolls her eyes and puts her hands in the pocket of her apron. "Oh, we've talked this through plenty, and you seem pretty set. So why don't you just go ahead and tell him."

"There's nothing to tell. I told you, I haven't *necessarily* made up my mind."

"Just tell him."

"Tell me WHAT!?!?" I finally yell, "Just tell me it already!"

At that very moment, Kelly comes through the back door, carrying a large trash bag over her shoulder, on her back. She walks past us without giving us a glance, to the dumpster, and she

throws the trash bag overhand. It flies through the air, up into the dumpster, where it lands with a loud *whoomph*. Kelly turns around and rushes back inside, ignoring the mess out here.

The door slams shut, and Mom faces me.

“Your father wants to hire another slut to do your work because he thinks it’ll be better for business,” she says.

Mom turns around, opens the door, and walks back inside too. I stare after her, slowly processing her words. Then I turn to Dad, who runs his hand through his hair and sighs.

“Jamie, it’s not like that,” he says. “I swear.”

I look through the window, and I see Kelly. She’s sitting at a table in the diner, counting her tips. She’s separating the ones and fives into piles and pushing the coins to the side.

“Jamie, listen,” Dad says. “What’s really going on is... I think it’ll be better if you had work experience outside the family, and then you can earn a little cash for yourself. That’s all.”

Kelly counts the ones bill by bill, her fingers running through their wrinkles and folds.

“Your Mom likes the idea too, Jamie,” Dad goes on, and he’s folded his arms across his chest, digging his hands into his armpits. “She just doesn’t want it to happen now because...well, she believes what she wants to believe, and I can’t control that.”

I look at my father and look at his brown hair, and for the first time, I wonder what he sees in Kelly, wonder how he sees Crosby’s Diner and the way he thinks it’s supposed to work.

“Are you okay?”

I take a step back, take a moment to think about the time and the place and where I could go and what I can do, but the eyes are blurring with tears that I don’t want to cry. Am I hurt? No. Do I feel loved? No. Betrayed? No, no, no, but my feet move backwards in some sense of

injustice and I want to cry for help. Can I get a quick fix? No, there is none, and slowly the thoughts sink in. *I've been fired by my own Dad! I've been fired so he can hire a new slut!*

Well, hurry, think fast, what to do, what to do but step back, step back again and again, and I see Kelly counting coins, and can see her smiling devilishly as she tallies up her nickels and dimes. Yes, because the thugs tip her, and she knows how it works, oh she knows all too damn well. And Dad knows too, and he's benefited from what he knows, but I didn't! I have no say in this, no place in their scheme, their wily ways, their social system of exchange of flirtatious laughs and girlish giggles, and I must grab the key in my pocket. I must get to the van and grab the door and take the wheel and take the wheel and go, go, GO!

Dad's running over to the van and pulls the handle for the passenger door but I've already locked it and the engine is going.

"HEY!" he yells, pounding on the glass window, running, running alongside the car, but I can barely see him. My eyes are focused on what's in front of me, focused on the driveway out to the road.

"HEY!" I hear him yell out from behind the van, but I've turned left out of the parking lot, moving away from the diner, and Kelly's small frame shows in my side mirror as she turns her head, just now noticing that something's going on.

The cactuses in the desert look like green blobs in my high beams as I whiz by in the dark. I turn off the freeway at the exit by the lookout and take the side road out to the pump jacks. The last of the sun is falling off below the horizon. Against the red, I see shadows of the pump jacks in the distance, rising up and down. I climb onto the van's hood, with Rihanna still

blaring from my iPod, and I lean back against the windshield and look up to the night sky. Even with Rihanna in the background, it's still quiet out here, and soon it will be cold.

As I lie on the hood, I wonder why I was ever angry. I didn't even like doing dishes anyway. I didn't like cleaning up after the thugs' regular messes and having to be around my parents all the time, sensing tension in their every move. But somehow, I still feel devastated.

I think about Simone and imagine what she'll say when I tell her about this.

Simone: It sounds like you overreacted.

Jamie: Yeah, but I don't get why! Why would I care if I worked at Crosby's or not?

Simone: Maybe you want to help your parents? Or maybe you liked having something to do? Or maybe you liked being around all those people you knew, Kelly and the thugs and whoever else stopped by, seeing them in the diner and serving them regularly and expecting them to always be around?

Maybe, maybe, maybe. I could speculate on all the maybes for hours, and I'm sure Simone could too. But it's done now—it's more than done, and the desert is starting to get cold. I shut my eyes and imagine I'm alone. I will go home and apologize to my parents and tell them that, yes, Dad's decision could be good. I will find a new job. Dad will hire another slut. The thugs will show up to the diner in droves and ogle the new blonde's boobs because, apparently, that's how the world's supposed to work, and I don't have to have none of it.

I climb off the hood of the van and get back in the driver's seat.

My iPod's back on. It's Lady Gaga again, and I'm imagining all the things I'll say to Mom and Dad when I get home—writing a speech for myself. *I'm sorry, I'm sorry, and I understand what's best for the business is probably best for us all.* Yeah, best for the girls, best for the thugs, best for Dad who gets all the attention he wants and to be around the sweet young sluts he hires instead of his own kids. I'm speeding so fast that I barely see the movement on the

side of the highway, the figure of a man stumbling alongside the dusty pavement, waving his arms in the air. I pull to the side of the road and roll down my window.

“Who goes there?” I call out.

No one answers at first. Then the man finally runs up to the car, and his tall frame and buzzed hair come into focus. He’s not running straight, stepping off the road every few steps, faltering slightly, but a pair of sagging shorts and a blue dress shirt with white vertical stripes slowly come into focus. Slowly, he takes the shape of Ty.

He keeps jogging until he comes close enough to see who I am. Then he halts.

“Hey,” he says, and he’s panting. “What are you doing out here?”

“I was just passing through. Getting back home. What are *you* doing here?”

He leans over and places his hands on his knees and his breath subsides, until he looks back up at me, but he stays silent. His eyes are slightly red, and he’s struggling to stand. The scent of alcohol slowly hits me, and I realize he must’ve been with the group, with Greg and Michael and Sam in the desert. Something must’ve gone wrong. The police must’ve shown up.

“Where’s your crew?” I ask. “Where’s Willy and Jeffrey?”

Ty doesn’t answer and keeps on panting. Then, he sneers.

“Is that Lady Gaga?” he asks

I don’t answer. I turn the music down, and Ty stands up straight. His shorts are sagging enough to reveal the elastic white band of his underwear. He pulls his dress shirt in close to him.

“Listen, man” he says, “It’s cold. I need a ride. Can you just take me downtown somewhere and drop me off?”

He's desperate, and part of me wants to drive away, wants to see him standing in my review mirror, his blue eyes staring longingly after me, but I'm not cruel. Even with those who've been cruel to me, I could never be cruel to back!

"Get in," I say.

Ty flashes a smile and runs around to the passenger side. The door slams shut, and we're on our way, driving back along Highway 20.

"Feel free to change the music to whatever you like," I say.

Ty slips out of dress shirt and snatches my iPod, and only then do I get a good look at him, the white shirt he has on underneath, and his biceps. As he wheels through the list of songs on my iPod, his biceps flex, bulging enough to fill up his shirt's sleeves. They're grapefruit biceps, the kind you want to squeeze just to see if they're real. I hadn't realized Ty worked out *that* much.

"You still do basketball?" he asks without looking up.

I just shake my head no, although he should already know the answer. He sets the iPod to an Eminem song, and he sits back in his seat, one arm resting on the door, the other on my parking break.

"Me neither," he says, "but I've been going up to Midland on weekends to this martial arts center there and taking classes in Taekwondo and shit. It's great. They do Muay Thai too, and I'm just getting into that."

Yeah, it makes sense for the brawny hothead lacking an understanding of teamwork to be in a ring beating up other dudes, and I can picture him at a punching bag for hours, throwing hooks and jabs, toning his arms to the point of grapefruits. I glance down at his arms again, but

quickly look back up. I've got to watch the road, got to focus on the road, but I feel strangely nervous, like I'm about to take a big test. My focus seems set to drift away.

We're silent the next few minutes. I try to ignore it, try to act calm around Ty, and as I exit the freeway and head toward downtown, I slow down my speed.

"So, what've you been up to these days?" he asks.

"Me?" I ask, surprised.

Ty laughs. "Yeah, you. Who the hell else am I asking?"

I turn to look at him, and my eyes catch his, his blue eyes, and I think of all the things I could say about Mom and Dad and getting fired from work, about the late night car rides and the pump jacks, about Simone and the people I've been talking to on the Internet. But somehow, all of it feels like nothing. I have nothing to say, really, and I still want to say something to him but can't find the words. So I just look at him and smile, look at his eyes and his buzz-cut hair and his biceps and the chest hairs poking over the top of his shirt, and his biceps are just too big to be real and go with his smooth, pale skin, his blue eyes.

My mouth hangs open and I'm about to speak when Ty turns away from me, and his eyes widen. I see him reach over toward me, and he lets out a high-pitch, piecing scream.

"JAMIE, WATCH OUT!!"

There's a swoosh then the pound of the impact, and my face plows into what feels like a cushion, pounding me, but I feel something warm around my neck, something warm with the scent of the grimy sweat of a Muay Thai fighter, his biceps squeezed around my Adam's Apple.

When I was seven years old, I would lie in my bed and hold an open pair of scissors to my throat and dream of snapping them shut. I would lie in bed for hours, scissors in hand,

imagining the bliss I would feel in ending it all. Veronica came into my room one time and looked down at me in my Superman sheets and asked me if I wanted to die, and I said yes. She asked me why I wanted to die, and I said because I didn't think I belonged in this world and didn't believe I ever would. Veronica then started crying, and I started crying too because I felt bad for making my sister cry.

I didn't want to die, really. I just wanted a future where parents didn't yell at each other or my sister and me, where I could find a place in the schoolyard of boys I couldn't relate to and girls who didn't know what chore to assign me whenever we played house. Death didn't seem serious back then. It just seemed like an easy answer, an option to consider playing with because no better ones were on the table.

But when you and your car are hurtling toward a telephone pole at approximately thirty miles-per-hour, you tend to see death a bit differently. To say the least, death feels a little bit more real, and as I felt Ty squeeze my neck tightly, I felt a determination to live, a determination to have final human contact before potentially slipping into oblivion.

I sat in the driver's seat, still buckled in and screaming, unable to move, and I heard the passenger door open. Ty ran out, stumbling off into the street, holding his right arm as though it were limp. I remember sitting and sitting, stunned, until sirens sounded, and I finally got out of the van and calmly walked toward the fire truck that had just arrived. A firewoman fully dressed in her yellow suit approached me.

"Are you okay?" I heard her ask.

I looked up toward the sky and saw the stars, and I felt a scratch on my neck.

"He hugged me," I said to myself.

The firewoman held her flashlight up to my eyes.

“What’s that, son?” she asked.

“He hugged me. When we crashed, he hugged me.”

“Who did? Who hugged you? Was there someone in the car with you?”

I opened my mouth to explain but paused—I couldn’t. I couldn’t say anything about Ty. If I let them know he was here, they’d go searching and find him drunk. I could never say he was here, and I needed to cover for him fast.

“Jesus,” I said, and I forced a dumb smile. “I felt him. Jesus hugged me when I crashed.”

The firewoman laughed a little and then lowered her flashlight. “I’m going to check you for concussions,” she said.

She turned away, and I let my smile fade. I glanced around at the scene and saw the van, its front bent into the telephone pole, and I tried to think of a way I could possibly explain what happened to Mom and Dad. Only then did I realize that if I really wanted to protect Ty, I could never tell anyone the truth.

After getting checked for concussions, the paramedics told me I should be okay, and soon Mom and Dad and Veronica showed up to drive me back home. The van was likely out of commission, Dad said, and he said nothing more than that. He sent me upstairs to my room, and from here, I can hear the murmurs rising up through the house of Mom and Dad and Veronica, discussing what to do with the now-totaled van, debating how to handle things financially, and I suddenly don’t want to be a part of their problems. For once, I only want to think about myself.

I walk to the computer and log onto the Internet. As expected, Simone is online.

Simone: Hey, how’s it going?

Jamie: Not good.

Jamie: I just crashed my parent’s business van.

There's a pause for a minute or two. Then,

Simone: Are you okay?

And I don't know how to answer the question. I keep thinking about Alex—how one encounter with the right girl made him totally change his life. And I keep thinking about Ty, the desperation I felt in his embrace as together we looked death in the eyes. I wonder if I'll see him at school on Monday, if maybe we'll talk about the crash, if maybe he'll admit to hugging me. But somehow, I don't think he will, and I get the sense this story can only be preserved by me.

A part of me wants to tell Simone everything or to post about it on the Internet, to recap every bit of my day to the entire world, from dozing off at Starbucks to getting fired by my parents to the strange circumstances of the crash. But as much as I want to tell this story, there's no need for anyone else to know it. Instead, I feel a very different need. I feel the need to take a step back and get my thoughts and feelings in order, to make sense of what I'm doing with my life, what I need to do to make it better, to find my own place in the world, a place where I won't get fired and don't have to clean up after a bunch of thugs. Sooner or later, I've got to figure something out.

End Notes

Credit must be given to the writer Dan Chaon, whose writing has influenced these stories in both little and big ways. My freshman year at the University, I discovered his short story “Big Me” in my creative writing textbook and immediately decided, “This is the way I want to be able to tell stories.” I have since read almost all his work.

One day last October, as I was revising the story now titled “Something Else,” a thought clicked in my brain: an emotionally and psychologically troubled character named Miles is one of the central figures of Chaon’s most recent novel *Await Your Reply*. Pure coincidence? Perhaps. But at the very least, I thought it was something worth noting. Quite possibly, it is not the only way in which his and others’ stories have secretly seeped into mine.