

Tell Me Anything

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Girls

“Molly!” I hiss, and my older sister looks up groggily. Her eyes don’t register recognition. She bends over and lifts her foot to take off a boot before she teeters and falls sideways. I catch her before she hits the floor and lower her down the rest of the way. Once she is sitting, I pull off her boots. She smells like puke.

We stand up together and I half-carry her up the stairs. Molly keeps trying to talk. “Shut up, you’re gonna wake Dad,” I whisper, but she is not listening. Her eyes drift closed. She is seventeen and not allowed to drink at all, let alone stay out until after three a.m. At fifteen, my curfew is eleven.

We make it into our bathroom before the vomiting hits--first into the sink, then the trash can, then the toilet. The smell of liquor permeates the bathroom. When she stops I wrestle with her jacket, taking it off and gathering her hair into a ponytail. She sways gently. Her cell phone

and wallet, thank God, are still in her purse. I look at her recent texts, a garble of nonsense letters. She retches again and, though nothing comes up, it sounds wet and disgusting. Through her sheer party top, I watch her stomach convulse. She doesn't react to me, even when I start to gently rub her back. At this proximity I can see the sweat beading on her white forehead.

I've had enough practice with her to handle what comes next. She starts to lie down on the floor, but I grab her under her armpits. "Noooooo no no. Up we go." I'm talking mostly to myself; she still shows no sign of hearing me, just blinks with blank, wet eyes, mouth slightly open. Heaving her up from the tile I sling her arm around my shoulders and drag her into her bedroom. I know better than to try to change her clothes--too much effort for now. She seems to realize where she is and climbs under the covers of her own accord. After a few minutes, when I'm sure she is on her side like I learned in health class, I turn back towards my own room.

"Stay with me, Leah," she croaks, trying to sit up. I'm relieved to hear her voice.

I lie down next to her on top of the covers. "Okay." I pat her side and she lets her head drop back onto the pillow. "Okay."

I wake up around eleven. It's Sunday morning and the smell of waffles winds up the stairs. Molly is sleeping like a rock, but snoring, so I head downstairs to Dad.

He slouches as he cooks. His flannel pajama pants have been worn so many times they are a lighter color in the knees as he shuffles tiredly from the fridge to the stove.

“Perhaps you might be able to explain the knocked over trash cans,” Dad says in a stern but apprehensive voice.

I swear inwardly. God, Molly. “Dad. It’s me. Leah.”

“Oh,” he says, turning around. He looks at me with a little concern. “Is your sister awake?” After a pause, he leans over and presses a cheek to mine. “Good morning.”

“Nope, she’s sleeping in. Good morning.”

“What time’d she get in last night?” He turns away, fidgeting with the spatula.

“Umm.” I wait a beat too long. “Midnight, I think. Don’t know about the trash cans, must have been a raccoon or something.” I keep my voice light. Even though Dad won’t believe me, Molly will blame me if I give away too much.

He nods and accepts the familiar lie. “Well, waffles’ll be done any minute. Why don’t you go wake the slumbering beast?” We both look around the kitchen, silently ensuring we have the proper equipment for a Molly morning-after: coffee, aspirin, water.

I go back upstairs to wake my sister. I expect her to still be asleep, but she is not in her bed and the bathroom light is on. The door is slightly ajar so I push in.

Molly stands in front of the sink. She is still wearing last night's jeans and socks but her shirt is off and her small breasts are exposed. Her right arm is raised and in the mirror she examines a bruise the size of a butternut squash. It blooms from her armpit to the indent of her waist. She notices me standing there, but makes no move to cover herself. When she sees my face she gives a half-hearted laugh.

"Kinda looks like a map of Africa," she says.

I can't help it. I start to cry. Pulling on a clean T-shirt, she comes over to me and hugs me gingerly, stroking my hair, apologizing. I don't hug back for fear of poking her bruise. For a moment I have a vision of her standing atop a boulder in Maine, thirty yards out from the shoreline, a nine-year-old kid in a one-piece with a gash on the side of her leg from the climb. But then, as now, her eyes glinted with defiance, unmoved by my fear.

When I get home from my shift at the coffee shop on Monday afternoon, Molly is making a smoothie. She wears an old tank top and running shorts and her hair sticks to her head with sweat. There is a cutting board and a long knife on the counter and she is dumping celery and spinach and some other things in the blender. I don't think it's going to taste very good, but I don't say so. I know it would just launch a fiery response, and I don't have the energy for her irascibility right now.

She turns around when she hears me come in and gives me a big smile. She is trying to pretend Saturday night didn't happen. Tired, I quietly comply.

"Hey!" she says, too brightly. "You want some Green Machine?"

"Sorry, some what?"

"It's a smoothie. I'm doing a cleanse," she explains. Her voice is excited and her hands flutter around. "Well, it's more of a reset. Basically you just eat only vegetables for twenty-one days."

"Why?" I stare at a wilted eggplant.

"I haven't been good to myself recently," she says. "I wanna get back on track. You know, detoxify, restore my body to factory settings."

I shake my head. She probably is quoting that right from some vegan website.

"I'm done with all the processed foods," she continues. "I feel like shit. I think this'll help. It'll give me my energy back so I can work out every day. I bought a kettlebell..."

She continues and I nod, though I'm not sure what a kettlebell even is. I feel bad for not believing her.

Ever since we were little, Molly has been doing stuff like this. Once, when I was eleven and she was thirteen, she decided to bike across the United States, and she wanted me to come along. She had read somewhere about these cross-country trips you could go on, where you sign

up with a group and you ride so many miles a day for however many days and go from Maine to the West Coast. I tried to tell her that you had to have a really professional bike for that, and special shoes, and several months of no work or school or anything to do. But she brushed me off. I think she really would have done it, taken her pink beach cruiser all the way to Los Angeles. But Dad found out her plan and told her she couldn't go. She cried for two days and got her nose pierced instead.

Now, she puts more things into the blender, lemon juice and coconut water. She moves quickly, purposefully; she's inspired. I wonder how long it will last. She kept the nose ring for three weeks.

I call Mom that night. She lives in Wisconsin with her husband Jim, where they have a Volkswagen and a Labradoodle and a house that looks exactly like their neighbors'. Same color siding and everything.

She answers on the first ring. "Lee Lee!" Sing-songy.

"Hi, Mommy."

"How are you doing, beloved youngest? What are you getting up to? Is there fun in your life? Is it frog-hopping with wonderful activities?"

I am sitting in my unmade bed. I pull the covers up over my knees, even though I'm not in my pajamas yet and I hate letting daytime clothes touch my sheets. "Just getting some homework done. Bio's kicking my butt. But I called because I want to talk to you about something--"

"Oh, honey, I can't imagine," she sighs indulgently. "But keep plugging away at it. I know you will ace your test, you always do. How about lacrosse? Lacrosse is about to start up, isn't it? Are you still a goalkeeper?"

"I'm not playing this year, Mom. I told you last week. I'm doing yearbook instead."

"Oh, right. You did tell me that. I'm getting old! My memory's going!" Mom is whimsical tonight. "You should see me anymore, I'm just such a mess. I have to keep a pair of glasses in every room because I always lose them. Or Jim sits on them--they slip sometimes between the couch cushions. I got a pair with lights on the side for reading in the dark."

I smile at the image. "How *is* Jim? And Nutter?" Nutter Butter is the dog.

"They're just wonderful. We've been going to the dog park Saturdays. Nutter loves it because it's getting warmer, and Jim and I just met our new neighbors who just moved in on Hemlock. They're going to come to church with us this weekend. Oh, and we're throwing a Valentine's Day party. But don't worry about things at this end. I want to hear about you." I hear kitchen noises. She is cooking. "We'll have to get you out here after school ends."

“Yeah, definitely. I’m all right,” I say, sighing. “I’ve been working more hours at the coffee shop which is okay, because I like to stay busy, but I’m kind of stressed about school. Also, there’s something going on with Mol. It’s getting worse.”

Mom talks away from the phone, admonishing Nutter, who is probably trying to steal people food. “That’s good, honey,” she says distractedly. “Not the stress part. The work part. It’s a good life skill, time management. How about Molly? And your father? Everybody doing okay? I’m gonna call her after dinner.”

“Yeah. Everybody’s okay,” I say. “I’m just worried.” I try to make my voice sound weird and distant. I want her to pry, to ask why I’m upset, to feel guilty for interrupting.

But she doesn’t. There are murmurs in the background; I let her hurry off the phone and hear her talk laughingly to Jim as she hangs up.

The first time I ever saw Molly drunk, I was twelve. She was a freshman in high school that year and, being beautiful and sharp-eyed and fierce, she had caught the eye of a senior. Mom was still living with us then and she told Molly she couldn’t date him. My sister, in predictable style, asked my mother if she wanted her to be a cliché her entire life and darted out of the house, where the eighteen-year-old waited in his rusted red Cobra. A fight ensued between my mother and me, the basis being that both she and my father thought I could exert some influence on my

older sister. But deeply they knew, as I did, that I couldn't. That night she drank a forty-ounce bottle of malt liquor and got sick in her own pillowcase. Dad went into the office even though it was a Sunday and Mom broke a kitchen chair. But the next weekend, and all the weekends after that, Molly came home when she wanted, hair flattened in the back from being mashed against the crushed velvet seat of the Cobra.

When I get home from school, Dad sits in the kitchen, his back to the fridge, facing towards the front door. He has just himself at the table--no coffee, no paper, no Blackberry even--nothing to give a pretense that he is not there waiting for my sister. He seems skittish and over-caffeinated. I know she won't be home until four o'clock today so I drop my backpack at the foot of the stairs and shuffle in to meet him.

"Daddy," I say.

He looks up at me. I'm not sure if he has already been crying, but he looks as if he might start now. "I love you, Leah. I love you and your sister more than anything else in the world. And I would sooner rip out my own appendix than let anything happen to you."

I'm nervous. "It's a vestigial organ, anyway."

He doesn't laugh. "I know it's a lot to ask of you. If you can fathom it I actually recall what it was like being fifteen and believe me, my soul is sometimes crushed by the weight of

remembering it. Fifteen's a tough age. I imagine it's a lot tougher when you've got to be the oldest sibling." He stares at me, tries to bestow great respect upon me, invest me with great value in both our eyes.

"What's going on?" I know what's going on. Mom gave me this speech a few months before she left.

"Molly. She's out of control. I don't know what else to say, what else to give, to use the carrot or the stick, to take her computer or cell phone--because what would that matter? There would be twenty-one-year-olds tossing rocks at her window in the middle of the night instead. She'd turn herself into some sort of Stone Age martyr. She'd make it a whole thing."

I find it best to say nothing, as he is right. I imagine Molly's line now: *Friends, I've gone off the grid*. It's like the AIM incident of 2008: when they suspended her computer privileges, the red-Cobra senior left a trail of notes down our driveway.

"Lee, I need you to talk to her. She tells you things, I know she does. And you can tell me whatever she says to you--don't feel like you're being disloyal. I've got to find some way to communicate with her, or..." He doesn't finish. In my head flashes the image of Molly's stomach muscles spasming as she vomits.

The bags under his eyes and his grey-speckled stubble are pronounced in this light; yet though he looks old, he seems so helpless. I want more than anything to offer him some advice,

some insight that I wish so badly I could give, a solution or even a reason for the problem. But I know what he knows, what Mom knew, that she is an insuppressible force, ebullient and unafraid.

Late Wednesday night I go down to the kitchen and forage in the freezer. I emerge with coffee toffee ice cream and even though it's got freezer burn, I chisel away at it with a big spoon.

Molly comes down and sits across the table from me. She doesn't say anything, just stares at me and at the ice cream. Her face is sallow, the overhead light deepening the shadows under her eyes. I hold the spoon out to her, a silent peace offering, but she shakes her head. I forgot that she's on her new clean-green diet or whatever.

"How's the homework goin'?" I say around a hunk of frozen chocolate.

She shakes her head and looks down, picking her cuticles. "It sucks. I'm trying to write my stupid senior research portfolio."

"Oh yeah? What about?" I work on frozen toffee with my molars.

"I dunno." Her voice wobbles. "I can't write."

I swallow. "School sucks," I say, wise as an old elf.

“Marcus thinks I’m a slut,” she says plaintively. I assume Marcus is one of the recipients of her alphabet-soup text messages and try for a sympathetic face, though typically her boyfriends come and go.

All of a sudden, Molly starts to cry. It’s the first time I’ve seen her cry in years. Hunched in the kitchen chair, wearing no makeup and Dad’s hoodie, she looks like a little kid. Her mouth contorts and silent sobs wrack her chest. She puts the sleeve of the sweatshirt to her eye, pressing with the palm of her hand.

I put the lid on the ice cream and return it to the freezer. Then I touch her elbow and she stands up; linking arms, we go upstairs. She has slowed down with the crying but still sniffles. “Don’t make me do any more homework,” she says.

“Never,” I say loyally. She plops down on her bed and I go over to the TV. “We’re gonna watch *She’s the Man*.” Tonight, I play big sister.

Molly laughs and claps, tears still clinging to her eyelashes.

We giggle our way through the movie, quoting our favorite parts. Molly remembers all the lines; she’s got an amazing memory like that. I peek sideways at her during the kiss scene. She has this little smile fighting its way out and she hugs her teddy bear, stroking his ear between her thumb and pointer finger.

She turns to me at the end credits. “Hey, Lee Lee.” She averts her eyes and starts to comb through the fuzz of her blanket. “Thank you for taking care of me. You know, when I get in late and stuff.”

The apology, and her diffidence, takes me aback. “Of course,” I say automatically. “That’s what I’m here for.”

“It’s not.” She shakes her head and looks me in the eye, her own cerulean ones flat and forthright. “You should be allowed to make kid mistakes without having to clean up after mine. I promise I’m going to try to rein it in.” She almost smiles. “If only so you don’t have to touch my barf again.”

I do smile, relieved at her attempt at insouciance. “I like taking care of you, Mol. You know I just worry. Dad does, too. A lot. Mom would, if--you know. Jim, dog, et cetera.”

Molly smirks. “Stupid dog. He pooped a sock this morning.”

“Nutter Butter?”

She starts to snicker. “Yep. One of Jim’s big wool hiking socks. Vet said it was a miracle he passed it.”

I dissolve into giggles. I’m so happy that she talked to Mom and that she still thinks poop humor is funny. Like kids, our laughter builds off one another and spirals in its hysteria, and we roll back onto the bed, kicking our feet in the air.

When I come home from the coffee shop the next evening, I hear Dad's voice in the kitchen. The syllables sound challenging. At first I think he and Molly are finally fighting and I prepare to flee the scene undetected--until I hear him cheer.

Curious but wanting to remain unnoticed, I peek around the corner. They are sitting at the table playing chess. My sister's eyes are animated, engaged in the game, and her mouth goes into a hard line as she concentrates. She fingers a knight and watches my dad carefully for his reaction. He says something and they both laugh.

The music is so loud that the bass makes my desk lamp rattle. I'm annoyed, even though I'm not doing homework, so I get up and go to Molly's room to tell her to turn it down. When I shoulder open the door she is whirling around, dancing wildly. She has MTV on with the sound off but rock music blasts from her stereo, a quick spastic song with a singer that shrieks more than he sings. I don't know how she can listen to this stuff. She sees me, I think, but she doesn't stop dancing; I look over to her desk and there is a big empty wine bottle. It's one of Dad's, a cheap sugary white, the kind he uses to make punch for holiday parties.

She stomps and heel-toes across the room, jabbing her hands down like she's pounding an invisible piano. When she reaches the bed she leaps and lands on her back, miming air-guitar,

eyes closed as she writhes like a pop idol. Finally, she acknowledges me. While I stand there stupidly, she jives over and grabs my hands, jerking my limbs around. I keep my feet planted as she tries to dance with me. Her eyes are watery and a lighter blue than usual and she doesn't smile, just looks at me and keeps dancing, out of breath.

I twist my hands out of her grasp, walk over to the stereo, turn down the volume, and walk out. I am embarrassed and angry for her. I close her door and retreat back to my room.

Gargoyles

It was late August and Kenneth had a headache. He was in the backseat of his mother's minivan, where the sliding doors' windows did not open; the air in the car was stale and hot. Kenneth panted audibly--at age nine, he had begun to develop a slight flair for the dramatic.

"Ken?" his mother asked, not looking to the backseat. "You okay, buddy?"

"Well, yeah. Only if you think suffocating is okay."

His mother didn't answer. They were on their way to Kenneth's father's house; he lived forty-five minutes away in a little town called New Hope, Pennsylvania. He owned an antique shop called Tradewinds that was adjacent to his house. After his parents had divorced, neither of them had remarried, but Kenneth often stayed with his father. He was going to be dropped off at their house for the day.

Kenneth traced the grey chevron of the car upholstery with his heel, passing time, until they finally arrived in New Hope. The streets were winding and narrow, cobbled and on steep hills; Kenneth looked out at the storefronts on the main street and felt they were close enough to reach out and touch. There were no big sprawling shopping centers like Springfield, his hometown--New Hope was lined with small boutiques and coffee shops and hair salons. Soon the car began to slow, and Kenneth saw the high, ivy-adorned fence that surrounded his father's house. He felt the minivan rock a little from side to side as it ascended the slope of the driveway.

They parked and he hauled open the sliding door. His mother got out, too, and paused to address him.

"I'll only be gone for a few hours," she said. "My haircut shouldn't take too long. In the meantime, you'll hang out here and be on your very best *Jeopardy!* behavior for Dad. Right?" Kenneth was allowed to watch *Jeopardy!* on Wednesday nights, as long as he had eaten dinner and finished homework without incident, which was often, as he tended to secretly enjoy homework. He nodded his agreement.

They went to the screen door and knocked before entering the cool, dark house. It had a musty smell, one that Kenneth associated with the old paintings and statues and bronze figures that studded Dad's entryway. Kenneth often wondered about the items in the house: were they

for sale? Were they purely for decoration? He didn't think so, because they seemed mismatched: some looked new, some extremely old, some pristine, some encrusted with a slow-grown filth. He couldn't discern a common theme among them at all. There was a bust of Medusa at the end of the hallway that Kenneth was excited to see again, because Medusa had been an answer on *Jeopardy!*, and he wanted to talk to Dad about her. He also remembered a Malcom Gladwell book he'd read that talked about curators' instinct for recognizing fake statues. *What is 'kouros,' Mr. Trebek?*

Dad was in the kitchen, seated on a bar stool at the tall, expensive-looking counter. He had moved in four years ago and Kenneth was familiar with the sight of him there, with his sandy blonde hair and freckled nose, at home among the relics of the house. He was cutting a tomato to make a caprese salad.

"Hey, Ken," his father said, a bit stiffly. "Summer snack?" He took a fork and speared a slice of tomato and mozzarella cheese.

"Hi, Dad. No, thank you," Kenneth said automatically.

"John," Mom admonished gently. "He's lactose intolerant."

"Oh, shoot. I'm sorry, buddy. I forgot." He patted the bar stool next to him. "Maybe just the tomato then. Hi, Alice." His terms of endearment felt affected to Kenneth.

“I should only be gone until about four. Thanks for letting him hang out here.” She patted Kenneth’s shoulder, as if giving him permission to leave her side. “Remember, dearest only. *Jeopardy!* behavior.”

Kenneth went and sat on the stool. “You bet.” His head pulsated.

She said goodbye. After she’d left, Kenneth’s father poured him a glass of iced tea. “So tell me what’s happening, Junior.”

Kenneth did not understand the nickname, since his father’s name was John. “Not much. It’s summer. So I’m doing swimming lessons. Mom says the chlorine is turning my hair green.” His hair was light, like his father’s, and it brightened in the summer months.

His father chuckled. “Maybe it’s the chlorine. Or maybe you’ve been body-snatched by aliens.” He grabbed Kenneth’s chin, tipped it up as if he were examining his eyes. “Nope, still looks like the same Ken to me.”

“Actually, I prefer to be called Kenneth now.”

“Is that so?” his father replied, nodding. “Well, I like that very much. Sophisticated. Fits you.”

“I guess,” Kenneth said. “Thank you. Mom likes it.”

He felt a little guilty after mentioning his mother but was unsure of how else to proceed.

His father, seemingly sensing his wariness, picked up his plate with the caprese salad.

“Well, all right. All right. I’m going to head to my study,” he said. The study was a spare bedroom at the back of the one-story house with an ancient marble-top desk. “Why don’t you head outside? Check out the warehouse. We got some new Persian rugs. I know you like those. And I saved the shipping documentation for you to read. You’re still into that kind of stuff, right?”

Kenneth shrugged. “Yeah.” He liked to read about the purchases because those sorts of little details often appeared on *Jeopardy!*. The shipping methods, too, interested him, the way some had to come by boat and others by plane, some even by train if they were from the United States.

His father nodded once and went down the hall.

Kenneth went outside to the open garage that his father called “the warehouse.” In the main part of the antique store--the showroom--the rugs hung like slabs of expensive meat from the ceiling, which slid so that the customers could rifle through them. But here, the rugs were either rolled up in butcher paper or flattened in stacks like pancakes. He preferred the warehouse

because customers were not allowed back here; some of the regulars recognized him and engaged him in uncomfortable conversation in the showroom.

Kenneth passed under the partially drawn-up green garage door and felt his headache thump painfully. He often got headaches, because of his lactose intolerance; as a younger boy, before his parents got divorced, his father used to sit on the couch with Kenneth on the floor in front of him, pressing his large palms against his son's temples. He wasn't sure if it was the pressure or just the attention of his father, but it always helped Kenneth feel better. Seeking relief, he went over and knelt next to a stack of rugs, lifted a few, and stuck his head between them like a sandwich. The weight of the rugs smushed his cheeks but did not provide enough pressure to relieve his headache. Still, he relished the coarse fibers of the carpets against his face. He imagined, with a little twinge of germophobia but a bigger surge of fascination, the feet that had stepped on these antique carpets. Persian kings or servants or princesses. He knew from *Jeopardy!* that Persian and Iranian were sort of related, but the headache was distracting and he couldn't recall exactly how.

Suddenly, he felt a sharp pinch on his arm.

Pulling his head wildly from the stack, he whirled around to see Tatiana, her silhouette lit from behind by the afternoon sun slanting into the garage. She was the eight-year-old daughter of

George Hobensack, one of the buyers for Tradewinds. Kenneth hadn't seen her since the Fourth of July but even since then she'd grown taller and her hair, like his, was streaked with gold from the sun. He blinked until his pupils shrunk and he saw her smile wickedly. One of her front teeth overlapped the other slightly.

"Hi, Tatiana," he said uneasily. Though Tatiana was younger, she had traveled extensively with George, visiting many countries Kenneth had only read about. This made her whimsical and fearless, quite his opposite, which intimidated him.

She giggled. "Hi, Kenneth." She pulled him up from his knees by his elbow. "What were you doing down there, head buried like an ostrich? Nevermind; I'm glad you're here. Come on, I have some new things to show you."

The two spent the next hour wandering around the warehouse, looking at imports in various states of undress from their packaging. Tatiana was very knowledgeable about the process by which items would be prepared to put out on the sales floor or on display in the garden. She told Kenneth about the ages of the wrought iron pieces and explained why copper statues turned mossy green. He knew the name for that: *What is patina?* Kenneth remained uncomfortable and off-balance in her presence. He was used to being the smartest student in his

class--or, at least, the one who knew the most facts. He hoped, secretly, for the opportunity to outsmart her.

“Look at these gargoyles,” Tatiana said, moving toward a cluster of hoary statues in the corner of the warehouse. “Aren’t they just fantastical?” She reached up and put a small, tan hand on one of the wings. “Sometimes I dream that they’ve come to life. They all wander into my room and have little troll voices that speak to me in different languages.”

“‘Gargoyle’ comes from the French *gargouille*,” Kenneth said, excited to contribute. He really had been at a disadvantage thus far, Tatiana being on her home turf. “It means, literally, ‘throat’ or ‘gullet.’ They’re meant to redirect the water so it doesn’t run down the masonry.”

“Yes, that might be true, but it’s not very fun, is it. They also guard against evil spirits. I think that’s a much more important function.” She looked skeptically at Kenneth. “If they were simply supposed to get rid of water then they could just be shaped like regular rain spouts.” She stroked the bulbous eye of one of the gargoyles. “Go on, touch one. They are very friendly and protective.”

“That’s called anthropomorphism,” Kenneth said lamely. “Giving things human qualities. And no, thank you.” He felt a bit unnerved by their cartoonish faces, and he was afraid touching them would somehow make them age faster, like the oils from his hands might blind them.

Tatiana sighed wistfully. “We used to have these wonderful statues that looked like lions. They were imported from Florence on a big ship because they were so heavy.”

In Mrs. Simms’ third-grade class, Kenneth had learned about explorers, about how before the discovery of America most of their motivation for expeditions was the discovery of new trade routes. He imagined men in feathered hats directing sweaty crew members as they hauled stone lions up the ramp of a wooden vessel. He tried to emulate Tatiana’s imagination, tried to make them come alive in his mind’s eye, but instead of yawning into roars they remained stock-still.

Tatiana, meanwhile, had grown bored with the warehouse. “Do you want to go out to the garden? The flowers are in bloom,” she said. Without waiting for a response she traipsed out the garage door. Kenneth followed, noticing her dirty bare feet and jean shorts. She seemed at once out-of-place and perfectly at home on his father’s property, like one of the bronze fairy statues in the garden sprung to life. He realized gratefully that his headache had gone away.

He followed her around the side of the house to the more private backyard. Kenneth did not spend a lot of time back here, since the koi fish had died the winter before. When he was younger he had liked to sit by the fish, watch the patterns they made as they swam. There was a small pond there with a fountain, one that had a stone head spouting water from its mouth.

“Bacchus, god of wine,” Tatiana said. Kenneth fought annoyance--she knew everything. “I had a sip of wine once, some of my dad’s. It was disgusting. We were in France eating snails, which were delicious. They were mostly butter. That’s the secret with a lot of these quite fancy foods—mussels, too—they’re all mostly just butter. Dad taught me about that.” She said this as if it were as casual as learning to tie one’s shoes. “The wine, though. Gross. That’s an acquired taste.”

Kenneth had heard his father say that. “Oh. I wish I was able to travel with my dad. But I spend most of my time at my mom’s.”

She picked a blade of grass and threaded it between her thumbs, trying to make a reed for a whistle. “Why?” she asked, in between breaths. “What’s that like?”

“Well,” Kenneth said, “it’s a little like living in two parallel universes. There are similarities—like, I’m allowed to watch *Jeopardy!* at both places, because they both know I like it. But they’re different: here everything is old and fragile, and at Mom’s everything is stained and cushy and bright-colored.”

Tatiana looked intently at him. “Which do you like better?”

“I couldn’t really say,” Kenneth said. “One’s not better than the other; they’re just different.” He thought of his father in the dark study.

Tatiana nodded and picked at the grass. “My mom died when I was four,” she said.

“Really?” His mother had told him that it wasn’t okay to ask about people’s parents when they didn’t have what she called (not without resentment) a “typical situation.” But Tatiana did not seem very typical to him, and she’d asked about his parents, so he broke his mother’s rule.

“What happened?”

“Cancer,” she said. Kenneth knew a little about that. His grandfather—his mother’s father—had died from cancer the year before. He remembered seeing him lying in hospice, without his dentures, mouth caved in like a ghoul. It was one of the scariest sights of his life. His mom and aunt had kept saying that the hospice was where angels took people away. But Kenneth knew about angels, knew about the Renaissance angels of Europe and the strange promiscuous gods of Greek and Roman history. He didn’t know which of these would come for his grandfather.

“Cancer is a terrible thing,” he said. How obvious. He was not good at emotional conversations like these; he hoped the subject would turn toward something familiar for him.

“Yes. That’s what they protect me from,” Tatiana said.

“Who?”

“The gargoyles.”

“I’m sorry,” Kenneth said sincerely. He felt flustered and eager to placate her. “I—I’m glad we got to hang out together today.”

Her face softened. “Yes, it is nice to have someone around my own age. Even if he is a know-it-all.” Before he could be offended, she leapt to her feet. “I forgot. Let’s walk around and look at the flowers.” She pranced away before looking back at her bewildered cousin. “Are you coming, Kenneth?”

Despite the accusation of being a know-it-all, Kenneth was excited to look at flowers. He even ventured a rare and rather uncharacteristic joke: “Horticulture is one of my budding interests.” She laughed a dorky, honking laugh that made her nostrils flare, which pleased Kenneth extraordinarily. They talked about the flowers, Tatiana describing the fairies that lived in them and Kenneth providing their Latin names. They passed a half hour or so like that, settling comfortably into the hot afternoon.

As the sun started to settle lower in the sky, a rusted red pickup truck rolled into the driveway. There were twisted pieces of metal in its bed, which Kenneth presumed would have to be prepared somehow before they could be set out in the garden or the sales floor of the shop.

Tatiana’s father, George, climbed out of the driver’s seat.

“Hi, Mr. Hobensack,” Kenneth said. He had always liked George because he treated Kenneth with tremendous respect.

“Kenneth,” he said, with a deep nod. He reached down for a handshake. “Always a pleasure to see you, my young friend.” He squatted down to talk to Tatiana. He poked her in the shoulder. “You showing Kenneth the ropes, sweet pea?”

“Of course,” Tatiana said. “I showed him the gargoyles and the fairies and all the flowers you planted.” As she told him about their afternoon she spoke with freedom and pride, and George was intent on every word, smiling and laughing when he was supposed to.

Kenneth thought about sitting with his parents as they bickered loudly in a restaurant. He was very young then, but still remembered the confusion and embarrassment of those times.

Last year Kenneth and his mother had gone on vacation together to Honduras. He was tremendously interested in marine life, and he’d researched all the fish beforehand. He had also read about the coral reef itself, which was protected by the government. They were given heavy plastic flippers and snorkeling masks, and the two of them had waded out from the beach and swam a hundred yards or so to the beginning of the lush reef. Kenneth did not remember very many fish, just the anxiety of trying not to let his flippers touch the reef, to not let any of it die.

What is a sea anemone?

Inside, Kenneth's father was doing a jigsaw puzzle on one of the large, low tables. It was a French painting, an impressionist one.

"That's 'Garden at Sainte-Adresse,'" Kenneth said, examining the box.

"It is! Where'd you learn that?" His father looked quite surprised.

"*Jeopardy!* I also learned about Medusa. I noticed you have a statue of her in your hallway." He bent forward, seeing if he could glimpse Medusa from where he stood, but he could not. "I used to think she was really scary. But not so much when she's made out of stone. She must have looked at herself in a mirror."

Tatiana's sonorous laugh rang out, but his father just smiled wryly.

"Time to go," Kenneth's mother said. "Thanks, John."

"Alice," his father said. He reached for Kenneth's hand, an awkward high-five.

Kenneth clambered back into the stifling backseat of the van, buckling his seat belt. He thought about what Tatiana had said, about importing statues from around the world that were so big and heavy some of them had to be brought over on boats. He thought of Ferdinand Magellan snaking through the Strait; of Vasco de Gama rounding the robust tip of Africa, his mind swirling with the scent of foreign spices. He thought about the trade winds that blew ships back

and forth, brought people from here to there, bringing them together and pulling them apart again. He thought about the gargoyles that sat in the warehouse, guardians he was afraid to touch.

A breeze ruffled Tatiana's blondish hair as she stood with her blackened feet on the hot asphalt, raising a hand in a dignified salute, as if he were departing on a grand adventure. He watched her and the statues in the garden as they turned out of the drive.

Collisions

It was the third week of September and the heat had finally broken; there was a hint of a chill in the air. Charlotte felt the cool dusk rush by as she cycled down Smith Street. She'd gone to the bicycle shop on her way home from class, where they had adjusted her seat; now, she sat high above the road, pumping her legs confidently and gaining speed. The sun set behind the buildings of the medical school and cast the evening in a honey glow.

She pedaled past the Laundromat and toward the private school. She was already thinking ahead to her arrival, to her roommates, who would already be home. She'd have to avoid them, probably, because they'd had an argument at lunch about the temperature of the apartment. Why, she had asked Daisy, does it have to be literally sub-zero in here? Why do you sleep like a bear? Which actually, as Liz had pointed out, had been a pretty rude and unnecessary comment. Considering it was just a disagreement about the thermostat. To which Charlotte had replied,

don't even get me started Liz, if you wake me up one more time before 8 a.m. with the blender I'm gonna lose it, I swear.

The whole thing had devolved into a huge fight. So now, awkward coming home. This annoyed Charlotte, because they had gone to the grocery the day before, and she had ingredients to make molasses cookies--her specialty. She didn't feel like being trapped in her room by the glares and murmurs of her roommates, ostracized from the kitchen and other common spaces. She hoped the smells of baking sugar would soften them; if not, she would bring the cookies to the Student Government Meeting. She imagined Roland--SG President and dreamboat--taking a bite of one, eyes rolling back in his head in pleasure. Seriously Charlotte, this is like the best cookie I've ever had in my life, imagination Roland said, and imagination Charlotte (who was so much sharper than her real counterpart and always knew what to say in situations like these) would say something to the effect of, more where these came from if you make me your main lady, huh huh. But in an endearingly dorky voice, so he knew she was kidding, knew she had a sense of humor as well as domestic sensibilities. This scene played in Charlotte's head as she coasted toward Radcliffe Street.

A few blocks away, Jake steered his Jeep with one hand. His mind, too, was already at his house. He had seven Busch Light cans left--well, six, he couldn't count the one sweating in

his cupholder which was half-empty--and there was a pledge keg later tonight. Where Toni would be. His heart did an embarrassing lurch, despite being nineteen and in a frat, despite being much cooler than the eleven-year-old kid he was when his heart did that for the first time. He wondered what he would wear, given the fact that none of his clothes were clean, but he shooed that aside and thought instead of Toni. He thought about her dark red hair and the freckles on her shoulders, about the drops of sweat on her hairline when she danced in the two-thirds-dark of the bar. He let his mind linger on that image as he drove through the dazzling evening into the night that lay ahead.

Charlotte rode a purple bike with a silver basket that was attached to the frame with Velcro. It was kind of amazing, she often noted, how that basket never got stolen--considering how easy it would be to just take it right off. Now, the weight of her backpack in the basket made it list to one side, the Velcro making a little ripping sound. She was also wearing a knee-length flowy skirt, which started to flap up in the wind. She reached a hand down to hold it against her leg and the weight of the backpack, no longer countered by her steering hand, caused the bike to swerve into the intersection.

It wasn't a loud crash; there was a momentary screech of tires and a thud where Charlotte hit the grill of the car. She had enough time for a faint, silver glimmer of panic before she fell unconscious.

Jake, though, watched it unfold in slow motion. He watched the girl on her bicycle veer in front of the car, felt all his mass move into the foot on the brake, felt the tires skid and the steering wheel worrying itself under his hands.

When they were kids, Jake's younger sister, Isabel, had fallen out of their tree house and broken her leg. She was very small, only about six or seven, and she laid there with her little bird limbs out at weird angles and she was wailing and wailing; there were no tears, just screams that tore out of her chest. Jake had stood there on the back lawn, bare dirty feet suddenly too heavy to lift. In a kind of childish denial he had waited, waited for a grown-up to show up or for Isabel to get up and say Just kidding! which had never happened, and he'd eventually had to run inside for Mom.

He looked at Charlotte now through the windshield with that same juvenile, fearful paralysis. She had landed roughly on one side, her arm pinned under her and head lolling sharply on her neck. The bike's one wheel was still spinning, though its metal frame was bent and badly scratched. Charlotte was motionless except for the feeble lift of her skirt in the wind. Jake stared

at her for a second, foot still on the break. He was pretty sure he'd seen her before. Inwardly he swore, wondered if she was dead, felt his heart palpitate.

Finally, he jolted into action. He threw the car in park, turned it off, flung open the door and leapt out onto the asphalt, nearly turning an ankle in his haste. He started to rush for the girl, then stopped: Who had seen what happened? Who would see him dealing with it now? He darted back to the car and grabbed the beer can and chucked it with a forceful no-nonsense underhand onto a lawn nearby. His heart panged with guilt again at this act, at choosing it over the girl lying in front of him. He was nineteen and he might have killed someone and he was drinking. He went over to her, only a few yards away from the Jeep, and as he drew closer the terrible brush burn on her leg and her face came into focus where she had skidded against the asphalt. He tried frantically to remember first aid skills from tenth grade health class. He squatted down and went through it in his mind: first check the pulse, or is it the breathing, but he couldn't touch her, because he was afraid he would cry or vomit. He whipped his head around, searching for someone. For anyone.

A woman had emerged from her house at the sound of the crash and he saw her rush out onto the lawn, assess his wringing hands and the strange geometry of their respective vehicles, and dart back into the house. He put his palm near Charlotte's mouth and felt a hot, slim thread of air emerge. Then a flood of relief. The wheel of her bicycle had stopped spinning.

Charlotte woke now, just barely, but her body was leaden. She had never felt her limbs so heavy and immovable. It was like someone was lying on her, pinning her down. She flexed a calf muscle. Searing pain. She had never felt pain like this. The side of her face burned. She heard a distant groan. Was that her? Was she the one making these animal sounds? A breeze brushed her thigh. She hoped no one could see her underwear.

Jake's eyes welled with relieved tears. She was alive. He was so glad that she was alive. He watched her stirring and frantically implored, *No no, don't move, just stay still. Please stay right where you are.* He might have said this out loud or he might have just thought it at her, putting his hand out as if to keep her from moving but still afraid to touch her, even the ostensibly unharmed arm folded across her chest. He strained his ears for the sound of her ragged breaths, counting each one and praying that she was okay. Counting and praying: five, six, seven.

The police finally came. He had never been so happy to see adults in his life.

A few hours later, in the hospital, Charlotte awoke again. Disoriented and groggy, she experimentally lifted a finger, then her right hand. It seemed to go okay and she looked down at her fingers. They wiggled normally. She looked over to the other hand. That one, not so hot. It was the ugliest bruise she'd ever seen. It was already turning slightly green, the skin mottled and puffy under the brush burns. Carefully she moved to flex her left wrist. An explosion of pain,

blinding throbbing pain, shot up all the way to her shoulder and she winced. Her left leg seemed to be in about the same condition, also covered with brush burns and ripening bruises. She lifted her chin a little to appraise the hospital bed and flimsy blue patterned curtain that separated her from the rest of what she guessed was the emergency room. There was no one around her bed, but she could hear voices murmuring, more than one, some nurse-sounding and some patient-sounding. Her throat was dry as dust and she swallowed, tasting blood. Had she lost a tooth? An exploratory probe with the tongue: no, no, everything normal, tooth-wise. Thank goodness. Though she was so thirsty.

She vaguely remembered what had happened--one second, she'd been riding home, and the next she was lying on the street with Jake Mitchell over her. He was the one that hit her. Oh, God. What a disaster. Through the haze she tried to imagine what Jake was feeling. Was he hurt? She didn't think so. Feeling guilty, she bet. She was angry, she guessed, but it was too hard to muster that beyond the throbs on her left side and the persistent sear of the brush burns. She wasn't sure he would know who she was.

A nurse interrupted Charlotte's reverie by peeking her head through the crack in the curtains.

"Hi, Charlotte," she said softly.

"Hi," Charlotte croaked. "Can I please have some water?"

“Of course, honey.” The nurse was an older lady, maybe Mom’s age. “I wanted to ask you if you’re up for seeing visitors.”

Being about a zillion miles away from Indiana, Charlotte pushed down the blooming hope that it would be her mother. “Who?” she said. “Police?”

“A young man named Jake Mitchell,” the nurse said. Seeing her reticence, she hurried to add, “If you aren’t up to it, I’ll tell him you’re still asleep.”

Charlotte thought about Jake in the living room, head in his hands, thinking she was dead or braindead or some weird leg thing that she would need to get amputated. “No, that’s fine. He can come in.” She shifted. “Um, what’s wrong with my shoulder?”

The nurse gave her a sympathetic grimace. “Dislocated. Doctors need you to be awake when they reset it. Sorry about that. We’ll keep you doped up.” She smiled reassuringly and ducked back out of the curtains.

A moment later she was back, with a plastic cup of water and Jake in tow. He looked the youngest Charlotte had ever seen him, far from his cocky posturing in class and at frat parties. He’d been crying and his hair was pushed up in the front. When he saw her lying there, he almost started crying again.

“Jesus,” he said. “I am so, so sorry.”

She looked so small, set back in the hospital bed against the white sheets, the skin that wasn't bruised a sickly yellow. Her cheek was angry and red and her left eye was swollen partially shut. Jake didn't know what to say, other than to apologize. So he did. He swallowed tears and looked at her. Thankfully, she just looked back at him neutrally, blinking slowly, saying nothing.

Monday came and a nervous dread settled over Jake. He tied his shoes in the morning and walked out of his apartment, feeling his roommates' eyes on his back. He did not take the Jeep with its dented grill but set out to walk to class. He gave the intersection of Smith and Radcliffe a wide berth, walking a block out of the way. He thought the twenty minutes would help him to clear his head, but all he thought about was who knew what had happened and what they might say. Each of his steps took tremendous effort.

When he crossed the street and walked through the gates into campus, he immediately spotted a few of his fraternity brothers. He pretended he did not see them and strode purposefully towards the brick classroom building, but one of them, Roland, called him over.

"Mitchell," he yelled. "Come here for a sec."

Jake sighed. He hated being called by his last name. Why didn't anyone listen when he told them that? He shrugged and gestured towards the building. "Sorry man, I gotta get to class."

Roland, that asshole, checked his watch. “Nah, bro, you got like, eight minutes still. Just come here real quick.”

Jake went over reluctantly. He took a deep breath, readied himself, and sure enough--

“Is it true, dude? What happened with that girl?” Roland and the two other boys he was with stared at him, silent and intent.

“What do you mean?”

“We didn’t see you the whole weekend. We heard you hit some girl with your Jeep.” This was one of the guys Jake didn’t know very well, and he seethed inwardly at his boldness. Who was this kid? Some freshman pledge? But he couldn’t react like that, outwardly, anyway.

“Yeah, man. It was an accident but it sucked. She was riding her bike and, like, veered into the intersection. But she’s fine; I mean, she’s out of the hospital and everything... I can’t actually really talk about it, since I’m still going through it with the police.” His pulse sped and he worried they knew about the drinking.

“The police?” Roland looked sympathetic but also vaguely satisfied to hear the story firsthand. “Damn, dude. That’s so heavy. I’m glad she’s okay, though.”

Roland sighed. “Yeah. Sorry, I gotta meet my professor, so... See you guys at chapter.” He turned around and didn’t wait for their reactions.

Sitting in class, he couldn't get the interaction out of his head. The guilt came over him in waves, despite all the rationalizing he'd done over the weekend. Yes, she had swerved in front of his car. No, he hadn't had time to react. But he had also been drinking, a fact which the police hadn't found out yet, and he didn't plan to tell them—he was underage, and a DUI would ruin his life. Still, did that mean it was his fault? He felt like the three beers he'd drank the afternoon of the crash were still pulsing in his veins, making him sweat.

His French professor was teaching them the phonetic alphabet. They translated nonsense sentences like, *L'odeur du beurre me donne mal au coeur* ("the smell of butter makes me heartsick") and *Mon coiffeur a peur des ascenseurs* ("My hairdresser is afraid of elevators"). He got that they were just trying to get the sounds right; still, why couldn't there be sentences that made sense? Why couldn't anything make sense to him, now?

When he left class, he saw Charlotte in the quad. She stood in a cluster of girls, left side of her face still contused and swollen and her arm in a sling. She was wearing long jeans to hide the bruises on her legs. His heart panged and he had to look away. Thankfully, she didn't see him.

Charlotte was sore and tired but she could not break free of the group of girls around her. Some were her close friends, but the others were acquaintances at best, people that wanted to

bear firsthand witness to the spectacle. Her face flushed as they stared at her, causing her injuries to grow hot.

“Oh my God, are you okay?” one girl asked sympathetically.

She forced a smile. “Yeah, I’m fine! Seriously. It’s not a big deal.”

“It is a big deal, though.” The girl put her hand out dramatically and rested it on Charlotte’s good forearm. “You’ve been through so much.”

“Let us know if there’s anything we can do for you,” another said, tilting her head to the side and frowning in exaggerated sympathy. “Even, like, just lending an ear!”

“So who hit you?” one girl blurted, and the rest looked sideways at her in annoyance. Still, they kept silent, awaiting her answer.

Charlotte breathed in and out. “Um, it’s just some guy from Kappa Sig. It’s really not important. I mean--he was in his car, he didn’t like... It was an accident.” She understood the importance of remaining calm when she talked about Jake, ignoring the resentment that seethed like a current under her scalp.

“I heard it was Jake Mitchell.” The girl’s friends now turned to glare at her. Charlotte knew they had been trying to feign ignorance, whether out of respect or to hide the extent of the rumors.

“It was an accident,” she reiterated. “But yeah. We’re cool, though.” She gave a tight-lipped smile and hoisted her backpack up, shouldering past the group. Rumors confirmed, they were appeased and left her to walk to class alone.

Jake sat in World Politics and reflexively looked towards the front left corner of the classroom. Sure enough, there shimmered the back of Toni’s head, her red hair falling straight down her back. Usually she came over to say hi to him before class started, but now she stayed resolutely turned towards the blackboard.

He approached her after class ended. “What’s up, Toni,” he intoned. His voice cracked on the *i*, like an embarrassing fourteen-year-old.

She looked at him coldly. “Hi, Jake.”

He was surprised by this reaction but decided to keep going. “Uh, how was your weekend?”

Toni sighed. “Look. I’m not really the type of person who can do the, like, small-talk thing. Can you just tell me if it’s true?” She looked down at her sandals.

He thought about telling her he didn’t know what she was talking about. But his secret and his shame made his throat burn and constrict. “It was an accident.” It sounded mechanic from repetition.

“So you weren’t drunk?” She stared him right in the eye.

He was taken aback. “I--no. What?” There were two or three other people dragging their feet leaving the classroom and he wanted them to hurry up. He mentally accused them of stalling by slowly putting things in their backpacks.

“Roland told me that y’all were drinking before you left his house on Thursday. Isn’t that true?”

“No, well--I...Look. It was an accident. Neither of us was paying attention.” The sudden turn was nauseating. If Toni knew, then others knew, others would think of him as the villain. Would it get back to the police? He didn’t think so, but couldn’t tell. He wanted to kill Roland.

Toni’s eyes glinted like sun on steel. “Whatever, Jake. I just think that’s really irresponsible. And I hope that girl is okay. I don’t know how you can make it seem like it was her fault.”

She turned promptly on her heel and left the classroom, leaving Jake reeling and blinking stupidly. The smell of lavender lingered after her.

After her shower Charlotte dried off gently, patting gingerly over the bruises with her towel. She pulled on the pink plush bathrobe her mother had given her and cinched it gratefully. Instead of looking in the mirror, she stared at her feet. The right one still looked pretty nice and

her toenails held her manicure, a summery pink-orange. She smoothed medicated lotion onto her abrasions, per the hospital nurse's gentle instructions.

Her bruises were blooming, deepening, purpling--but she knew that to be a good sign.

She went into the hallway and passed Daisy and Liz, who peeked furtively out of their rooms. They were constantly checking on her, the thermostat/bear/blender fight forgotten.

Logging onto her computer, she felt dread accrete in her stomach upon seeing notifications from Facebook: messages of well-wishes, some even from Jake's friends, some defending him and others ostensibly taking her side. There was a long message from a girl named Toni that she did not open. She wished, fervently, that he had been a stranger, that the blame and fury she still could not suppress could be placed square and guilt-free on someone else: someone that she would not have to face, every day, and pretend she felt nothing aside from the sting of her injuries.

She remembered when Daisy's dog had died last summer and almost laughed, noting the parallel between these people's sympathy for her and for Ranger. The messages were really almost the same.

Now Daisy came into her room, knocking tentatively on the partially-open door and sticking her head in. The look of concern made Charlotte nauseous.

"Hey. You can come in."

Daisy sat down at the foot of Charlotte's bed. "You doing homework?"

Charlotte let out a snort-laugh. "Actually, I got extensions on a lot of my stuff. Professors feel bad. You know. But I just want to go back to normal." She tried out a joke: "I thought if you got hit by a car you got straight A's for the whole semester."

Attempting levity, Daisy laughed, too. "If I were you, I'd milk it for all it was worth."

Charlotte appreciated the humor, was grateful for a break from the attention.

On Tuesday, Jake and Charlotte sat on opposite sides of the precinct. They were both alone; neither had wanted friends for support—Charlotte because she wanted to get things over with as quickly as possible, and Jake because he was afraid one of them might mention the beer. The thought festered in his mind, spread like a disease into his subconscious thoughts. People looked at him differently, now, as the rumors of the alcohol spread. He hadn't heard what people were saying, really, apart from what Roland and Toni had told him. Still, he felt the heat of their judgment on the back of his neck when he walked through the quad. He had dreams about fiery wrecks, ten-car pileups, waking from a blackout to find blood on his sleeves.

They hadn't talked since the hospital, not to discuss a story, not to apologize. He knew they would tell the police the same thing and he would not utter a word about anything before the moment of impact. He could only hope that would be enough.

The next day on her way to the Student Government meeting Charlotte passed Jake in front of the dining hall. He strolled with a group of his brothers, she with a clump of chattering girls. Their eyes met, but both quickly looked away. Each heart seized with fear.

Years later, when Charlotte was married and dealing with the broken arms and scrapes of her own children, she would think of Jake and his Jeep and feel a surge of regret come over her like a shadow, ashamed that she had told the police the rumors about the beer.

Jake would think about Charlotte often, too, about the shiver of her skirt in the breeze and the way she kept her eyes on her cell phone as they sat across from one another in the police station.

Roger, Newly Coronated, Surveys His Kingdom

Roger stood in the kitchen in front of the open refrigerator, feeling the cool air spill onto his bare feet, wondering what to eat. It was late summer and hot outside; all the lights were off in the house and the air conditioner gave a sinister hum. Roger's mother was asleep, as usual, in the back bedroom, though it was midday.

Brotherhood was serious business, especially big-brotherhood. Roger understood this deeply, and he relished his role as oldest. He knew that lunch for Max and him would be his own responsibility, but the fridge's contents were sparse. Sighing, he pulled out Grey Poupon mustard and provolone cheese and roast beef. He also withdrew the bread, a nearly-moldy pumpernickel, down to the ends of the loaf.

The screen door opened at the front of the house and Roger darted out to meet his younger brother, Max.

“Halt yourself,” he said somberly. “No tracking sand into the house or Mom will have our heads.” He liked to make things life-or-death.

At seven--two years younger--Max did not. “But she’s asleep,” he whined. “There’s barely any sand on my feet, even.”

“I can see it from here. Go hose off.” Then, sensing Max’s defiance: “Go!” He was a ruthless ruler.

His younger brother groaned and retreated back onto the porch towards the hose.

Roger went back to the kitchen and made his sandwich with deliberate movements.

Though he was not partial to pumpernickel or roast beef, it was his father’s favorite lunch; these ingredients were some of the few left in the fridge after Dad’s passing several weeks ago. Mom hadn’t gone grocery shopping in a long time and the neighbors’ goodwill, materialized in the form of casseroles and frozen meatballs, had begun to run dry.

Max came into the kitchen. “You know, that doesn’t taste the same as regular mustard.”

He tried to sound experienced and wise as he gestured toward the Grey Poupon. “I tried it once.”

“I know what it tastes like. I like it.” Both brothers knew it was a lie, but lately Roger had been adopting many of Dad’s old habits. He’d had a growth spurt that summer and stood a full head taller than Max, tall enough now to see over the counter and reach the cabinet where Mom

stored the plastic plates and glasses with acorn decals on them. He busied himself with setting the table.

“Did you make me a sandwich, too?” Max asked timidly.

“You can have half.”

“Can I have your pickles?”

Roger liked dill pickles; his father had preferred the sweet bread pickles, which Roger found disgusting. “Yes, I suppose you can.” He was also a merciful ruler.

The two brothers sat across from each other, each with a tall glass of orange juice in an acorn glass.

“Let’s go back to the beach,” Max said. “It’s boring here. And too quiet.”

“Go ahead to the beach if you want to.” Roger forced a swallow of the dry pumpnickel.

“Sheesh. Needs some sauerkraut.”

“You don’t even like sauerkraut,” Max accused. “I don’t want to go by myself. I want to go with you.”

“It’s too hot and my book will get sandy,” Roger replied. He tried on a new word: “The granules get in the crease of the pages and it makes a weird sound.”

Max pouted. “Kay, fine, then. I have stuff to do anyway.”

But he did not really have stuff to do, which both boys knew, so Max didn't move.

Mom's snore mixed with the purr of the air vents over the table and Roger felt a chill pass over his sunburned skin. The truth was that he did not want them both to be gone if his mother woke up. Though it was small, the house felt loose, like a too-big pair of pants, and Mom wasn't good when it got that quiet. Dad, even drunk Dad, had lent the house a pulsating energy that they all missed.

Finishing his sandwich, Roger wiped his hands on his swim trunks. "Okay, I guess we can go to the beach. But if we see any lights turn on, we come back."

They lived on the Eastern shore of the Chesapeake Bay, and their tiny split-level was on Beach Road. A gravel driveway led from their porch to the street and from there it was only twenty yards to the sloping beach. The two boys stepped carefully over the gravel and across the street, eyes scanning for nails, which their father had assured were not only plentiful but sure to cause tetanus. Though neither of them were certain what tetanus was, they were not soon hoping to find out. The smell of baking asphalt gave way to a slick, sweet salt smell—the bay at the peak of the afternoon. This late in the summer, the water was filthy and lukewarm, and it was not uncommon for dead things to wash up in the froth along the shoreline. The brothers found an isolated spot and dropped onto the sand, without towels or beach toys. Roger thought himself too

old for any of that and Max did whatever his brother did. Dad used to bring a Frisbee to the beach with them, but the brothers fought too often now to play together by themselves.

Roger looked out over the jetty. The boys were not allowed to swim too close to it or climb on the rocks because Dad had also warned them about water snakes. Roger suspected, now, that most of Dad's warnings were about mythical things—snakes, rusted nails—in order to enforce Mom's rules. But now his father's warnings took on a leaden significance and he dared not disobey, even if he thought they weren't true.

He opened his book, a biography of Henry VIII. This book heightened his enjoyment of status as older brother because he fancied himself something of a king figure. A precocious reader, it was not the first book he'd read about the British monarchy, and the literature informed much of his behavior toward Max. He felt a sovereign entitlement to Max's belongings, helping himself to new toys or even hand-me-downs he'd already bequeathed to his younger brother. Max's friends, especially, were subject to Roger's whims. Earlier that summer, before Dad died, Max had invited a pair of twins from his class, Ava and Noah, over for a play date. It was a very big deal, in his first-going-on-second grade circle, to capture both twins at once and Max had been looking anxiously forward to their visit for nearly two weeks. Roger, having a keen eye for his brother's excitement, decided to join the trio on the day of their sojourn with a spark of avarice in his eye.

In an effort to get the bunch out of the house, Dad had permitted all four children to walk the three blocks to the Catholic school, where there was a playground and a small soccer field. On the south end of the field there stood a large wooden structure that may once have been a lookout for football referees but now served as the slightly older crowd's jungle gym. Max, being seven and eager to prove himself to Ava and Noah (who, thus far, had been starstruck by the attention of the soon-to-be fourth grader in their midst), had struggled up the structure and cheered down to them from the top. However, he'd then watched helplessly as Roger whispered persuasively to the twins. All three of them had taken off, sprinting towards home with gleeful shrieks stinging the air in their wake. Monarchical. Dad had been able, mostly, to inhibit these vicious streaks; but with him gone, Roger was more nefarious than ever, needing to bully his brother to quell something else, deep and insurmountable.

Now, Max napped; his eyes drooped closed as he lied back on the sand. Roger felt the ugly thing well up in him, the need to assert his dominance. He dropped his book and stood up. The sun had dropped a bit lower and shadows stretched across the beach, long and ominous. He dug his heels in and raked his fingers through the sand, picking at little dried seaweed clusters and shell fragments and tossed them in the air, secretly aiming for Max but not throwing them too close. He felt restless and bored and wicked. The Osprey pattered by, a shuttle that drove the loop from Beach Road to Main Street. He and Dad used to ride the Osprey to Durdling's Ice

Cream Shop and drink root beer floats on Sundays. Now, he could have ridden it alone if he wanted to, but he didn't want to go by himself, and he wouldn't dare let Max join in the tradition.

To entertain himself he imagined what he might do later: tell Mom that Max hadn't been wearing sunscreen, or dump some sand onto her carpet and blame it on him. But he knew she would not care, that she would not get angry at Max at all, that she would just cry and hold his little head against her belly and his brother's eyes would be scared and helpless. The image forced him up and he began to pace the beach.

Mom and Dad had been in love, but things had never been purely good. As kingdoms go, theirs was one of instability, whether it was a precarious transfer of power from one monarch to the other or impending doom from neighboring nations. For example, Dad had once come home late and parked, drunk, with one tire on Mrs. Mosser next door's lawn. As retaliation she'd let the air out of that tire. The result was a very public argument on her porch, which Roger and Max had heard all the way from the beach. But things had also not been purely bad. There were the trips to Durdings, family dinners in their little kitchen, watching Dad mow their brown, balding lawn. Dad inflating rafts for the boys to float on the ginger-colored bay. Dad making grilled cheese for Mom as she sat in bed. Dad, Dad.

Roger paced, unruly and anxious. He walked down to the edge of the beach where the dirty water left a latticework of foam on the damp sand. He looked out over the brown bay and saw a large cargo ship going slowly across the horizon. He wished desperately that he could be on that boat, sailing for a new place, exploring new kingdoms where he didn't feel trapped and sad and angry. He continued along the edge of the water until he saw a lump of something a few yards ahead. He smelled it before he saw it: an eel.

The eel had been dead for a few days, and it stunk horrendously. Its eyes were clouded over and rotting, its skin a grotesque, decaying, shimmering green-brown. It was about a foot long and coiled in an unlikely heap, as if its spine was broken. It was partially sunk down into the wet sand. The smell hit the back of Roger's throat and his stomach roiled. It was perfect.

When Max was in first grade he'd begun to take the school bus with the other kids that lived on Beach Road. Though it was his first year at the elementary school, many of the other children in their neighborhood were older; Roger was the next youngest, in third grade at the time. Roger had been ashamed to admit they were related, and he often pretended not to hear or see his younger brother--a game which he jokingly called the "Ghost Game." One day at the After-School Club, where the boys stayed until their mother picked them up, he'd made Max

stand outside so he wouldn't interrupt their game of Mousetrap. The despotic pleasure he felt from games like this were worth the twinge of guilt.

Roger's shunning inspired one older boy, a fourth-grader named Harley who lived around the corner, to contribute to the bus stop bullying. He took to tormenting Max regularly, turning his backpack inside out or trying to trip him while he climbed the steps onto the bus. Max had begged Roger to talk to Harley, knowing he could call off the attack, but Roger had been reluctant to confront a student a year his senior—even though he'd felt it was under his dominion only to persecute Max. One wet morning in early fall, Harley had cackled nastily while stuffing handfuls of damp yellow and red leaves into the back of Max's jacket. Though he usually tried not to, Max began to cry, and when he looked up he was surprised to see Dad standing above them. Dad had stood at a towering six feet, four inches, with a belly so large that as a toddler, Max had once asked if he was pregnant. The belly was round and hard from years of drinking, defying logic by sitting sturdily atop his spindly legs. It jutted out so that he could cross his arms and rest them on it, which he'd done then.

“Hello, son,” Dad boomed, looking down his big nose at Harley, who immediately stepped back.

“Hello,” he'd said uncertainly.

“I see you’ve met my youngest, Maxwell.” Dad clapped Max on the shoulder, nearly causing him to topple over. “Good kid.” He didn’t take his eyes off Harley. “I’ll be right inside there”--he jerked his thumb over his left shoulder back to the sunroom window, which offered a view of the bus stop corner--“just keeping an eye on things, case anyone should need me.

Anyone think of a reason I might need to meander back out here?”

Everyone looked at Dad. Harley shook his head almost imperceptibly.

When Dad had shuffled back up the front walk into the house, undoubtedly hungover but still hulking and all-powerful, Harley had hissed at Max, “Need your old man to fight your battles?” But he hadn’t bothered him again. The borders of the kingdom remained secure.

Now, with Harley and Dad both gone, it was Roger’s duty to be Max’s adversary. He wanted to be the one to inherit the house, to be Mom’s keeper, but was at the same time resentful of the responsibility. The tension made him crazy. He stomped up to the tall marsh grasses, looking around for a tool. He found a broken zig-zagged tree branch; it was a sharp angle but it would serve his purposes. He picked up the thicker end and went back down the slope of the beach to the eel.

Using the stick as a skewer he jabbed at the dead creature with considerable effort. It was not heavy but very slippery, and it took him several tries to impale it with the branch. Once it felt secure, he hoisted it like a bayonet and marched towards his younger brother.

As he walked he envisioned in his mind the times when his parents had taken Max's side, had blamed him for not sticking up for his brother or for bullying him. He envisioned his parents arguing late in the night, Max awake and thrashing below him in his bunk bed. He envisioned his father on a hospital bed, skin paper-yellow and cracked with spidery blood vessels, Max crying and too scared to come inside. He reached his brother and felt the ugly thing rear its head, fury overtaking him.

“Wake up, infidel!” Roger cried, jabbing the stick out as if to drape the dead, rotting eel over Max's curled legs.

He saw his brother's light eyes widen, felt the purity of his terror, and felt his own chest swell up—he was on the precipice, feeling that hideous malevolence building and building, but there was no Dad to stop him from taking it too far. His lip curled in a sneer. Max whipped his head toward the house, as if waiting for Dad to emerge as his protector, before he remembered and began to cry, his sobs so intense they were mostly silent.

The tears deflated Roger a little; he dangled the eel from the stick, keeping it a few inches above Max's quivering kneecaps. He held still, brandishing the eel, breathing heavily. The flare

of his anger went out slowly, smoking like a bonfire in the rain. Looking down at his hands, he tried to see his father's, rough and reddened from working in the sun, dirt under the nails and embedded in the cuticles. Instead he saw his own nine-year-old hands, small and pale, incapable.

The boys returned to the house as the sun was setting. Roger had thrown the eel sidearm out towards the jetty, where he hoped it would snag on a rock, so that it wouldn't wash up on the beach again. His book was sandy, but he was too tired and sunburned to care. The brothers trooped up the beach to the knee-high hose on the side of the porch. They did not speak to one another. Max's face was tear-stained but he kept his chin up and shoulders back. They were young soldiers, and each felt a strain of duty upon his small shoulders. They went into the house where Mom sat in the kitchen and joined her, wordlessly, at the table as the room darkened around them. No one got up to turn on the light.

Two Weeks' Log for Dr. Abess

Saturday 11/08. Today is my birthday. Feeling bright and normal. I woke before James, my nearly-boyfriend; he was so warm, furnace-like, beside me. I slipped oblong out from my side of the bed and went to the kitchen, treading only on the balls of my feet. I was naked and a chill passed over me, going down between my shoulder blades. I started to make avocado toast, my favorite and James', too, because today I was in a pleasing mood.

He woke up when I came back into the room. James stirs from sleep like a bear emerging from hibernation, a deep rumble-moan emerging from his throat as he stretches. It's one of the moments I love him most, when he is his most base and primitive and wonderful. I stifled a giggle, standing there with the food.

"Oh," he said, one eye cracked open. "Shit. I wanted to beat you awake."

I put the plates down on the bedside table and climbed back in with him, feeling the heat creep up over my goose-bumped arms. He reached over and put his hand on my ribs.

“You can’t beat me awake,” I said. “You know what happens when I drink liquor -- I wake up early, think about my life choices.” Yes, Dr. Abess, I drank last night, because I was celebrating. I didn’t take my Ativan, though, because I remembered you reciting the hazards of mixing the two. Still a star pupil.

I waited for James to wish me a happy birthday, but it was a moment before he spoke again, his breathing heavy and wrist heavy, too, on my side. His thumb nestled between two of my ribs.

“Happy birthday,” he said finally, on an exhale. His eyes don’t open. “You’re my reason...” He trailed off.

“Reason for what?” I’d been waiting for this, the confession. My pulse quickened.

“Reason for being here.” I hoped he meant reason for being here, on this earth, but probably he meant here, as in, my apartment.

We spent the day together, which was blissful -- both of our days off. We walked outside among the flowers at Waterfront Park and ate sandwiches from the deli across from my place.

We walked past the dog park and I said for the thousandth time that I want a puppy, but James

still doesn't think I can take care of one. I suppose you wouldn't, either, since we're still working on the stability issue.

Monday 11/10. It's been cold, which is fine. I do just fine in the cold. I wore the coat my grandmother gave me today. Sometimes I wear it and I feel strange, like I'm her ghost, which I suppose I am. We had--have?--the same diagnosis. Sometimes I'm comforted by that, by the constancy of it, by the fact that I stand on the shoulders of someone who was just as crazy as me. I'm sure you, Dr. Abess, would object to me saying it that way, but that's how I feel. With my bipolar grandmother's coat on I feel I have some semblance of armour. A shell against all the people who are somehow immune to all of this.

It was a workday today. My cubicle is not the absolute smallest, but it is close: it is larger only than Maude's. Maude is the temp and sort of ugly. Once, six months ago, I got fed up with my cubicle and my monotonous work responsibilities and complained to Ted, my immediate supervisor. (This is before I became your patient, Dr. Abess, so forgive me if I did not employ confrontation best practices, as you may have suggested.) He smiled with his mouth and told me that my cubicle was so small because of its proximity to the supply closet. I repressed an ironic

comparison to *his* office, which has actual walls and a window with a view of the parking lot, because I really could not afford to lose the job, so I just nodded and went back to my desk.

Anyway, I still sit in the same spot as when I was first hired. Since it was Monday I had a slow start and elected to play Minesweeper discreetly, leaving a Sales Force tab open for a quick switch in case Ted passed on one of his laps of the sales floor. I also admired Calvin, who sits across the aisle and whose game of choice is Spider Solitaire. He has a crew cut and wears well-fitting suits, though he buys them at Macy's. He also has a nice watch. Today I wondered if his girlfriend gave it to him. Does he have a girlfriend? As my birthday gift James gave me an old Ryan Adams record for which I have no player.

Calvin is so good-looking in that average kind of way. I can't help but suppose he is dating some younger blonde woman. Maybe someone in this very office--Nina, perhaps? She goes to the bar on weeknights. She is undoubtedly fun.

I heard Ted's expensive shoes shushing down my row and shifted stealthily to Sales Force, clicking on Reports and scanning the list of cold calls I had to make. It is the part of my job I hate most and a hollow dread passed under me like an ocean swell. (At the time I did not have the "technique toolbox" you gave me for dealing with stress in an elevated mood. I kicked

myself for having forgotten it at home.) Ted stopped at my cubicle and I waited a beat before looking up, so as to simulate being absorbed in my work.

“Hey, Lil. Looks as if you’ve got some good leads. Why don’t you get a-movin’ on those?” He smiled perfunctorily. “Seems like there’s quite a few numbers there. Might take a couple of hours.”

Nervously, I smiled. “Yep, looks that way. I was just gathering some momentum. You know, getting psyched up.” I borrowed this phrase from one of our conference room meetings. Ted likes to give motivational speeches that motivate no one. They’d be better suited for a high school football team locker room, not an office that sells educational software.

“Well, hey, that’s the spirit we like to hear,” Ted replied, his smile even less authentic. “Off to a good start on your week.” He ambled down the row to stop at Maude’s cubicle.

Calvin leaned conspiratorially into the aisle. “Yeah, get psyched up. Those mines aren’t going to sweep themselves,” he intoned mockingly.

I surprised myself by retorting, “Says the guy who’s losing at Solitaire. Better get psyched up or you’ll have to start a new deck.” I was thrilled when Calvin cracked into a genuine chuckle, but it was followed by a twinge of guilt as I thought of James, who was working a double at the restaurant. Probably not laughing.

“Touche,” Calvin noted, with an exaggerated half-bow in his swivel chair. He turned back to his screen and I found myself staring as he scratched the back of his hand, watch glinting under the fluorescents.

Wednesday 11/13. Today, I exercised after work. I remembered your advice about stopping a depressed mood with endorphins. I counted out my squats and push-ups, dreaming up pool party scenes where a vaguely Calvin-shaped stranger said, “Looking good, Minesweeper.” In an unmistakably complimentary way. It was accompanied with the same playful guilt when James came over afterwards, his feet smelling from the black sneakers he wears to work and his shirt pungent with bar food grease.

Thursday 11/14. Today Nina dropped by my cubicle. (!!!) I think, Dr. Abess, that our sessions have a quite positive effect because previously Nina has not paid me any mind. Certainly I am easier to be around than before; up to now, our interactions--inevitable, as we're in the same department--had been pedestrian and superficial. Today, however, she opened things up by complimenting my shoes.

I said thanks, taken aback. “They were kind of an impulse purchase. I’m actually saving up to go on a cruise.” I was shocked at how easily the outrageous lie materialized. A cruise? With my meager nine vacation days a year, of which I have already squandered four? I worried immediately, Dr. Abess, that this was a sign of an elevated mood, the opening phase of hypomania. Still, there was no turning back right then, so I said: “Probably to Jamaica. All-inclusive.”

Fun Nina, predictably, has been on a cruise before. “Good for you, lady. I’m partial to Nassau and Freeport myself, but it all depends which cruise line you settle on. As long as there’s booze, right?” She gave me a campy, patronizing wink and turned to go back to her cubicle, but looked back over her shoulder with an appraising look. “Hey, I’m having a little get-together next Tuesday,” she said. “Sort of a last hurrah before everyone has to go suffer their families for Thanksgiving.” Conspiratorial look. “If you’re not busy, you should stop by.”

Plans on a Tuesday. I was about to become a fun woman! “Umm, I’ll check my planner.” Oh, dorky. “I mean, I’m pretty sure I’m free.” I’m sure I’m not, actually. James has the night off tomorrow and we had plans to have a movie marathon, but I felt certain in the moment he wouldn’t mind if I cancelled.

Nina gave a generous laugh. “Okay, well, if your planner” (this last word dripped with something vaguely sour) “isn’t too full, you should come. It’s not a work party, but some people from work are invited. I’ll email you my address.” She walked off without awaiting an answer, her stylish slacks swishing down the aisle.

I know that you say comparison is the thief of joy, but in that moment I felt immeasurably small compared to Nina,

Friday 11/15. I was peeling a hard-boiled egg today in the breakroom when I heard someone walk in and caught a whiff of cologne. I didn’t dare turn around until I was sure it was--

“Hey, Lily. You going to Nina’s thing tomorrow night?” Calvin asked.

I paused and turned around, slouching slightly, just oozing casualness. “Oh, I dunno. Got a lot of things going on.”

He smirked. “Oh, yeah? Sweeping mines again?”

I thought there had to be another inside joke between us I could call upon. What else had we talked about? Had we ever really talked before? I wondered about his sudden change of heart.

“Ha, yep, but, you know, I have, like, dinner parties all the time. More fun than our boring co-workers.”

“Oh, yeah? What about the boyfriend from the Halloween party?”

“He’s not really my boyfriend,” I said. “We were just seeing each other for a little while.”

I’ll admit, Dr. Abess, that at that point I started to keep a ledger of my big lies and my small ones. Oh, boy, I thought, if only you were there to remind me about the low return on investment of dishonesty. I think I need a refresher on that at our next appointment.

“I see,” Calvin said, taking an almost imperceptible step closer. He has seashell-white teeth that I tried not to look at right then. “Well, it’ll be fun to hang outside work.” He took a Diet Coke from the fridge.

Why yes, Calvin, it would be fun. I think it would about the funnest thing ever. “Yeah, I guess so.” I shrugged and took a bite of my hard-boiled egg before I realized that it is a disgusting and uncool snack. I raised my eyebrows and turned back to the counter so Calvin didn’t see the searing blush that rose like a rash up from my collar.

Friday, later in the night. I know I am fun, but not in a Nina way, so I have been planning how to present my persona for this little soirée. I am good at picking wines to go with cheeses, so I picked out a bottle at Total Wine. I also have excellent taste in music. Would it be obtrusive, I

worried, to bring over my favorite CD? With your help, Dr. Abess, I truly feel as though I can better perceive how those around me are responding to me and I'd like to make a really altogether great impression at this party. I wonder who will be there, what kind of hors d'oeuvres she'll have. I have wanted for so long to go to a fancy party with hors d'oeuvres.

For a moment, I succumbed to a naughty thought: Calvin and me, in love. I permitted myself to trade places with Nina and made believe it was me hosting the dinner party. In the fantasy I had a cute, shabby-chic apartment and I'd planned a nice menu with simple country dishes that look homey but were, in fact, incredibly delicious. I was wearing irregular and wild pearl earrings that Calvin had bought me and he stood behind me to kiss my shoulder but you see, I had to shoo him away, as I was cooking. I think I even playfully swatted his hand with my spatula--he was trying to steal one of my mouthwatering hush puppies! I shrieked in protest and insisted he go put on Frank Sinatra at the perfect volume. Our friends trickled in, well-dressed pairs.

The embarrassing domestic fantasy made me burn with another guilty flush. James is real and does not like Frank Sinatra and would not know to get me wild unfinished pearls.

In the middle of the night, when I can't sleep--like tonight--I think about James with a critical eye. At first, he seems wonderful and whole, but when I get closer he disintegrates, like a

cloud that looks dense and tangible from far away but is actually just a gathering of close water droplets. My dreams about him are met with gnarled reality and wrestled to the ground every time.

Sunday 11/17. Tonight I went to the grocery and while I was strolling the aisles, I picked up the phone and dialed my mother's home number. She answered on the last ring. As you've reminded me I try not to read too much into that.

"Lillith," she answered cordially. She has a way of trying to make her voice sounds like a Jane Austen character, having been born in London, though, as you know, she lives in Wisconsin.

I'll admit, I bristled a little. "Hey, Mom. You don't need to call me that, remember? I'd really rather you didn't. It's a grandma name." Certainly you might have reminded me of confrontation best practices again here. I exhaled deeply.

"Oh, must you mouth-breathe directly into the receiver? It sounds like a jet plane is passing overhead." Note that she didn't comment on the name. Further proof, Dr. Abess, that she invalidates my concerns.

"You could always turn the volume down."

“I don’t bother with that, dear. I don’t know what all the buttons are.” An auster sixty-six, my mother stubbornly refuses to confess to having any knowledge of modern technology.

Suddenly I became violently averse to having a conversation with her mother but I reminded myself that every other Sunday is our call schedule, so I was determined to follow through. I set my jaw and tried to get back on track. “I’ll try not to produce such deafening quantities of carbon dioxide. What are you up to this evening?” I pulled my shopping card aside next to the cheese wall, deciding.

She told me she had drinks with Charles, her neighbor across the hall.

I snorted. “Is he your gentleman caller now?”

“Oh, please be civilized, darling, I’m not a hussy.” I nearly burst into tears of mirth at that. I made a mental note to tell Dad--it will absolutely tickle him. “He is just a friend. These Wisconsin men are not the caliber for me.

“Mom, you moved there when you were seven,” I told her. “I think you’ve committed to the Wisconsin way.” Speaking of cheese: “What do you think: Brie or Camembert?”

“Well, it depends.” I was proud to hear that she sounded a little impressed. “What for? Certainly you don’t have social plans?”

“I’m going over to someone’s house for dinnery,” I said testily.

“Not a man,” she replied. It did not sound like a question.

I huffed aloud. “Actually, my boyfriend will be there, Mother.” Add it to the list--fake boyfriend. In my mind it was not that much of a stretch--after all, James is all but official, and Calvin wanted to hang out with me outside of work. Only it just occurred to me now--did he mean everyone in the office hanging out?

Before James, my last real boyfriend was senior year of college. We dated for only four and a half months, but after relentless questioning from her parents--whose marriage had long ago been drained of any romantic zeal--I'd lied that we were engaged. During one of my elevated moods, of course, when lying comes easily. Soon enough, my mother found out and dramatically accused me of being a lesbian. The following year, once they'd divorced, there was not so much pressure on me anymore. I hoped she didn't press the issue because I did not want to elaborate on the depressing quasi-relationship in which I currently find myself.

“Well, I'm just thrilled to hear that you're doing something social. It's so good for a young woman to have a man around. That's why I so enjoy my companionship with Charles. Though he'll not be good enough for me it is buoying to have some romantic attention, and you're smart to go out and enjoy some yourself.”

“Yes, I agree.”

She hesitated. “What are you going to wear? It’s a good thing you’re bringing cheese. You just mustn’t show up empty handed.” Her archaic elocution sounded ridiculous cloaked with the vague Wisconsin accent. “Wine, too, dear. He will see what a splendid party guest you are. Perhaps you should host at your apartment! I will send some more darling decorations your way...”

“Oh, that really isn’t necessary, Mom. I gotta get going, I’m checking out.” I reached decisively for the Camembert and a demi-baguette from the adjacent rack. “Talk to you soon? I’ll tell Dad you say hello.”

“Don’t tell him anything. Except Charles. You can tell him about Charles.”

Tuesday 11/19. There was a new moon tonight and it was very dark as I guided my old car onto Nina’s street. She lives in a quiet neighborhood in a rowhome; I could tell which house was hers because a couple of people had spilled drunkenly onto the second-story balcony.

As I approached the house I felt the pulse of the party. And it was, indeed, a party--not a gathering, not a dinner soirée, but a sloppy and loud party like those I attended my first year at college. I was secretly glad about this because James and I had argued about my going on his

night off. I knocked three times, which yielded no results, so I steeled my resolve and pushed the door open, only to collide with the shoulder blade of a yowling partygoer.

I apologized with my face and navigated the bottle of wine and the cheese platter through the entryway crowd, wondering if I should just bring them back to my car. I felt embarrassed, Dr. Abess, and I was worrying more than I was not worrying. Not a good start.

The kitchen was crammed with people; most of them were about my age, or looked it, anyway, but some looked much older though they were dressed like college kids. The air was stale with smoke and the kitchen island was littered with liquor and beer bottles.

I set my wine down on the table and looked around for anyone I knew. I gave up pretty quickly on the idea of finding Marcy; the crowd was sweaty, huge and hopelessly drunk; even if I spotted her, weaving my way through the revelers would have been a near-impossibility. I was saved from wondering what to do by a tug at my elbow.

“Jen knows how to do it big,” someone bellowed into my ear over the music. A man in his late twenties was leering at me. “Can I fix you a drink?”

I glanced skeptically at the liquor on the counter: Raspberry Smirnoff, malt liquor, Absinthe. “Oh, no thanks. None of that really looks appealing to me.”

He leers even harder. “Oh, you’re one of those, huh? What, you want a pinot noir?” I imagine he thought he was charming or flirtatious when he poked me in the ribs but he used some considerable force. He was drunk and it hurt. When I winced, he laughed. “I’m just joking. D’you wanna take a shot?”

“No, thank you.” This automatic response came up unbidden but I was grateful for the reflex. Then, following an instinct and flopping loosely to lean on the island: “I’m already pretty wasted.”

He put on the predatory grin I recognized well and alarms shot up in my cerebellum. In college there was one night with one certain senior who had glimmering carnivore teeth just like these--

“Hey, babe. Sorry, took me forever to park the car.”

Calvin, sweaty and glowing under the kitchen overhead lights like a professional athlete, still wearing his watch but switching his nice suit for jeans and a button-down. He shouldered his way over, kissed my cheek, and slung an arm over my shoulders.

Then he looked expectantly at my suitor. “Cal. Lily’s boyfriend.” He smiled without teeth.

“Yeah, I was just offering your gal a drink,” the man said, turning away even as he spoke. “Nice little lady.”

“That she is.” Calvin turned his back to the man until he wandered away, dejected.

“Oh my God. Thank you so much,” I gushed. My stomach felt like a blender.

“Don’t sweat it. Guy was being totally creepy. It’s the least I can do. D’you just get here?” He sipped from a red cup and winced a little.

“Yeah. Sotally tober,” I joked. Dorky, dorky! Reign it in! “I actually got high before I left the house, so.” The ledger of big fibs is growing longer by the minute. I have smoked pot exactly twice in my life. But I could tell he was drunk and figured it wouldn’t hurt to seem intoxicated too. I know, Dr. Abess, low ROI on dishonesty. But it was Calvin! I couldn’t help it.

Thankfully, he laughed aloud. The volume was about two notches higher than normal, even in the crowded kitchen. “Niiiiice,” he said, like a frat boy. “Not really my thing anymore, but I respect it. You’re pretty laid-back, huh?”

“Yeah,” I said dumbly. “Pretty much. I’m saving up to go on a cruise.”

At this moment, Nina spotted us and nudged through the mass of people. She looped an arm around each of our necks. She slurred heavily when she bellowed, “Hey guys!”

“It’s the first time we’re hangin’ out outside work,” Calvin said, blinking wetly at her and smiling. I noticed just then that his gums show when he smiles.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” I nodded. I looked around, trying to maintain a casual air. I think my voice was lowered self-consciously in response to Nina and Calvin. I thought of you then, Dr. Abess, and remembered how to conduct myself in a moment of uncertainty. Remove, relax, rethink. “Nina, where’s your bathroom?”

It was about ten minutes later when I emerged from the bathroom, having collected my thoughts a bit. I am ashamed to admit to you that I’d decided to get drunk, and fast, to quiet my thoughts. The drunk girls pounding on the door had interrupted my meditation and made it impossible for me to sort out my mood. When I emerged, I walked straight into the man who had talked to me before, who was tipping his drink all the way back. His throat rippled as he swallowed whatever was in his cup. His grimace afterwards told me it was strong.

I tried to slip past him without being seen, but he grabbed my upper arm roughly.

“It’s you!” he said. His eyes were wet.

“Yeah, me! I’m going back to my boyfriend now,” I said quickly. But he didn’t register my words. His head bobbed along with the loud music, never letting go of my arm. His hair was

thin up close and his skin, slimed with sweat, was splattered with little moles and freckles.

Noticing my gaze he gave me a loose smile and stepped closer. Then his eyes narrowed.

“Can I tell you a secret?”

I didn't move. A little spool of panic unwound in my gut.

“I gotta little bit of a crush on you.” He smiled, this time attempting sheepishness. He went to take a slug from his cup before realizing it was empty. I could see that he was awaiting a response.

Panic turned to real, metallic-tasting fear. “Oh, really? We don't really know each other, though.” I tried to remain calm, Dr. Abess, because that is the rational approach for irrational people, as you say.

“I dunno, somethin' about you,” he slurred. “Maybe your hair. I always thoughts blondes were overrated.” He reached for a strand of hair, but misjudged the distance and nearly inserted his finger into my ear. I leaned away nervously, thankful for my sobriety then.

“Where you goin'?” I thought tonight we would finally hang out one-on-one.” I was amazed at how drunk he was, at how fast whatever he was drinking rushed to his head. The other people in the hallway had begun to drift back into the kitchen and we were nearly alone.

“I'm going to get a drink real quick,” I said, nodding my head towards the crowd.

“No, let's talk. I wanna talk.” He put his drink on the floor and placed a hand against the wall on either side of me. I pressed my back against a closed door on the opposite side of the hall from the bathroom. “Don't you like me? I thought you liked me. I can tell.”

I looked into his face, at the freckles and greasy stubble and parted lips. I tried to draw in my borders so that no part of me touched his outstretched arms. “I don't know you.”

He blinked and inched closer, forcing my legs apart with his knee, pressing it up painfully against her. Desperately I tried another tact. Keeping my voice light: “Maybe we could go get coffee or something, later in the week or on the weekend, I think we could have a lot of fun--”

But his face moved towards me like a train, eyes unfocused, breathing heavy breaths strong enough to get me drunk just by proximity. I tried to make my head sink into my neck and into the quiet dark space between my lungs, where his grinding and panting was a distant echo. Still he came towards me. He scraped his beard against my collarbone, opening his mouth against the side of my neck, his throat making an animal rumble. I tried to make herself as flat as I could.

“Really, I don’t want to do this here,” I said. Ineffectual.

He began to work his way up to my ear, his teeth scraping my cheek. They felt sharp as a shark’s. I tried to put a hand on his chest and push back but he grabbed my wrist--with surprising speed for someone so drunk--and yanked it down. He had my hands tucked behind me against the door and frantically I felt around for the knob. He almost had his full weight pressed into and onto me then, supporting himself with one hand against the door and one hand pinning one arm to my side. With the other I found the knob; with an experimental twist, I discovered it was unlocked.

My heart pounded as I yanked the door open behind me and scrambled back.

The man took one lumbering step into the room, pushed forward by his own weight but scrambling for purchase by scraping at my arm, which he still gripped. He faltered, took another unwieldy step into the dark room and pitched forward into a glass coffee table. Finally, he let go of my arm, and I darted out of the room. The shatter drew a crowd to the doorway. I didn’t notice

if Nina and Calvin were part of it. I heard his howling and the shocked reactions of the partygoers as I shoved a path through the kitchen and out the door.

Wednesday 11/20. This morning I sat in my cubicle, the moments ticking by ominously. I did not know if Calvin and Nina knew what happened. You see, Dr. Abess, I was concerned that in my elevated mood I had in some way not handled the situation improperly. When I wrote my log last night my emotions were so heightened that perhaps I left something out. Ted came by to ask if I was alright and I just looked up at him, nervously.

I have also been struggling with what to tell James. A small part of me, the part you do not like, is telling me he would be angry at me, that he would believe it was my fault. But that part is small enough to counter. I think I have you to thank for that.

Nina stopped by my desk a little later in the day. “Hey,” she said, strangely. “Is everything all right?”

“Oh, yeah,” I replied, too quickly. “I’m good.”

“Hey, I was pretty drunk but I think I lost track of you last night,” she said. “Sorry about that. Got distracted by this dude mauling some drunk girl. He went through my coffee table.” She rolled her eyes. .

“Oh. Really? Wow. That’s crazy. Yeah, I’m really sorry I lost you,” I said, hoping she’d believe it. My stomach was twisting and I was worrying my words sounded like I was reading from a teleprompter. I needed, more than ever, a good lie. “I actually had a friend in town so, you know, had to entertain. Couldn’t stay too long.” I begged in my brain for her not to ask any more questions.

“Aww, how fun. Well, maybe we can get happy hour sometime soon or something.” Nina smiled and gave a half-wave as she left.

Thursday 11/21. I slept heavy last night, Dr. Abess. At our session on Monday I think I will be down from a peak to a valley, back to a depressed mood. I will talk to you about my dreams, waking in the blue dark before dawn to floods and people getting burned, to parties that are filled with smoke.

Metastasis

At the coffee shop near her house, there was a patio on the other side of a wall of glass doors. She liked to sit out there when the weather was fine. Occasionally she would take a break from her writing to get a fresh cup of coffee, and to save her spot she would leave her laptop and purse sitting at the table. She'd watch nervously from inside the shop, making sure no one stole her things; sometimes she'd test herself, even after they had finished making her coffee, seeing how long she could stand there, feeling the anxiety pass through her like an electrical current.

The day was in the mid-sixties and sunny, so she went to the coffee shop dutifully, turning off her cell phone and resolving to produce something valuable. It was usually an unfruitful venture but she liked the excuse to get out of the house, liked for people to see her bent studiously over her notes and computer. She liked to play the role of the writer and had chunky brown glasses that she hoped looked professorial. Today there were not many people at the coffee shop; she guessed they'd be going to the beach, or walking their dogs. In the warm height of the afternoon she took off her cardigan and let the sun press into her face, the tops of her shoulders.

She walked to Vaughn's house after trying for several hours, in vain, to write some new pages. Vaughn was her fiancé. They had been high school sweethearts until distance ended their affair; then, he had transferred to her college a few years later and they'd took up again. Rediscovered one another. They got engaged after graduation, two years ago, and hadn't yet set a date for the wedding.

He lived in a first-floor apartment with another man, Kendall, who worked at a restaurant and had long, irregular hours. It was a Sunday afternoon so she thought he might be at work serving the early dinner crowd. But it was Kendall who answered the door.

"Hey, Margo. Come on in," he said. He did not show any reaction, happy or otherwise, upon seeing her.

Vaughn was in his bedroom tuning his guitar. A would-be musician, he concerned himself greatly with the upkeep of the guitar, musicianship only incidental to the tweaking and polishing. She knocked on the frame of the door.

He glanced up. "Look what the writer's block dragged in," he said.

"Is it that obvious?"

"No, but it's usually why you show up here unannounced."

The comment stung. "Well, I didn't think it'd matter. I thought Kendall would be at work."

Kendall raised his voice from the kitchen. "Done for the day," he called. "I worked early, dealt with the brunch crowd."

Margo came into Vaughn's room, uninvited, and sat next to him on the bed. Vaughn reached out and touched her knee and went back to tightening the strings of his guitar.

“I’m glad you came,” he said, “because there are some things I’ve been wanting to discuss.”

“Oh,” she said. He was still looking at the instrument resting on his leg.

“I’ve been thinking about the future of things, about my future as a musician and your future as a writer, and it’s clear to me that our artistic temperaments are going to clash. They’re going to cause problems, down the road. At some undefined point in time. It’s inevitable.”

Even in the stab of worry that arose in her chest she thought, *What a cliché. Life imitating art imitating life.*

“So I think we should just deal with those problems now, get them out in the open now. Steer into the skid, as it were. You know what I mean?” Margo had little to no idea of what he meant. “For example, I want children.”

“I do, too,” she said, perhaps too quickly.

“Yes, but I worry that we’re going to disagree on how we should go about that.”

“How to go about having children? I think it’s pretty easy to get started,” she said, moving her hand toward his lap. She sometimes used sex to avoid arguments, thinking it the path of least resistance, or at least a way to delay things a bit.

“No,” he said, taking her hand gently. She was reassured for a second but he placed it back in her own lap. “I don’t think we’ll be able to agree about the children. About school, how they dress, what religion we’ll raise them, whether or not we’ll let them smoke pot. It’s just going to be fight after fight, do you see?”

Becalmed and bewildered, she blinked stupidly. “Don’t you think these concerns are... I don’t know, premature?”

“That’s just the very thing I’m saying,” Vaughn said. His voice sounded like the one he used to talk to young children. “If it’s premature it just means that it will, at some point, be mature. We’ll have to deal with eventually, regardless. And that’s why I don’t think I can marry you anymore.”

She went dazedly back out into the sunny afternoon. There were birds chirping and across from Vaughn’s apartment there was a small park that had numerous university students tossing a frisbee. The scene was incongruous with the internal scene of Margo’s thoughts. She twisted her engagement ring, an unconscious habit that had before not carried much meaning other than calming her nerves; now, however, the motion had weight that made her uncomfortable and sad. She did not know how the conversation had gotten away from her so quickly, how it had become so one-sided. She was aware of Kendall’s presence in the next room. Surely he would have heard everything, but as she was leaving, he simply said, “Bye, Margo.”

Walking numbly, she returned to her house and locked her front door. She lived alone and Vaughn often spent the night; things of his were everywhere, guitar picks, flannel shirts, soy milk cartons, toothpaste. She noted with some alarm that the last time he’d spent the night he took his medicine and toothbrush with him when he left. She had missed an important warning sign. Perhaps, had she noticed this collection of necessities, she might have foreseen the conversation that just took place. But it was too late to wonder about that now.

She had worked, for the past two years, as an admissions counselor at the university. It was an exciting job, one that looked constantly forward, held hope and rejection and uncertainty

and, often enough, joy. Margo loved talking to students at this age, so stubbornly optimistic and self-important, so sure of their worth and place in the world.

That week, she worked after five o'clock several nights, which her boss mistook for commitment to her work. It was the time of year when acceptances and rejections were being sent out and Margo was, gratefully, quite busy. She began walking a different way home each evening, mostly winding, circuitous routes that took three times as long as necessary. She grew unable to stand silence and played music constantly--in her office, through her headphones on the walk home. She called her parents more often.

Gradually, in the way a plant grows surely but imperceptibly, Margo became aware of a change in her body. It began with weight loss, though she hadn't changed her eating; at first she was thrilled, then concerned as it went from five to fifteen pounds that had melted away. She'd heard from friends that this sometimes happened after a breakup, but inwardly she knew that wasn't the cause. There was not great grief or loss eating away at her. Then the vomiting started, each morning: it occurred to her that she could be pregnant, a thought which buoyed her slightly--certainly Vaughn would reconsider, should that be the case.

She went to the doctor two weeks after the sickness manifested itself. Her doctor was not gravely concerned; he was clean and professional, asking questions and nodding at the answers, making notes on his clipboard. His name was Dr. Dhariwal and he had graying hair that grew over the stems of his wire glasses. He did not think pregnancy was a possibility, based on the weight loss.

"Could be an ulcer," he said. He had a very slight, pleasant accent. "Could be that some tumor, abdomen or esophagus, is inhibiting digestion. Are you finding your vomit to be a certain color? Perhaps, the color of coffee grounds?"

The ease with which he made this comparison was very unsettling to Margo. “Oh, no, not that I’ve noticed,” she said.

“I think it best we proceed with a CT scan,” he said. “That will provide us an idea of what’s happening with your blood vessels and soft tissues. I’ll have Dolores write a referral for you; you can grab it when you check out.”

Stomach cancer, she thought as she left his office. What an inelegant thing. Or throat cancer--she was tempted to make this a metaphor for her inability to write, to speak. But it was not.

Later, she called Vaughn.

“Margo,” he said, as if he were reading her name from a phone book.

“Hello,” she replied.

“I didn’t think you’d want to speak to me for a while. I’m surprised you called.” He did not sound surprised, however. Nor did he sound particularly pleased, or upset, or anything at all.

“Well, I’ve actually called to tell you some news. I’ve been to see Dr. Dhariwal and it seems that I might have cancer.”

“Oh my God,” he answered. She was pleased with the urgency in his tone. “What kind? How advanced?”

She remembered, with a tinge of regret, that his grandmother had passed away from breast cancer the year before. She wondered if it was cruel to tell him before she had any new information. Still, her self-pity won out. “Well, they don’t know yet. Maybe stomach or throat cancer. But I haven’t had the, you know, the CAT scan yet.”

There was a pause. “So it might not be cancer?”

“No, I suppose not. But it also might be.”

He sighed deeply. “Well, okay. Do you have someone to go with you to all your appointments?”

“Aunt Sharon may be coming down from Allentown to stay with me for a while. Pending the results of the scan.” The Scan. She mentally capitalized it.

“Okay. I guess, keep me in the loop.”

The outcome of this conversation was not, she realized, what she’d hoped, though she couldn’t say exactly why or what her expectations had been. “I will.”

“Are you doing okay, otherwise?” he asked.

She didn’t know what to say. “As okay as can be expected.”

The day of The Scan came and she went, without ceremony, to the imaging center. It was a squat and ugly building but the inside was comforting, carpeted and well-decorated in earth tones. The receptionist was quiet and friendly and handed her the paperwork with a gentle smile.

She sat in the hospital robe on the edge of the place where she was to lie down. The CT scan machine looked to her like a donut; the molded plastic platform where she would lie would go up and she would move through the hole in its center. Everything was very white and sterile, not like the waiting room. The attendant came in and situated her on the platform, adjusting her arms just so and making sure she was aligned with the grooves of the hard plastic. Margo blinked up at her but the woman, professional as they all were, did not make eye contact. Margo realized how markedly different her job was from this woman’s: while she had hopeful and excited students, this woman was on the doorstep of death, disease, mortality. Her hands were skillful and practiced. The nails were short and clean and manicured, unpolished.

Margo wished she knew the technician's name but she turned quickly and went into a small room separated from the scanner by a glass window before Margo could ask.

Aunt Sharon arrived a week later. She bustled into the room with her bags humming "Night Fever" by the Bee Gees. Margo greeted her with knee-buckling relief. Sharon had raised her since her parents divorced when she was eleven; they'd gone through the toughest years together, teenage malaise and the existential uncertainty of college. Sharon was a hairdresser, pragmatic and no-nonsense when it came to most things--except her relationship with family, where she was prone to sentimentality.

"Well, you certainly haven't kept the place up," she said, not unkindly.

Sharon spent the afternoon tidying Margo's apartment, wiping counters with wipes she'd bought and ironing the curtains, something Margo would never have thought to do. All of Vaughn's left-behind things went into an empty liquor store box, which Sharon had also brought. She was not a drinker but often went to the liquor store and asked for boxes. Margo liked to imagine that had her aunt been a Native American, or a farm wife from a different time, she'd be the kind who used every part of the animal once it had been killed.

"So. The fiancé," Sharon said. She opened a bottle of Riesling at the kitchen counter and poured two glasses.

"The fiancé." Margo sighed. "The ex-fiancé."

Sharon nodded once. "Well," she said with finality. There was no discussion of how long she would stay, of what would have to be done.

Soon she went to the grocery. When she came back, she unloaded the contents of her bags into the refrigerator, humming the whole time, stopping only to kiss Margo's forehead as her niece watched, rapt, from the couch.

On Saturday Margo took the box of Vaughn's things and walked to the coffee shop. She sat with her laptop at a table and set the box across from her. She'd hoped it would give her inspiration. She wanted to write about the pain in her stomach and the strange vacuum in her throat she felt whenever she thought about Vaughn. Or perhaps that was part of the illness. It didn't matter; whatever it was, it did not move her, did not pull aside the veil that blocked the light from which she got her creativity.

She picked up her things and left, leaving the box where it sat. She hoped someone could find some use from its contents.

Tell Me Anything

The night my daughter's best friend died was a clear, otherwise unremarkable Sunday night in early November. It was cold but not unseasonably so; there were no stormy skies or strange spells of humidity or fog. We did not live together then; her college was a twenty-minute drive from where her stepfather, Micah, and I lived. She'd been at our house since the afternoon doing laundry.

She received the call when I was out jogging. I had run a little too far from the house to the bridge over the reservoir, where there was a sidewalk that snaked along the tall chain-link fence. Breathing heavily, wind whipping at my sweaty temples and lifting my hair, I wondered about the fence, wondered about jumpers. I was tired and it was getting dark, and by the time I returned to the house my lungs burned from the cool air and my legs felt weak.

Micah was not there but Willow was, and I remember being struck by the fact that none of the lights were on. I opened the door and called out.

"Hello?"

I heard anguished braying coming from the darkened kitchen. My daughter, ever the dramatist, was crying on the floor in the dark. Though worried, I did not rush to her--I figured maybe her boyfriend, Sahat, had broken up with her. I walked into the kitchen and turned on the

light. My tall, beautiful daughter was collapsed into a fetal position on the hardwood floor, her back hunched.

“Willow. Honey,” I said, sitting next to her, drawing her chin out from between her hands. I could see that she’d been crying for a long time. Her green eyes were flushed through with pink, black lashes clumping together, mascara running onto splotched cheeks. I pulled on her shoulders until she was sitting up.

“Harrison is dead,” she sputtered out. Her forced breaths were somewhere between coughs and sobs and her long face was as disturbed as I’d ever seen it.

I had met Harrison in September, when we took a few of her friends and Sahat out to dinner for her birthday. He was a handsome young man with long, blonde hair and a side-smile that showed his white teeth. He had sat on Willow’s other side and reached up to tug on her earlobe.

I was speechless. My daughter reached out to hug me, letting her forehead fall to the sweaty crook between my collarbone and shoulder. I reached my arms around her, not knowing what to say.

Harrison had, I soon learned, been hit by a car when he was crossing the street. A terrible, sudden thing. Willow couldn’t stop crying when she told me. Harrison’s mother, Eliza, had called to deliver the news and had charged Willow with the duty of informing their other friends. Micah, in his wrinkled suit, came home to find us sitting at the kitchen table and calmly took Willow up to her old bedroom with the landline phone. From the bottom of the stairs I could hear her crying slow as he murmured to her.

“Should I go in?” I asked Micah in our bedroom as I peeled off my workout clothes.

“I think maybe this is something she needs to do alone.” He was seven years older than me and his children were out of college, dating, engaged. As I wrestled with my sports bra he put his hand between my shoulder blades.

Micah was the principle of the elementary school where I taught. We got married when Willow was seven, and he became something better than a father to her: an adult not bound by blood who truly loved her. As he liked to joke, “I’m lucky. We’re not related, so she’s actually allowed to like me.”

I gratefully pressed back into his hand.

“What do I do now?”

“Nothing you can do, really,” he said. “Just hug her. Exist with her.”

In the next hours it became clear to me that I did not know my daughter. She began marching through a series of agonizing phone calls, delivering the news to several students, many of whose names I did not recognize when I held my ear against her door.

Around ten she came out, shuffling down the hallway and climbing onto my bed. Micah was downstairs watching television. Grateful, I wrapped her up in my arms and held her against the fluffy collar of my bathrobe.

“You’re very brave, honey,” I said. I felt her chest heave a little as she cried silently. “I’m sorry you had to do that. Did you tell your friends? Sahat too?”

She sighed a little. “No. I made Bethany call him. We’re not speaking right now.”

She and Sahat had been dating--had dated?--for almost a year. He was very thin and tall; I remember my daughter gushing to me, in a rare moment, about their first date: “Mom, he’s actually taller than me!” At six feet two inches tall, she didn’t meet many young men who could

look her in the eye. Sahat was an engineering major at her college and had come to visit during their summer break. Micah and I liked him tremendously. He had thick black eyebrows that tilted up where they met the bridge of his nose; he always looked friendly, if a bit bewildered.

“You aren’t?” I blinked. “Why didn’t--Are you okay?”

She kept softly crying and snuggling into my robe, putting her long leg across mine. Her face looked bloated like a drunk’s. “Mommy,” she moaned.

I had a sudden memory of Willow’s sixth birthday. We had it outside in our garden and it was a gusty day, so her birthday candles wouldn’t stay lit. She’d cried and said, “Mommy,” in just the way she said it now.

But this was a wholly different person. I looked down at her long legs, one curled across mine, wearing black corduroys I hadn’t seen before. This woman had sex, had friends I didn’t know about, went to house parties to which she brought illegally-procured wine. I’d once overheard her talking to a friend on the phone about getting a tattoo. This woman only spent a weekend every now and then at my house, her childhood home, to eat and do a few loads of laundry. An ugly glimmer of selfish satisfaction passed through me: she needed me again. I held her and stroked her dark hair back from her face.

The next week passed strangely. Willow wanted to be at school with her friends, but each day after I dismissed my class, I called her. Some days she would answer; others she sent a text saying she couldn’t talk. I was impatient, wanting to help, wanting to be involved. But I felt her keeping me at arm’s length. On Wednesday she answered my call on the first ring.

“Hi, Mommy,” she said. Her voice was sad but sounded relieved: she was happy to hear from me. I felt the selfish shimmer pass through me again.

“Hi, sweet one. How are you feeling?”

“Okay. I wrote a poem about Harrison.”

I didn’t know she still wrote poetry. “Oh! Could I read it?”

“No, it’s not really for reading. I just needed to write it.”

I didn’t understand that.

“Well, okay. How are your friends doing? Bethany? Er, Shannon?”

“Shaina. She’s doing all right. Bethany, not so well. She and Harrison were sort of, like, dating.” Willow took a deep breath. “It’s just so crazy, you know? Because people have been asking her if he did it on purpose. If he jumped out in front of the car.”

“Oh.” Nervously: “Did he?”

“No! God, Mom. He would never do that. Anybody who knew him would know that. He wouldn’t do that.”

Well, I didn’t really know him.

“Mom, I have to ask you something.”

“What is it?” I asked quickly. “Do you need me to come get you?”

“No, not that.” She took another deep breath. “So, Harrison’s parents live in Texas, and that’s where his burial is going to be. And we wanted to go, we felt like we had to go.”

“Okay,” I said. I sat in the driver’s seat of my car without turning it on, waiting.

“The only problem is the tickets are so last-minute that they’re kind of pricey. Like, to get on the Friday morning flight to Houston is over six hundred dollars.”

Willow worked at the coffee shop in the library making minimum wage. I knew she couldn’t pay for it herself. Still, I willed her not to ask me for the money. She didn’t.

“Bethany and I want to organize a memorial for our friends at school, for people who knew him who can’t go to his funeral.”

I tried not to let my relief be audible. “Oh, Willow, what a lovely idea. A really nice way to honor your friend.”

“I’m so glad you think so! Because, well, we can’t really reserve a space on campus last-minute. So I offered to host.”

Pause. “At your apartment?”

“No,” she said, her child voice coming out. “At our house.”

She hadn’t called it ‘our house’ in years. “Willow, honey, I don’t--I don’t think we can do that, there’s just--”

Now the six-year-old was back in full force. “I knew you would say that!” she spat. “I knew you wouldn’t let us do this.”

“Look, Will, I don’t know what to tell you. I can’t have hundreds of people coming to our house that close to Thanksgiving. I understand where you’re coming from, but it’s not practical.”

“Practical? Okay, fine.” She was angry-crying as she hung up. I sat with my forehead pressed to the top of the steering wheel.

My mother died when I was Willow’s age--nineteen. I was a sophomore in college at Millersville, and my parents lived in Lancaster County; I was their only daughter and wanted to stay close to home. She had Parkinson’s. I remember, when she died, feeling a mingled sense of relief and pain and unbelievable helplessness. My father was alive but he was getting sick, too, and my brothers and I had to do most of the work planning her funeral.

I did an exercise with my first-graders that Friday during free drawing. I asked them to draw what makes them feel better when they’re mad or sad. Some drew their pets, some drew

televisions, a surprising number drew pizza. Note to self -- remind parents not to reward their seven-year-olds with food. The idea for this activity came, of course, from Willow. In her room she had a massive bookshelf, one that spanned from floor to ceiling and halfway across one wall. It was her crowning joy throughout elementary, middle, even high school. She would seek refuge there after a bad day.

When I got home from work I went into Willow's room. I relished the marks of her recent presence--a long wavy hair on the white pillowcase, an empty water glass on the nightstand, one sneaker halfway hidden beneath the drooping quilt. I bet she was looking for that. Going to her wall of books, I scanned my eyes over the spines, some very old, some less so. I saw the book Peter bought her when his father died: a little volume called *Butterflies from Heaven*. She'd been so small then, but still it pained her to see her father cry. She would toddle over to the shelf and bring it to him. Always, that bookshelf was a source of comfort for him, for her. For us.

I regretted being so harsh with Willow, but I didn't think I was wrong. I'd met Harrison only once, in the context of her birthday, and since then rarely heard about him. I wondered--and felt shameful that I did--why Bethany's family didn't host the memorial, since he was her boyfriend. Later that night, I vented all this to Micah as we nested under the covers.

"My heart aches for her," I told him. My fingers combed through his salt-and-pepper beard. "I just want her to feel safe, to feel like she can come to me. I want her in my atmosphere again."

He nodded, speaking to me with the patience he afforded our youngest students. “Have you thought more about the memorial?” he asked.

I rubbed my bleary eyes. “Yeah.”

“And?” He kissed my eyebrow.

“I guess we can do it here. But I’m going to need some help.”

“You are a kind and noble person,” he said. He kept his face very close to mine as we fell asleep.

I had lunch with Willow on Tuesday. I had drawn up a tasteful card, announcing the time and place of the memorial, that I put inside the cover of *Butterflies from Heaven*. She cried when she saw it and hugged me. I found myself confused, as if I had expected a more excited reaction, like I’d given her concert tickets. She slipped the card into her backpack, leaving the book on the table.

On Saturday morning, I woke up early and drove into the city to pick up my daughter. She and two of her college friends climbed into my Honda and we drove away from Temple, back to our house to set up. I had borrowed two rectangular tables from the school and set out hors d’oeuvres and drinks. Bethany and Shaina had brought posters with photos of Harrison for their friends to sign. When Willow saw them, she got teary and excused herself.

I followed her into the kitchen to see her opening a leather-bound journal, one I hadn’t known she kept. When she saw me, she hunched her shoulders forward and away so I couldn’t see what she was writing.

Before I had children, I'd vowed that I would never read my child's diary. Being a diary keeper myself, it seemed the most sacred thing in the world. But now I found myself desperate to get a peak of what was inside. Who was I sitting next to? Sometimes she seemed like a past version of me; other days she is like someone else entirely, someone unrelated, someone from another planet.

People started to arrive around noon. The weather was crisp but there was not a cloud in the sky, and we had things set up in the back garden. I had the unsettling experience of glimpsing who my daughter is when she is outside my house. She went around, flitting hummingbird-like from person to person, consoling and hugging. When one boy was crying, she placed her palm flat in the middle of his chest to placate him, a gesture so startingly intimate I stared. There were not so many people as I had expected; maybe fifty or so. They all looked like permutations of the same person to me, too-short church dresses and rumpled suit jackets. Except for Willow. I watched the sets of eyes followed her around the yard. She was born with a crop of thick, dark hair that grew wavy and silky and she had long, slender limbs. When she was younger, we would get stopped in the mall by people telling her she should model. While I insisted it was just because of her height, or because those women recruited teens so they'd pay for talent agents, I was pushing off the inevitable. Now, I was confronted with Willow the woman, the beautiful one that no longer fell under my jurisdiction. After a few moments, Bethany called everyone's attention. She'd set up folding chairs in rows, auditorium-style. It was time for everyone to share.

Willow went first. She read the poem--the one she had decided wasn't for sharing. It startled me. It was about the crunching of bones and runaway trains. I excused myself into the kitchen.

Micah was there.

“Hi. Why’d you come in?”

“Willow read a poem. I can’t fathom what is inside of her brain. When I think I know, something foreign comes out, like she learned French since I last saw her.”

“Some things they just don’t tell you,” Micah said. “You remember being nineteen--when your mom died. Trying to make up your life. Inventing.” He popped a stuffed olive into his mouth.

“But why does she have to invent? Why can’t she just be? Is she inventing at all?”

One of Willow’s classmates slipped in through the kitchen on his way to the bathroom and we quieted. When he had passed, Micah knuckled me under the chin. “I think you have done a fine job,” he said. “We have done a fine job. She is beautiful and gracious, and it seems like her friends are, too.”

“Thank you,” I said. “Why aren’t you out there listening to everyone’s testimonies?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t dare. Feels intrusive.” He ate another olive. I wondered if this was his way of telling me I needed to back off.

Later, when everyone had gone, I went for a walk. It was evening and I went west towards the sunset, even though I couldn’t see it over the tops of the houses in our neighborhood. About a block away from us lives a Japanese man with his wife and three children. Each day, around when the sun sets, he goes out to the low cement barrier that separates their front yard from the sidewalk and sits there smoking cigarettes. Whenever I see him, we nod to one another. He is often eating a banana. Sometimes, when I’m overwhelmed with other things, I think about him. I imagine his wife insisting he can’t smoke cigarettes in the house, pushing him outside,

chattering in Japanese while she ropes the children in for dinner. I have trouble with the banana-- why does he eat it so close to dinner? How does it taste against the cigarette smoke clinging to his teeth?

I figured Willow would be taking the regional train back to campus with her friends, so when I came home, I was surprised to find her at the kitchen table.

“Hi,” I said. Like a cat, you must approach carefully. “How was it today?” I pulled cookies from the pantry and a quart of milk from the refrigerator.

“Sad.” She’d been crying. “But good. It was so good. To hear everybody tell stories, to laugh, to cry.”

I wished she’d tell me a story about Harrison. Setting the cookies down between us, I sat across from her.

“Mom, no, I’m dieting.”

“Dieting? You don’t need to diet. Besides, one cookie won’t hurt.”

She sighed and started to cry again. It was at once a familiar and unfamiliar sight. As she always had, when she first began to cry, before the tears came, her face would twist up, corners of her mouth lifting--it almost looked like a smile. Then forced air would come out through her nose and her shoulders would collapse into her collarbones. Only then did the tears come.

I reached across and put my hands on hers. “Talk to me,” I said. Pleaded. “Tell me something.”

“Like what?” she answered.

“Anything.”

She got up from the table and went to the fridge, pulling out a jar of dill pickles. She took a fork from the drawer and stabbed one, bringing it back with her to the table.

“What do you want to hear about?” She took a loud bite. She hadn’t wiped the tears from her face and they sparkled salty on her cheeks.

“How about Harrison? Tell me what he was like.” I hear Micah’s voice in my head. *Exist with her.*

“We were sleeping together,” she says.

I work to compose my face, to conceal the shock. “You what?”

“Yeah,” she said. She looked at her hands and picked at the nail polish on her thumb.

Suddenly I longed for ignorance, longed for the foreignness I’d felt looking at her before.

“I don’t know what to say, Willow.”

“Me neither,” she said. “I hadn’t told anyone else. Bethany doesn’t know, obviously. It sits on my heart like an anvil, but I think telling her would be selfish.”

I withdrew a cookie from the box and broke it into pieces, first in half, then half again, then crushing the crumbs between my fingers. “Is that why you and Sahat...?”

“Yes, and no, and sort of. He didn’t know, but after it happened the first time I knew I wasn’t happy with him anymore.” Suddenly she stood up and began to pace, long legs loping like a tree come to life. “I didn’t love him or anything.” She looked up at me. “I didn’t love him. Not like that.”

I felt she was searching for confirmation, for validation, but I couldn’t come up with anything.

Later that night we sat together in the living room. I turned on a movie to occupy the silence that grew like a tumor between us. About halfway through the movie, she fell asleep, letting her head loll onto my arm.

With her eyes closed, lashes fanned against the top of her cheeks, I could see tiny freckles on the bridge of her nose, ones she'd had since she was a little girl. I willed my muscles to stay still so that I wouldn't wake her.