Emergency Contact

Sophia Shealy

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Emergency Contact

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in the Department of English from The College of William and Mary

by

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Accepted for Honors

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Williamsburg, VA
May 5th 2020
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Prologue

It has never ceased to amaze me what we, humans, can adapt to: famine and plague and terrible haircuts; soul-crushing breakups that leave us depressed and sleepless, mumbling the lyrics to “I Know It’s Over” in staff meetings and lecture halls; the loss of someone more part of you than your own skin and nails and canine teeth. We somehow survive more often than not. And in the face of our despair, we whisper: Why should I go on, and how do I do it, and is there any reason for it anyhow? Receiving only silence and a certain heaviness and, if we look right into the blinding heat of its fragile core, the knowledge that, for the most part: no, there is no real reason. You simply will. It’s the human condition, our evolutionary curse, the reason we go to work and drink decaffeinated coffee and smile for profile pictures while our private worlds crumble softly inside us and more ice sinks into the ocean.
In my experience, perhaps the only thing more powerful than our ability to adapt is our ability to remember. A certain smell – freshly-lain carpet, Ovaltine, dollar store self-tanning lotion – a wedding ballad through radio static, an especially dark and large pair of eyes, if not properly prepared for their attack, can undo years of progress, demolishing countless hours of therapy with bespectacled empaths in seconds. For so long, I fought to suppress this propensity, at first losing more often than winning. But with plenty of practice and varying forms of self-medication, I reached a point of denial, of warm blankness not unlike sunshine through eyelids, where what had once crippled now hardly stung. And I had years of blissful pretending. I thought I had beaten it. I thought I had become immune to my memory.

But for the past month or so, in rare moments of silence and solitude, I have caught my mind drifting. It always wanders in the same northward, gray-tinted direction to a place cloudy and directly behind my eyes, as memories of my brother, Christopher, creep slowly to the surface, called upward by a voice I do not recognize as mine. At first, this unwanted and surprisingly unstoppable force frightened me. I did what I’ve always done to dull such impulses, to soften and misdirect their slithering intentions. These efforts of shutting out the quiet and with that, Christopher, usually meant copious amounts of alcohol or reality television marathons or some highly destructive combination of the two. I’ve endured many happy hour flirtations with investment bankers, all puffed-up chests and gin and tonics and boring ties bouncing against their soft, freshly-divorced stomachs. I’ve downed bottles of wine watching people much prettier than myself fall into mutated, Kodachrome love on dating shows, and I’ve been legitimately sad when they’ve broken up. I’ve stumbled into telephone poles, bedrooms, and reeking alleyways with friends for the night I never see again. I’m fairly good at distraction.
In recent weeks, however, everything started to change. Every tactic ended in failure, and the silence always returned, and the more valiant my attempts to resist it, the more powerful it became, until what I faced had morphed into a twisting, poisonous hydra of nostalgia. *Remember*, it would slither, fangs grazing at the turn of my neck. And I would. More powerful and more needling than the strongest forms of indulgence or amusement, memory slinks through the walls we erect, no matter how thick we think we build them, shaving bricks with plastic spoons until everything falls apart.

The first day I truly gave into the stillness and Christopher arrived, the memories flooded with biblical proportion.

It started on a Tuesday marked for nothing at all. I got up and went to work, arriving a bit earlier than usual to make up for everything I hadn’t done the day before – a pattern I fall into rather frequently. My job, on paper, was relatively simple: I was the manager for Daedalus Records, a small-to-mid-sized independent label that prided itself on maintaining intimate, client-prioritized relationships with the bands we represented. Our artists were genre-benders, singer-songwriters, indie rappers, and alternative performers, all of whom showed up to meetings late and crusty-eyed, clutching bottles of fizzy water and shaking with the after-effects of whatever they had consumed the night before. Our company slogan was: “We put YOUR music FIRST,” and it was printed on every Daedalus Records business card, emblazoned over the doorway to our reception area, and stamped on all company correspondence. What this really meant is that our lawyers drew up contracts that gave our bands an absurd amount of professional leeway and creative freedom, and they used it to walk all over their PR reps, personal assistants, and social media managers. When their terrible choices went poorly, they would, without fail, bitch and moan and threaten to break contract. And since our president
maintained a strict Do Not Bother Me policy, a big part of my position was to keep the clients happy and, in doing that, keep deals from falling apart.

I had worked at Daedalus for about six years, stumbling upwards from front desk nobody, to personal assistant of the Marketing Director, to Co-Director of Artist Development, to, finally, Label Manager. In terms of Daedalus’ unconventional hierarchy, I landed somewhere above the directors and below the vice presidents. No one had ever provided me with a clear-cut description of what my job entailed, so I ended up doing a little bit of everything. I made timelines and crafted budgets. I tweaked album art. I negotiated the fine print. I oversaw. I delegated. I listened when people needed someone to complain to, and I never complained back.

It sounds stupid to admit at this stage of my life, but I got into the work because I’ve loved music for as long as I can remember – it’s something I’ve known how to care about even when I’ve been so low I haven’t wanted to care about anything. But most days, my job didn’t tap into anything actually stimulating or meaningful – two things I thought would come naturally when you devoted your livelihood to music. I was clearly only kept around Daedalus to crunch numbers and make deadlines, for practicality, since I hadn’t been asked for anything else. It somehow made it worse that I was actually good at my work, because when I really took a minute and reflected on what I did from day to day, it was obvious that what had begun as the pursuit of a lifelong passion had devolved into nothing more than a job, the reason I could keep my stuff in an overpriced apartment and live off a diet of mostly takeout food. So, no, I didn’t especially care for my position or the label itself, but getting a job in London as an ex-pat, especially in my field, ranged from difficult to downright impossible, and most days I left the office feeling more grateful than not.
The day the memories of Christopher began, I had opened my morning at Daedalus writing emails. I approved new t-shirt and tote bag designs. I scheduled a meeting with an up-and-coming dream pop group we were dying to collect. I had an hour long conference call with a particularly trying band about their upcoming tour dates. They wanted to drive a half-working, clementine orange VW van across the coastline of Australia. I wanted them to take a bus, so they could actually take their crew, instruments, luggage, and equipment with them, while also making use of an A/C unit and air bags. I very narrowly won this battle, so long as I swore, on my life, I would get the bus detailed to resemble the van I had vetoed. As soon as the call was over, I popped three Tylenol Extra Strength and screamed softly into a couch pillow. The frustration I felt from working with people who considered you and your agenda so entirely beneath them, from the futility of my position and the path I had chosen for my life, and from the endlessness of it all, the reminder that this was a pattern I was doomed to repeat until I quit, was fired, or the label went under, seemed far too much to bear.

All in all, it was one of those depressingly half-empty days which might as well have never happened. Nothing meaningful was said or done. I barely listened to my coworkers, responding only when prompted. The leftover Turkish food I brought for lunch had turned soggy in its container. And right when I was about to take a lifesaving smoke break before the two o’clock staff meeting – the only thing I had been looking forward to all day – I realized I was completely out and had left my extra pack at home. I had to sit through the meeting irritable and fidgeting until Mitchell in Creative Works, a fellow addict, noticed my discomfort and slipped me two of his own.

I got home, changed out of my work clothes, and stuck a tray of frozen spring rolls in the microwave. My plans for the night included several hours of television, wine, and a commitment
to pretending that it wasn’t all starting over in just a few hours. When my food appeared thawed, I pulled the steaming plate out of the microwave, ready to begin my evening. I took a large, impatient bite in the kitchen, and overwhelmed by the heat of my food, dropped my fork on the tile.

And all at once, I was eight years old in Virginia, standing many inches shorter, my hair braided down my back. I saw everything, as if it were happening in real time: it was summer, and Christopher’s own fork had slipped from his fingers, scattering drops of watermelon juice across our yellow-speckled kitchen tile. My mother’s sigh, ever-present and unmissable, hummed through the background of this vision while her buttery perfume danced beneath my nose. The image was absurdly vivid, but shimmery and color-warped, like looking into a gasoline puddle. I could smell the sweetness of the fruit and the lemon-pledge my mother had just sprayed on the kitchen table, I could hear Christopher’s half-hearted apology already forming at his lips, waiting for my mother to forgive him but knowing she already had, and I was sick. I ran to the sink and immediately threw up the only bite of spring roll I had eaten and the köfte from earlier that day.

There was no way to prepare for such a slaughter, so I curled into my bed before sunset while my brain foamed and churned rabidly through the night. When I woke, I felt lighter. I felt starved. Years of abstaining from the very thought of my brother, from everything that happened and everything that had brought me, now, to this surreal space which seemed to be my life, had bred a near-obsessive desire to remember. And the trying was much easier than I realized it could be.

After that initial time, Christopher’s materialization became an everyday phenomenon. I could no longer control his intrusions into my head, so instead, I searched for moments of
aloneness and made room for his arrival whenever I felt the initial knock. Sometimes it would start as I swayed on the Tube rides which bookmarked my working day, headphones in, eyes roving, observing my fellow riders like bacterium under a microscope. Sometimes beneath the dryers at the hair salon, or maybe at Tesco, searching for the ideal spiral of pasta. Oftentimes, he would come as I sipped a mug of tea in my office, the door blissfully shut while my well-meaning but fundamentally useless staff was out at lunch. I would look out my window at the Thames beneath me, reflecting London – shining, swearing, bustling London – back up, and I would daydream about the ant-people on the ground, selling and touring and holding hands, drinking and walking and smoking their lives away. The smallness of them all, and their distance from me, dulled the noise in my brain profoundly, and I would sink into days long packed away in boxes.

Besides that first interference with the spring rolls and the kitchen floor, it always started the same.

My mind would drift right where it had refused to go for the last decade-and-a-half, like a child picking a scab. I waited. I closed my eyes and filled my chest with air while whatever remained of the outside world’s pounding, repetitive din shrank to the hum of a wasp caught between my ears. And, as if by magic, a sort of trance would begin. I knew I had found him. Everything smelled like guitar strings and dusty cabinets and crushed pine needles, scents of home I’d thought I’d forgotten until they drifted by once more. In the beginnings of these reveries, I could barely make Christopher out. He was hardly more than shadow. A thumbprint on a mirror. He was so far, and it was so dark, and a thick smog closed in on us from all directions. Forgotten song lyrics, travel itineraries, middle school infatuations, good restaurants in neighborhoods I had long since abandoned, laundry lists of half-completed tasks – the
discarded components of my subconscious swarmed through the near-darkness like debris lifted upward in the wake of a tornado. I would go to him, fighting off the wreckage as it steeped around my ankles, stinging at my flesh. But when I reached him, it was worth the journey every time.

Somehow, his face was both completely void of any feeling and flaunting every emotion I ever saw him wear all at once. His expression, once so familiar, morphed from sadness to glee to regret to anger to uncertainty and back again. He was the athlete I cheered for on Friday nights, mud-spattered and cleat-clad; the sleepy undergrad home to tousle my hair and throw laundry in the washing machine; the freckled, lanky child of my dimmest memories, mouth ringed with red popsicle juice, a faint sunburn peeling off the top of his nose – the same one we all inherited from our mother, slightly-upturned, skinny at the top, widening out with our nostrils. He was more beautiful in my head than he was in real life, and he was always beautiful. The most handsome of all us siblings, broad shoulders and Martian cheekbones and a confidence both innate and transcendent, impossible to inject or buy at the pharmacy despite what Maybelline ads may tell you. Back in the real world, I would try and hold myself steady, to keep from breaking apart under his gaze.

He would speak to me, but all I could hear was lovely, thunderous nonsense, an unfathomable roar of corny jokes, brotherly jabs, words of comfort. I would beg him to slow down for a minute. To stop. I would present my hands for his, but he would never take them.

Scenes from my youth whirred past with nauseating speed, while Christopher remained planted firmly in front of me, growing and shrinking and frowning and laughing all at once. Every anxious, miserable first day of school. The weekend I learned to ride a bike in our gravel strip of driveway, him steadying my back as the training wheels became, like a miracle, more
and more unnecessary. The summer afternoon I broke my arm falling out of a tree I had been strictly forbidden to climb. Christopher carrying me home and driving me to the hospital with only his learner’s permit. Him telling our parents I had just fallen down the stairs.

There was one memory I came back to over and over again. It was always the last to appear, and it was exactly the same every time. I was thirteen, Christopher was eighteen, and the moment I had been dreading all summer, maybe all year, had finally arrived: he was leaving me for college. He was leaving all of us, I know, but I was selfish, and he was my favorite person, and it felt like he was only leaving me. Our ancient minivan was stuffed with everything the freshman packing list said he needed, and much, much more: see-through storage cubes purchased on sale at Walmart, a two-in-one shampoo/conditioner that smelled something like condensed masculinity, a plaid comforter and matching set of sheets, brand new blue and gold basketball shoes his coaches had provided for him, his battered acoustic guitar no one thought he would ever pick up again. My parents were driving him up to Vermont, leaving early Sunday morning to make the ten-hour drive in one day. I had begged them to let me come, but they said no, of course. There wasn’t enough room, and I would only get in the way. To make the whole thing even more miserable, our humorless and fanatically Baptist grandmother was coming to babysit. Life in that moment felt colossally, abysmally, unjust.

I remember sitting cross-legged in our front yard, plucking blade after blade of grass and trying not to cry. It was just past seven A.M., and the late-summer sun crept steadily over the hills behind our house. In a few hours, it would be hot enough to swim, but that wasn’t exciting for me anymore. Not without Christopher to join us at the pool when he got off work, letting us win breath-holding contests and helping us perfect our dives and cannonballs.
I looked up and watched him load the last of his boxes and bags into the van. In my barely-adolescent mind, he looked more adult and capable than he ever had before, and I could feel the pull of our separation coming, its magnetic grasp tugging us apart and me into pieces.

“Time to go!” said my father once everything was packed. He was shouting mostly at my mother and Christopher, but also, always, at the rest of us.

Gabe, my twin brother, and Natalie, my little sister who was just six at the time, came sprinting out of the house still in their pajamas. Our father gave Natalie and me a fleeting hug. Gabe got a slap on the back that made him jump. Mom brought us all in for a tight embrace, kissing us one by one. She gave Natalie an extra squeeze all on her own.

“Be good,” she said, looking only at me. I scowled. By thirteen, I had somehow already been cast as the trouble-maker. I could often sense my mother looking for evidence of my misbehavior before I’d even had the chance to do anything.

Our parents got in the car. I heard Dad mutter something undecipherable to Christopher, who smiled coolly and bounded over to us, his siblings, like a Labrador free from his leash.

Natalie, restless even as a child, was already bored with the whole affair and ready to get back to her toys inside. Christopher gave her a huge hug, and she ran away cheerful, completely unaware of how much his absence would hurt in so little time.

Christopher wrapped his arms around Gabe’s shoulder in a half-hug my twin didn’t know how to return. “So long, big guy,” Christopher said. Gabe nodded, wordless and wooden, which in the scope of his stunted emotional range signaled devastation. Apprehensive and awkward, he had never been good at properly expressing himself in tense or poignant situations. Or happy ones either, I guess. Without a look back, he followed Natalie inside.
Finally alone, I hugged Christopher around his rib cage – the highest point on him I could reach – and began to sob uncontrollably. I knew I was far too old to be so upset, but I couldn’t help it. The thought of being stuck in our family without him was devastating. “I don’t want you to go,” I said.

“I wish I didn’t have to,” he said, kneeling down to my level. “But I’ll call you. And we can even write letters, or something, if you want.” I said nothing, unable to be consoled. I’m sure I’m just misremembering it now, twisting the scene around to my liking, but I think he was crying a little bit too. He made me promise to come see him play, and I made him promise to come back.

My father honked the car horn twice. Christopher rolled his eyes, and I copied him. By this point in time, my brother had developed a healthy dislike if not outright animosity for our father. The rest of us would follow suit.

“And hey,” he said, lowering his voice in secret, just for me. “Fuck these guys. Right?” He tilted his head back to the van where our parents sat.

“Right,” I said. “Fuck ‘em.” I didn’t know much about swearing yet or the extent to which I would soon agree with that sentiment, but it felt like the perfect thing to say in that moment.

“Love you, Jane,” Christopher said to me, hugging me one last time.

“Love you too,” I said.

And then he was gone, leaving nothing behind but the scent of his chewing gum and a half-empty room of old jerseys and unwashed sheets and dust. The car screeched down the driveway, kicking up gravel as it went. I stayed outside for a while, sitting in the grass and
feeling very sorry for myself, hoping to see the van rolling back to me, until Gabe came out to say that *Even Stevens* was about to start.

And then the daze ends, falling apart like paper soaked in water. Back in the real world, my eyes have begun to water. Never more than a few small tears, not enough to even ruin my mascara. The only evidence that what happened actually happened.

A memory hangover is worse than that of any bender I’ve ever lived through. After these episodes, I found myself exhausted and aching and vulnerable but also recharged somehow. Slightly more alive than I was before. Buzzing all over with the knowledge that even though the whole experience has left me shattered in its void, it is mine to seek again. I know I will, and when I see him, bringing him back to life the only way I still can, what has been wounded and never healed will ache profoundly and sublimely like it first did when he died fifteen years ago, and I will be reassured of what I’ve lived through once more.

**One**

When I looked down at my wrist to check the time, I saw my appointment was supposed to have started almost twenty minutes earlier. This sort of lag normally might have annoyed me, but on that day, I felt fine to delay as long as I could.

I picked a clinic in the Canary Wharf district I had never been to before, far from where I worked and lived and went out with my friends on the weekends. I had chosen it partly because it was the only place able to get me in to see a doctor within days of my calling rather than weeks, but mostly because I didn’t think I would run into anyone I knew. London is a smaller
city than any guide book would have you believe, and I find myself nodding hellos to mutual
friends, former acquaintances, and bad blind dates much more often than I would like.

So, there I was, sitting in a beige, pleather armchair in the waiting room of a woman’s
health clinic I could not remember the name of, studying my hands and blinking up at the
fluorescent lights. I felt uncomfortable and feverish and completely on display, only barely
comforted by the fact that it was a clean enough lobby, stocked with amenities. There were
gossip and bridal magazines neatly fanned across the coffee tables, a mini-fridge full of small
water bottles, and a corner full of toys for children to play with while their parents checked
Facebook on their phones.

I was at the clinic for a reason both wildly complicated and primitively simple: I had
enough evidence to believe I might be pregnant. For the past couple of weeks, I had been aching
and starving, intermittently nauseous and even ill, and last Wednesday, when one of our
enthusiastic, interchangeable interns told me I looked particularly “glowy” that morning – a
comment I found slightly bizarre and overly-personal – I realized I hadn’t gotten my period in at
least a month.

I bought the cheapest test I could find from the drug store two blocks from my apartment,
not wanting to alarm Jenny, the woman at my normal pharmacy who sold me cigarettes, gum,
and Bic pens when I visited once or twice a week. Because the universe has a sadistic sense of
humor, the test was inconclusive, remaining maddeningly blank when it was supposed to reveal a
certain number of lines. I decided to take this as a sign to go and see a real doctor rather than
waste any more money on home pregnancy tests or any extra time worrying when I surely,
absolutely, was not pregnant. There had to be another explanation. Ovarian cancer, maybe, as
many of the symptoms were the same? But a pregnancy seemed out of the question.
I don’t know why, exactly, I felt so convinced of its impossibility. I’d known since puberty my body was supposedly able to become pregnant with a baby and deliver it into the world, but I don’t think I’d given it much thought since my high school had shuffled us into shame-inducing sex education classes where gym teachers drilled into our heads that getting pregnant was tantamount to a prison sentence. Now that the consequences felt less severe, it rarely crossed my mind. I think I stupidly assumed that since I was older, and a pregnancy could no longer ruin my life like it might have when I was younger, there was no reason I should be punished with a baby on the rare occasions I had sex without protection. It wouldn’t function as a lesson anymore, so I didn’t think I had anything to worry about. And now that I was past thirty, a horrible illness seemed like just as likely of an outcome for my symptoms.

But the longer I waited at the clinic, the sicker I felt, as full-bodied anxiety began to flood my system. My temples throbbed in perfect rhythm while my stomach flipped against the walls of its lining. The people-watching was almost enough to distract me, but the urge to tap my fingers against my seat or pick at my already raw cuticles did not subside. And making everything much worse: after about a week and a half of withdrawal, the longest ten days of my adult life, I was dying for a cigarette. I was dying to go home. I was probably, actually dying, it was starting to feel like. I looked around the room for an interruption from the nervous chasm of my brain.

The woman to the right of me looked about six months pregnant. Still before that phase of pregnancy where women swell head to toe with the life fermenting inside of them, she draped her hand over her bulging stomach and rubbed it as though a small, well-behaved cat was hiding beneath her sweater. She scrolled through her BBC app, stopping when an article like “BREXIT DEAL IN CRISIS” or “MEGHAN’S PREGNANT WITH TWINS! QUEEN NOT SO HAPPY”
popped onto her smudged phone screen. A shimmering rock of an engagement ring sat on her knuckle above a platinum wedding band. *New money, first child, not married more than a year or two*, I decided from her young age, the lack of other babies snapping at her ankles, and the garishly expensive handbag collapsed behind her legs.

Across from me was a self-conscious-looking straight couple I placed in their early forties. She could have been a year or two older than he. Working professionals, maybe solicitors or ad execs, smartly dressed, well-groomed. They both sported a similar shade of icy-blonde hair, close to grey but purposefully not. The man gripped several pamphlets he absolutely would not look at while clicking his nails against his Rolex and glancing at his phone. The leaflets were brightly-colored and block-lettered, shouting titles like: “Raising Your Sperm Count” and “The ABCs of IVF.” The woman poured over her own pamphlet, “All You Need to Know About Geriatric Pregnancy” when not staring at the obliviously expectant woman next to me. Her longing was so acute it made me cringe. Both of them, the man and the woman, seemed embarrassed to be sitting in this room, penned in like farm animals. I could practically smell their discomfort. They were definitely not used to failing at anything, I imagined, or to needing any sort of help, especially not for something so personal in nature. I decided they were the type of couple that never wanted kids, that laughed at the idea of such an egotistical, impractical endeavor until suddenly, they realized they did. And now they were just hoping it wasn’t too late. Or maybe this whole attempt was the last-ditch effort, all they had left before looking into adoption or calling it a day.

The woman noticed me staring at her, clearly trying to make sense of their situation. She gave me a curt smile, meaning: *Fuck Off.* I bit my nails and looked away, obliging her. It felt like the very least I could do.
The last patient in the room was either pregnant or carrying the last of a post-partum belly. For her sake, I hoped it was the latter, as she was already surrounded by two small children, red-haired and pale little things, and cradling a baby in her lap. The oldest of her brood was a girl, probably no more than five, who sported disheveled pigtails and a purple dress with a large chocolate stain down the front. She played with a pair of naked, balding Barbie dolls. Smacking them into each other again and again, she mouthed a contentious disagreement between the two. The other child was a boy with a large Band-Aid over his elbow and an impressive scratch zig-zagging angrily across his forehead. Bored with his toy cars, he whined to his mother and harassed his sister. He had twice started running around the waiting room, wailing for no particular reason. His mother had grimaced at the adults apologetically. “Nanny canceled,” she said. I nodded politely, grateful for no connection to her private little hell. But in the midst of the chaos, her youngest one slept soundly, his little fingers gripping at the air. The mother kissed her baby’s forehead and closed her eyes, finding some sort of peace, I don’t know how.

So, I said to myself, here we have them: the well-behaved oldest child, riddled with underlying rage; the wild, attention-starved middle one, prone to injury and disaster; and the baby, probably the mother’s favorite, her refuge from the crazed older beings making constant demands of her and grabbing her face with mysterious, unpleasant substances stuck to their fingers.

I have always believed that families subconsciously want to embrace their predetermined roles, secretly happy to lean into patterns, birth order psychology, and generational expectations whenever they can. These designations – intelligence, creativity, goodness, grit – usually bestowed to us by our parents, allow us to classify things too painful to truly understand. Rather
than acknowledge a rotten family dynamic – some pattern of toxicity germinating within a bloodline for decades on end – and pick it apart to its core, you can instead cast parts and wear costumes and speak in a dialogue you hadn’t even known you’d memorized until it tripped perfectly off your tongue. Parents can separate themselves from the responsibility of admitting what they have done to their children, what their own mothers and fathers have done to them. Children have an endless supply of complaints about the people who have raised them, while being forever, implicitly reassured they need only rise to the expectations they have been born into, whether fair or unfounded.

Black sheep. Distant fathers. Prodigal sons. Golden children – in our family, this was Christopher. Many families have one – I’m not naïve enough to think our situation is all that unique. No one person and no one household is nearly as original as we would like to believe. We replicate and duplicate and imprint versions of ourselves onto our offspring over and over again. Children like Christopher are just one outcome of this experiment. Easy babies who grow like hulking, sun-soaked cornstalks into precocious children and athletic teenagers, puberty leaving them relatively unscathed in comparison to their lurching, pockmarked classmates. Christopher was liked by all and loved by many and generally good, if not great, at most of the things he attempted. Varsity athlete, student body president, prom king, four-time member of the homecoming court. It seemed there was no door he could not charm open, no place he would ever have been turned away. And yet, I never resented this perceived ease with which he grew and performed and dazzled those under his spell. I was happy for him. I wanted him to succeed.

With him in my life, I could just barely grasp at a point of selflessness I can now rarely ever reach. He led by example, always, and what he showed us was a graciousness I can hardly fake, much less truly occupy. There was nothing he would not give to others, often without them
ever having to ask: his money, his time, his laughter. Words of encouragement, excellent advice. And I wanted him to be proud of me. Although he never said a word, barely reacted at all even, I could always feel his disappointment when I was selfish, when I was less than kind, when I had done the wrong thing while knowing what was right, and it crushed me. So I tried to be good and find some of what he had for myself.

But when he died, it seemed as if I lost access to what I had just barely begun to develop, this well of kindness and grace I could draw from and give to others without expecting anything in return. Now I feel as though I can only fake generosity and hope it goes undetected, a shocked sort of selfishness I wear like a second skin.

The door beside the front desk swung open with a theatrical flair, and a stoic-looking nurse appeared before us. Her bun was falling out in volcanic sprays of hair, and she looked both exhausted and ready for combat, like she knew she would get blamed for this delay despite it being out of her control. We eyed her, some with expectation, others – me – with dread. She shuffled through her files and without looking up, she asked, “Is there a Jane Gallimore?”

My stomach dropped. *Time to pay the piper,* my mother would have said.

“Yeah. That’s me,” I said, trying to sound normal and composed.

I gathered my things clumsily. My coat was dampened from the February rain, and my purse overflowed with my wallet, keys, and a stack of album reviews I was supposed to read for work but hadn’t yet touched. I wished my hands would stop trembling. I didn’t understand why I was so nervous. I was an adult. I had money, kind of. Insurance. Choices, that’s what they always said. So, why did this feel so impossible for me to handle, regardless of the outcome?

The nurse led me through a long, sterilized corridor of offices and examination rooms. The clinic stretched far beyond the promise of its exterior; there was no end to the labyrinth I
could see, just more rooms, more machines, more women like me – 30ish and panicky with expensively layered hairstyles – waiting to be lectured at by people with better educations than themselves. A seventies playlist had been chosen, and Bob Marley’s familiar voice was crooning, “Don’t worry about a thing. Cause every little thing is gonna be alright.” It was a song I used to find comforting if not just benign, but now it was starting to depress me. It seemed an inappropriate choice for a women’s clinic – too on the nose.

Hordes of people flitted through the hallways clutching clipboards and jackets. Some were doctors and nurses wearing scrubs of all colors or perfectly laundered lab coats. Others were patients, many clearly pregnant. There were very few men, but the ones I saw lingered close to their partners, grasping their hands or placing a palm on the small of their backs. Some reminded me of the stallions I’d seen on farms back in Virginia, valiantly sheltering their mares, comical in their skittishly combative efforts. Others were more like the monkeys or wild dogs from nature documentaries: scowling protectively, suspicious of outsiders and sharp edges.

Health advisories were tacked up to the walls, along with cringe-inducing, motel-type tableaus, serene displays of women and babies. Cherubic infants frolicked with small farm animals, and Gaia-esque matriarchs of all shapes, sizes, and races cradled their stomachs or nuzzled small, swaddled newborns in their laps.

“I love all the art. Very homey,” I said to the nurse, expecting her to laugh.

“Thank you,” she said, totally serious. “We get it all made custom by a former patient. I can give you her website, if you’d like.”

“That’d be great,” I said. “Thanks.”

What stood out to me most about the clinic was the color. Everything around me was some shade of sickly pink: the tile floors a milky-bubblegum blend, the walls Pepto Bismol, the
counter-tops at the nurse’s station salmon-tinted. The air smelled like vanilla and bleach, a
cloying and sickening combination. Femininity practically dripped off every surface and puddled
around the floor.

“This is for you,” said the nurse, whose peeling nametag read “ANNA.” She handed me a
small plastic cup and pointed me towards the bathroom.

I was measured and weighed in the hallway and led to another room – also pink, with a
mural of angels dancing on sticky, cotton candy clouds. I was told to undress and given a light
pink paper gown to wear. The material scratched against my skin, and it took me a long time to
correctly tie it shut. My fingers were still shaking.

When the nurse came back, she took my blood pressure. She checked my heartbeat. She
told me everything about me was completely average.

And then the line of questioning began: How often do you exercise? How many hours do
you sleep per night? How many drinks do you consume per week? Do you smoke cigarettes? Do
you take drugs? What kinds? How often? Do you ever suffer from anxiety? Depression? Suicidal
thoughts? Any history of mental illness in your family? Breast cancer? Cervical cancer?
Miscarriage? Sexually transmitted anything, ever? First day of your last period? Have you ever
been pregnant before?

Instead of lying, like I usually did at my normal physician’s office – he was an older
gentleman with an eerie likeness to my fourth-grade math teacher, and I refused to tell a man
who could have taught me fractions my actual number of sexual partners – I told her the
complete truth. I would have revealed my most shameful stories, time permitting. All she had to
do was ask. I can hardly explain it now, but feeling so anonymous and finding myself in a
situation so boring and common and yet so completely unanticipated gave me a rush of radical
freedom I hadn’t felt in years. I felt like I finally had permission to say the ugliest things about myself out loud.

Living in a different country than the one I had been born a citizen of, sometimes it felt like I was balancing two separate versions of my identity. There was the American who had once belonged to a completed family, who had childhood friends and crushes she didn’t speak to anymore, who had lived through things that now felt impossible to speak aloud. And then there was the person I played in London – more or less anonymous to everyone, even those who considered me a close friend or confidante. I had a condensed, cleaner history and fewer things to apologize for. Here, I was basically untethered to all but a few people. No one asked or assumed anything, really, about the person I was before moving across the Atlantic, so I got away with shortening my stories in some places, exaggerating them in others, softening edges and blurring out the nastier bits of the truth. The result was I often felt like anyone I wanted to be and no one I recognized at the exact same time. For the most part, it was liberating. It was escapism. But here, I found it didn’t matter either way.

Stupidly, I expected her to express some sort of shock at my personal history. Wasn’t I special or interesting in some way? Wasn’t I entertaining? Didn’t I know how to scandalize? But she simply typed in my answers one by one, her chipped fingernails clacking against the keys. Her face registered only a vagueness I could easily decipher as boredom. After the last question had been answered, she left to grab my doctor.

I noticed a brightly-colored poster about birth control tacked up by the door. Its top-left corner had become unstuck, drooping slightly over itself. This seemed like an ominous sign. Each form of birth control was represented by its own grinning, Disneyfied cartoon counterpart. In an accompanying word bubble, it voiced its method of implementation and rate of success:
“I’m Mr. Condom! When used correctly, I’m 98% effective at preventing pregnancy and STDs!” I tried to commit the numbers to memory, but they all blurred together. I realized I was tearing the flimsy hem of my gown to shreds.

Then came the knock at the door.

My doctor was a thin woman with a shiny black bob and flawless skin. She shook my hand and sat on a stool in front of the examination table. I don’t remember her name, but I remember her symmetry. Everything from the slant of her shoulders to the length of her hair to the one crease across her blouse was perfectly balanced. I searched for flaws in her design, but she was made of mirror-images, disturbingly angular. The nurse from before stood blankly behind her, playing with her stethoscope. I offered her a weak smile she did not return.

“I had no idea people still used sponges,” I told the doctor by way of introduction, pointing at the birth control poster.

Nose buried in a thick, important-looking file, she ignored my comment completely. For maybe a minute, we sat in complete silence. She shuffled her papers around, raising and lowering her eyebrows as she read them through. She said nothing to me, and I felt spectrally invisible. As more seconds passed, my need to be noticed was taking full control of my body, making my palms sweat and my mouth taste like metal. Had she forgotten I was there? Was any of this really happening at all? Had I had stumbled into a horrible dream, where I would be stuck until I pinched myself awake? I had the sudden, rabid urge to scream at her or wave my arms like a maniac.

Instead, I cleared my throat, and she finally looked up at me, emotionless, as if just then remembering I was there. “So, your test came back positive.” She said. “You are pregnant. Probably about nine weeks or so from the date of your last cycle.”
For a brief but endless moment, I had been deflated, knocked airless and reeling. I shouldn’t have been so surprised, there were really only two possible outcomes, but her words still smacked into me like an unexpected blow.

But then the logic of it all unfolded, different pieces of a humiliating puzzle snapping right into place, revealing the picture in its grim entirety. My skin prickled as I recalled several crucial, condemning facts from the night it must have happened: we hadn’t used a condom, I wasn’t on birth control anymore, and I was definitely more than tipsy, feeling careless, by the time we had left the pub – the same one we always met at. And besides that, I had a bad habit of being irresponsible with the guy – I couldn’t call him the father – in general. Again, I had just assumed I was immune to these sorts of dilemmas. Thirty-one, almost thirty-two, was far too old to be facing an unplanned pregnancy. There was no drama to it, nothing romantic at all. There was no one to blame but myself, and this fact made me profoundly unhappy.

“Well,” I said to the doctor, breathing out, hard. “If you say so.”

Instead of collapsing or bursting into flames, what I thought was bound to happen, I remained shockingly upright and intact. And for a second, I wasn’t even anxious anymore. I was just annoyed; all I could think about was the way she’d presented me with my results. It really shouldn’t have bothered me, I’m sure they weren’t supposed to be particularly enthusiastic with random, accidentally-pregnant women who stumbled into their clinic, but it rankled that I didn’t even receive a word of joy or congratulations. Her tone was as celebratory as a number caller’s at a deli counter. It felt like she was confirming a well-known suspicion, something I should have understood all along: that this was a terrible predicament for me to be in, that if I chose to have this baby, I would be a horrible mother, that I didn’t deserve to feel anything but scared. I
suspected – egotistically, I know – that she and the nurse had been gossiping about me in the hall.

For the next twenty minutes or so, I sat on the table while she talked about the next weeks and months of my pregnancy, about the disgusting things that might and would happen to my body as I undertook the miracle of life, about the hormonal imbalances and the waves of nausea and the possible – probable, given my medical records – bouts of depression I might suffer, about the medications I would have to start taking, about the many, many foods and drinks I would have to avoid. I said nothing. I nodded when she stopped for breath. I watched Nurse Anna scroll through her phone.

About halfway through her speech, I realized that “Three Little Birds” was still playing, left on repeat for at least a half hour. Time had stretched by without anyone seeming to notice while I had been left behind in this limbo with Bob Marley and now, a pregnancy. I briefly contemplated asking if someone could change the music, but the doctor didn’t stop talking for long enough.

She put my feet into stirrups and showed me the small, grey shadow growing inside me. I watched what she told me was its heartbeat, marveling at how fast such an unbelievably tiny thing was thumping.

“Is that normal? That can’t be normal,” I said.

“I’ll send you home with a picture,” she responded.

Before she left, she asked me, as if an afterthought, if I wanted to discuss my choices. I didn’t know what to say, so my mouth just hung stupidly open. When I had officially taken too long to speak, she handed me about fifteen different pamphlets and told me she would send my prescriptions to the Boots down the street. With a voice like an answering machine, she said that
it was a pleasure to meet me, that she was looking forward to seeing me again. Before the door shut behind her, I watched another nurse hand her a different stack of files and race her off to a different room down the hall. I was just a stop along her way, and now I had been handled. I knew I wasn’t supposed to take this personally, but I just wanted someone, for just a moment, to take care of me in a way that didn’t feel perfunctory, like I was a chore to be checked off a list.

“Good luck,” said the nurse, following my doctor out the door. The lift of her eyebrows suggested I might need it.

I didn’t pick up my prescriptions. I walked outside and stood frozen in the late-afternoon drizzle until a homeless man told me to move. Like a robot short-circuiting, I began to walk aimlessly through the winding, anonymous streets, feeling charred and prickly. I was positive that one wrong move – an off-kilter trip on the sidewalk curb, a sharp shoulder bump from a stranger – would tear my skin right off, flaying me alive. The sun, still tightly bound by smog and cloud-cover, dipped lower into the horizon until it disappeared behind the skyscrapers. My feet felt numb with the cold and the rain and the slight pinch of my boots. I had been stupidly excited when I put my shoes on earlier that morning. It was the only thing I was looking forward to that day, knowing the appointment was impending. They were brand new, simple but gorgeous black riding boots I purchased when a boutique near my apartment had a suspiciously good sale. But now they were torturing me, and I was beginning to think they weren’t good for anything other than the envy they had inspired within me when I first saw them through the shop window, daring me to buy them.

I must have walked about a mile, thinking about nothing and everything, my brain alive and clattering with an onslaught of strangers’ voices and unfamiliar street signs, when I realized I had no idea where I was and that my toes were maybe, probably, bleeding through my socks.
The unfriendly office buildings were emptying themselves of suit-wearing worker bees, corporate drones of all ages and professions going home to make meal-prepped dinners and stream their next episodes, tucking their children into bed or staying up with their partners to have tight-lipped arguments about money or climate change or the EU or everything at once. Stranded in the cold, pregnant and unsure if I wanted to be, it didn’t seem like such a horrible life.

I went straight into the nearest pub I could find, a grim, low-lit establishment that smelled like salt and handprints. I was the youngest person in there by a good two decades and could tell from the ambush of dissatisfied looks that I was an intruder in their establishment, out of place and unwelcome. I ordered a club soda and took a seat at a table tucked far away from the small but raucous crowd. Sheltered from the elements and human beings alike, I felt safe for the first time that day, hidden beneath vintage posters of rugby teams and Princess Margaret memorabilia. In a smudged mirror hanging crooked over the table across from mine, I saw I looked as dreadful as I felt: my makeup was smudged, my hair was frizzy and plastered to my skull – recent blowout all for nothing – my clothes were wrinkled from the pointless trek I had just taken. I shrugged out of my coat and retreated into the sleeves of my sweater.

I pulled all of the pamphlets out of my purse and stacked them onto the seat next to me. I wasn’t feeling brave enough to read them and relive my visit to the doctor’s, but I placed the ultrasound photo on the table and stared at it, sipping my drink and grimacing. I found its shapelessness, its ambiguity, very frustrating. Although I held the visual proof of its existence right before me, had seen it pulsing onscreen at the clinic, had been told that it was very much a ball of cells capable of morphing into a human being, I felt I had no solid hold on it. At any minute, it could hide from me, disappear into another cavern of my body, or mutate seamlessly.
into something else – a third eye, an extra hand. It was a brutal reminder of my body’s failure to protect itself. A ticking clock, a grenade, a lock and key all at once. I didn’t know how I was supposed to be feeling, but I knew whatever I did feel was wrong.

I hadn’t considered any possible connection between motherhood and myself for years, really. I never made mental lists of trendy baby names, plugging them into the surnames of whatever guy I was dating at the time to see if they would fit. I can’t remember hoping for X number of girls and Y number of boys. My daydreams rarely involved the family I would one day conceive with some boring guy in a polo shirt, settling into the suburbs to rot comfortably away in a house full of things I didn’t need. I never felt like it was a matter of being judgmental, though it definitely sounds like it now, or a point of pride. It just never felt like a route I was bound to follow.

I shivered in my chair and thought about where I could have lost my maternal instinct, assuming that was a real thing and not just a Hallmark-like platitude, shiny and void of meaning. My first thought was Natalie, my little sister, and the two years I tried to take care of her after Christopher died and our parents both chose, independently, to abandon us. To say I underperformed is putting it kindly and neglecting certain, crucial details. I ruined what little she had left in her that trusted. I ran away.

Maybe it’s because my own mother never seemed particularly interested in the whole act of motherhood herself. She gave birth to four children and seemed to spend much of her time faking smiles and regretting us. She left six months after Christopher died, and although I knew her for seventeen years, when I try to think of her and her alone, unencumbered by her offspring or my father or some simpering church friend, my mind goes mostly blank. She exists only within saturated flashes of memory, unsatisfactory and perhaps completely fabricated: a series of
slender shadows lingering unhappily at doorways; strappy sandal tan lines crisscrossing her feet during the summer months; the grim, quiet line of her mouth, like a toe dragged through sand.

An eyelash dancing above the curve of her cheekbone while she did the dishes every night, humming softly under her breath. The song was not usually a happy one, but it always sounded lovely just the same.

I pictured myself as doting godmother. The fun family friend and emergency babysitter when the regular one got mono or had a date. If my siblings and I actually enjoyed spending time together, I would have been an excellent, ridiculous aunt – showing up to birthday parties with cool, slightly inappropriate gifts, quick to provide my underage nieces and nephews with an extra glass of champagne at holiday gatherings. I just never thought I had it in me – that invisible, vestigial limb, primordial and relentless, which pumped people full of chemicals demanding they recreate themselves into smaller semi-clones.

Maybe it was just fear. Of what, I’m not completely sure, though death seems a probable choice. Nothing signifies the impending loss of your own youth and agency like having to spend lots of time with people younger than you, which is, I’ve heard, one of the central facets of parenthood. And of course, even in today’s modern, smarter, cleaner times, it’s not like giving birth has been known to prolong your life. I’ve never really made peace with the idea of dying, but the older I get, the more I can feel it coming. Death, decay, infirmity, it all looms in the lonely white hairs growing around my temples, the small clusters of wrinkles puckering my mouth and eyelids where new collagen once held them smooth.

And taking love entirely out of the equation, which I’d hope at least a majority of parents have for their children, liking a member of your family more often than you dislike them, especially when they depend upon you for their survival, seems an impossible feat. I can imagine
little more unpleasant than having to spend huge amounts of time – let’s just say 18 years – with a person you can’t stand or who can’t stand you. I should know: I lived through the experiment. My own father went through various, often contradictory states in terms of his own feelings towards his children, but liking us – enjoying our company just for its own sake and not because of what we could offer him, which was usually nothing; affirming us when it was not necessary or expected for him to do so; laughing with us when we were happy, mourning with us when we were sad – never seemed to come very naturally to him. He liked distance. He liked his study, his instruments, his books untouched. He liked raising his voice over ours. He did enjoy us when we weren’t embarrassing him, when we succeeded publicly in sports and maybe with music, so long as we never exceeded his own talents. He could sometimes handle being in our vicinity when he was about three Jack and Cokes deep, smiling sedately, tapping his feet to whatever tune happened to be playing. He liked us much, much less after Christopher died and our mother left, two acts that deemed him the sole caretaker for his remaining, living children.

I took the final sip of my drink and crunched on a piece of ice. I thought about calling someone. That seemed like what most people would do. But there was no one I really wanted to share my news with. The dwindling handful of college friends I kept in touch with were probably all at work, and beyond that, might equate my announcement with a decision to move back to the States, which was a conversation I had no interest in having again. My small circle of close girlfriends in London – Alice, Johanna, and Blair – were three women as likely to marry and have children as nuns, though for basically the opposite reasons. A baby meant the end of fun, of long nights out spent dancing and flirting at roof-top bars, of lazy Sunday afternoons nursing hangovers and smoking cigarettes in Green Park, of sample sales and spur-of-the-moment spa days. If I told them I was having a baby, they would probably block my number.
My colleagues were happy hour friends at best. News so personal and life-changing would only make them uncomfortable. I could picture their half-squirming, half-congratulatory smiles now. They would probably buy me a cake with dry frosting and then begin plotting how to push me out of the company. When Ella in Accounting got pregnant, she was taken off the fun email chain and never again invited to the rare non-work, weekend gathering: concerts, occasional dinner parties, memoir readings by middle-aged rock stars in the midst of their fourth or fifth times getting sober. After Ella’s son was born, she stopped working altogether and moved from her beautiful flat out to Clapham to be closer to her in-laws. Only a few months ago, she announced on Facebook that she was expecting again.

I couldn’t see how my siblings would be useful in this department. Since Natalie had to change her cellphone number after a fan leaked her old one all over social media, I only had her email, and most of the time, those messages went unanswered. Sometimes, Edwin, her manager, would respond to me, relaying a message that Natalie was “busy, but sorry to hear that,” “in Tokyo at the moment, but will write back soon,” “super swamped, but thinking of me.”

And Gabe would have no idea what to say. We would sit there in silence until one of our phones died, or he might lie and say that his international plan was about to run out. He would hang up first.

Strangely enough, I had a feeling I should call my father, but I squashed that notion quickly. I didn’t know how he would react if I told him. Out of everyone in my family, he was the one I spoke to most frequently, as bizarre as that was to consider. We hadn’t seen each other in almost five years, but after a fifteen-month intermission of contact, he called me out of the blue. Even more amazingly, he wasn’t angry with me. He didn’t mention any past argument, the eight hundred dollars I had borrowed from him without asking, the fact that all of his children
had “left him behind” – his words, not mine. He wanted to talk about his job. About the new dean who was changing the makeup of the department. About his friends that were retiring. The public library was being torn down and replaced with a Chipotle, he told me. Had I seen the new documentary on The Monkees? He hadn’t yet but wanted to. It was an oddly pleasant conversation, one of the least combative ones we’d had since I was a teenager. From then on, we called every other week, always on a Wednesday night, always around ten p.m. my time, five p.m. his. Without ever deciding or discussing, an alternating pattern of initiating the call was established, so that no one called first two times in a row. Understanding the warped, power-hungry patterns of my father’s brain, I knew that this was a way of preserving dignity, of not releasing too much of his control.

We never talked about anything very serious, nothing that really mattered. Not his feelings. Never my romantic life, nor his. Natalie was not a safe subject, but Gabe sometimes was, depending on the nature of the question. My mother, never. But then, I didn’t want to talk about her either. Christopher had only been discussed one time, but that had been a disastrous mistake on my end, the only time either of us had yelled or ended the call before at least ten minutes had passed. I hadn’t thought he would phone me back after that, but he did, two weeks later, just after ten. Given all that had happened between us, something like a pregnancy didn’t feel like a good idea to mention. Especially before I knew what I was going to do about it. It was too personal. It revealed elements of my life that we both seemed happy pretending didn’t exist. So Dad was off the table, too.

And I couldn’t tell the guy, even if he was half responsible for this problem. We didn’t have any real sort of relationship beyond friends, not anymore, and I knew if I told him, he
would offer me marriage or maybe some money, and I didn’t want to be saddled with his endless
compassion or my inevitable guilt. I was sick of asking him for things I couldn’t repay.

Sadly, and unsurprisingly, the only person who would have handled the news exactly
how I needed them to was Christopher. No judgment, just enough exasperation to make the
whole thing a joke, a smidge of concern, but ultimately understanding that whatever I chose to
do was the right thing to do. The only thing to do. That’s what he would have said. And then he
would have smiled and hugged me without pity, and everything would have been okay because
that’s how he would have willed it.

Resolving to call no one and say nothing until I knew what I was going to do, I left the
pub right before seven and followed the street signs to the nearest Tube station, which turned out
to be Whitechapel. The cracks in the streets were filled with mucky pools of water, and the air
was thick with the scent of exhaust, cigarette smoke, and roasted chestnuts from a nearby stand.
A couple of teenagers had fashioned drums out of plastic barrels and hit them with their hands in
a complicated beat, winking at anyone who stopped to drop a coin in an upside-down cap. The
rain had finally stopped, but the air was still soggy and freezing. I felt a layer of goosebumps
cover my skin, bare neck to cramped toes. I kept my head down and shut out everything I could:
the throbbing in my feet; the jeers of the street vendors as I made my way to the station, guided
by the green awnings and yellow brick exterior; the blitz of taillights as Uber drivers barreled
down the road and nearly into one another; the university students yelling about socialism and
string theory, trying to outsmart one another.

I swiped my Tube pass and melded into a crowd of tired, unsocial people wearing
headphones and damp-smelling jackets, following signs to the eastbound platform. It was an
above-ground station, and I shivered while counting the stops separating me from my bed. I was
relieved and surprised to realize I hadn’t gone nearly as far as I thought, and it wouldn’t take me more than thirty minutes to reach my miniscule apartment, a couple of streets away from the heart of Soho.

The train arrived within minutes, and when I stepped onboard, the heat felt like a wonder. I found an empty seat and slumped into it, so tired I feared it might be terminal.

Just when I was starting to feel comfortable again, my cellphone rang: an American number. I would have ignored it since calls from the States, while rare, were almost always accidents or telemarketers with international scope. But the area code stopped me just in time – I saw the three familiar digits of my own hometown.

Without thinking, I pressed “Accept.”

“Hello?” I said to the transatlantic static.

“Hi there. Is this a Jane Gallimore?” asked the caller, a woman. She spoke in the familiar accent of my childhood: the slight nasal ugliness of the Appalachian draw, the slowness of fading Southern vowels. A lengthening of sounds and silences I rarely, if ever, heard anymore.

“Yes. This is she,” I said. I was sure it was going to be a weird insurance mix-up, maybe an oddly-timed high school reunion. And then came the long, scripted pause.

“Miss Gallimore, my name is Maureen. I’m a nurse with Blue Ridge Health. I hate to be the one to tell you this, but your father suffered something of an accident earlier today.”

“Wait – what?” I asked, my voice raised in alarm. I had instantly earned the attention of my fellow-riders. An American voice was bound to incite something between surprise and irritation when heard by unsuspecting Londoners who hadn’t assumed you were a tourist, but an American voice elevated in any sort of heightened emotion was a whole ‘nother beast. It was a stereotype, soap operatic. “Is he okay? What happened?”
“Well,” she began, “He collapsed at work. Fainted and hit his chin on the doorway of his office.”

I could see that office so clearly in my mind, could smell the Hawaiian Breeze air freshener. My father’s office was something he had fought for, tooth and nail, with the music department chair, and he had barely succeeded. Winning that small, cinder-block box was the only time he had come home from work genuinely happy. The first time I saw it, I remember being unimpressed. Embarrassed by his excitement. It was an ugly, windowless room tucked into the furthest corner of the music building, which hadn’t been renovated since the seventies. But it was good enough for him, he always said. And looking back now, I can see why he wanted it. An office meant that he had to be taken seriously. Before it, he shared a room next to the supply closet with three other adjuncts and the faculty microwave. The office made him legitimate – he wasn’t just the guy who had been very nearly famous, who had quit that band right before their big break and somehow ended up here, in a job where nobody respected him. He had a place to go, even if it all seemed kind of sad to his children, and he made sure it looked like it belonged to him. He covered the walls in posters of obscure indie bands that had formed and broken apart in the span of the nineties – perfect for impressing the hordes of female undergrads who fawned over him – and filled it with consignment store furniture and the guitars he didn’t want to keep at home. Plants were always dying on his desk. The image of him lying unconscious in the doorway of that room was almost too pathetic to cognitively tolerate.

“Oh, my God,” I said. “Did he break something?” I felt immediately guilty for some inexplicable reason. My first thought was that I should have called him at the pub. It was an irrational thought – I still didn’t want to tell him about the pregnancy, but I felt like I had done something wrong in having that thought and not acting on it, ignoring my instincts once again.
“Thankfully no, but he split his chin open quite badly. Had to get a couple of stitches,” she said. “Wasn’t too pleased about it either.” I almost smiled. I could practically hear my father shouting at some poor E.R. doctor. This whole ordeal would have been his worst nightmare. He was as vain about his appearance as he was mistrustful of anyone in the medical industry. Doctors, nurses, pharmacists, dentists, even life guards who were particularly well-versed in first aid, “Quacks,” he called them all. He never scheduled us regular checkups and refused to take us in for treatment unless we were nearly catatonic or inconveniently ill, throwing up or bleeding all over his things. His idea of first aid was a combination of hot water, rubbing alcohol, and Neosporin. “Man up,” he would tell us when we cried.

“Well… wow. That’s awful. Thanks for telling me. Is… is there something I should do? I can try to call him in a few minutes.” I didn’t understand why I was being consulted or even informed about this matter. It wasn’t something my father would have shared with me himself.

“Miss Gallimore, his jaw isn’t really the problem,” she said, beginning to sound quite pained. “Your dad exhibited several other alarming, unrelated symptoms when he was brought into the emergency room today. And upon further examination, an oncologist has diagnosed him with pancreatic cancer. He’s actually in surgery as we speak.”

At that moment, the train car screeched to a grinding, obnoxious halt. I started forward, nearly flailing out of my seat. The doors buzzed open. Pairs of feet shuffled out and onto the platform. I still had several stops to go and a different Tube line to switch to.

“Oh, Jesus,” I said. The nurse said nothing. “That’s one of the bad ones, isn’t it? Pancreatic? That’s bad?”

“Well, there are no good ones, really, but yes. I’m sorry to say that pancreatic is one of the bad ones.”
I took a deep breath. No one in my family had ever gotten cancer. No one I knew of, anyways. We were alcoholics and addicts of all kind and severity. We were bad drivers and prone to gambling. We swore. We made ill-advised investments and often married poorly. We lost our minds to dementia and the occasional stroke. But we didn’t get cancer. This felt like a mistake of cosmic proportions. If I were at all religious, I would have asked God to double-check that he picked the right family, that he didn’t mean to go one or two houses over.

“How severe is it? Do you know?” I asked the nurse.

“How severe is it? Do you know?” I asked the nurse.

“His disease is already quite advanced. We have reason to believe it’s stage four.”

“Will the surgery help?”

“At this point, the only treatment we can likely offer your father is palliative in nature,” she paused. “That means pain-relieving.”

“Oh,” I said.

“Oh,” I said.

“The cancer has metastasized,” she continued, “And there’s no way we can stop it, or cure it, as some might say. And with pancreatic cancer, the odds are difficult regardless.” We lingered in my silence until she added, “But his surgeon is currently working on placing a stent in his bile duct, which should hopefully aid in his digestion and lessen his pain.”

What a stent or a bile duct was, I had no idea, but strangely enough, I felt my eyes beginning to water. “So… so he’s been in pain, then?” I felt stupid for asking, but the idea of my father – a man who had once gone hours uncomplaining with a nail lodged in his hand after a roofing accident, who had popped his dislocated shoulder back into place by ramming himself into a wall, who had called Arnold Schwarzenegger “a real pussy” on more than one occasion and meant it – in actual pain was shocking to consider. It was the complete breakdown of everything he ever was to me.
“Probably for quite a long time, yes. I’m actually amazed he didn’t seek some sort of help sooner. I’ve never seen anything quite like it.”

I rubbed my eyes, trying to shove the tears back into my skull. I was more overwhelmed than anything else. It felt like I had been forced onboard a leaking ship and held hostage while it sailed blindly into the eye of a storm. All I could do was clutch the rail and hope to grow a set of gills. So far, it didn’t seem promising.

I just couldn’t believe any of it was real. How could this be happening all at once? How could my dad be so sick, actually suffering, when he had been impenetrable my entire life? How could I be in this predicament of my own? None of it was adding up. On the same day, I had been handed the burden of possible change inside of me and an omen of death thousands of miles away. The extremes felt so heavy to hold on my own, one stacked on top of the other, pushing me through the floor of the Tube car and into the earth beneath me. I didn’t know if I could do it.

“What the fuck, Dad,” I said before remembering that where I grew up, I wasn’t supposed to swear. Especially not in front of strangers. “I’m sorry. This is just a lot,” I said.

“There’s no need to apologize,” she said. “It’s very normal to be upset when someone you love and care for is sick.”

There was no time to explain to her the layers of what a diagnosis like this really meant. I didn’t know if I loved my father, but it had to be wrong not to feel it intrinsically the way I imagined other people did. It was an evil thing to even question, wasn’t it? That’s probably what someone would have said or thought if I tried to work through it all out loud. But I just didn’t know. I wasn’t sure if I cared for him, not in the way she expected I did, at least. He was never someone that had asked to be cared for by anyone. I don’t remember him ever having needs it
would have been possible for us to meet, and he was never one for sharing those things anyways. Anything we knew about, we had no possibility of fulfilling.

Beyond whether or not I loved him, all I could tell for certain was that something buried deep within my rib cage, something hard and small and jagged, was starting to hurt.

“How long does he have?” I asked her.

“That’s hard to say,” said the nurse. “Some in his condition last months.” But there was no hope in her voice. Only finality.

“What about my dad, though? Like, specifically, him?”

She sighed. “Given the progression of his illness, his history of substance abuse, and his other medical issues, I would say he’s more likely looking at weeks. Maybe a month, if you’re lucky. But there’s no way to tell for sure.”

“Okay,” I said, though it wasn’t. “Is this why you’re calling me, then? What am I supposed to do?” And what other medical issues? How much had I not known? I felt like I had missed lifespans in the nine years I’d lived away from the States.

“Miss Gallimore, you are your father’s emergency contact,” she said, slowly, as if that answered my question or was something I already knew but had forgotten. “He gave his consent for me to call you while he receives surgery.” Out of all the things I had heard that day, this was vying for the title of most shocking. My father had hardly trusted me with bringing in the mail when I was in high school, always convinced I would drop something important on the walk back to the house. Being his emergency contact was a role I felt supremely unqualified for. It was borderline irresponsible of him.

“But I’m… I’m in London. I don’t live there. None of us do. My siblings…” I rambled.
“Yes. I know that,” she said, more patiently than I would have. “Unfortunately, I don’t have the legal right to contact them at this point in time. Only you and your father do.” I realized I was being given a task. Already weary, I started making a mental list of the emails I would have to draft, the messages I would need to leave. I wondered how much time I could take off of work.

“How soon can you be here?” she asked me.

“How soon?” I said. “I can be there tomorrow.” And in saying it, it became true.

The nurse gave me the other information I needed and even offered me her personal phone number. We said our goodbyes, and she told me to have a safe flight.

Back at my flat twenty shell-shocked minutes later, I lugged my suitcase out from the closet and began stuffing its lint-filled cavern with sweaters, socks, jeans, shoes, books, moisturizers, and chargers. I packed robotically, grabbing whatever I could find that looked remotely useful. I found my passport, thankfully not yet expired, under a stack of beer-stained coasters in my bottom desk drawer.

I sent an email to my supervisor, Monica, a quickly aging woman who insisted we call her “Mon” and not wear suits to the office:

Hi Mon,

Dad’s v ill. Cancer. Have to make emergency trip back home. Shouldn’t take more than a couple days hopefully. I’ll be available over email.

Cheers,

Jane
The casualness of my email was discomfiting, but Monica liked to read emails she would have written, and I was happy to conform. You could tell her you were going to be crucified in the morning, and she would respond, “Sorry to hear that, luv!! Thx for checking in. xx Mon.”

I sent Natalie a much more formal, much more dramatic email in which I begged her to meet me in Virginia without ever explicitly writing “beg.” I would stoop very low, but I would not grovel to my 24-year-old sister, a person who made a significant portion of her living off Instagram ads. When I sent it and immediately received an “Out of Office” email in reply, it took every bit of strength I had not to throw myself and then my laptop out of my fourth story window.

With Gabe, I called and felt thankful to get his voicemail. I wouldn’t have to nag my twin brother. I knew he would book a flight at the first mention of Dad’s sickness. He would then spend the first day we were together mostly silent, pissed off that I knew about it before he did and looking for any shred of evidence I had already, undoubtedly, screwed up some portion of my responsibility.

I booked the most inexpensive ticket I could find on my credit card and tried not to think about the debt I was accumulating. A flight to Washington, D.C. wasn’t cheap, and my financial situation was anything but well managed. I’d be lying if the money didn’t make me hesitate about going through with the whole thing. But then I thought about my dad in a hospital bed with stitches in his chin and a pancreas that was killing him, and Maureen, the faceless nurse, standing at his side, waiting for me to arrive. I clicked “Purchase,” checked for the confirmation email to come through, and smacked my laptop shut. I shoved it in the messenger bag I was taking as my carryon.
It was almost midnight by the time I had everything taken care of, and I realized I hadn’t had a meal since breakfast. I went to my kitchen and ate in the dark: stale Muesli with my last splash of milk. I threw all of my produce and perishables into the trash chute by the lift. I had no idea how long it would be before I was back.

I had three hours to sleep before I needed to get up and make the trek to Heathrow. The timeline of the coming day: a scatter of numbers and terminals and announcements by loudspeakers, the awful selection of movies, the inevitable jetlag, all tumbled through my head.

I didn’t sleep, obviously, but about an hour before I had to get up, a small thought pricked at the back of my mind: I wondered at what stage of pregnancy you weren’t supposed to travel by plane. I knew it wasn’t yet, and I didn’t know if it would even matter, but I was curious nonetheless. I figured it had to be in one of my pamphlets somewhere, but with a start, I realized I had left them all in the pub by Whitechapel. That’s when the rush of the day: the doctor’s office, the test results, the walk through a mile of nowhere, the call from home on the train, all hit me, finally, at once. The fear for myself, for my father, for a future that had been certain only to suddenly go dark and light and different all at once, shrouded me like a blanket made of lead. I started to sob and didn’t stop until I heard the sound of my alarm.

Two

Fifteen years ago, before Christopher died, before I moved to another country, and before my father got sick, I was sixteen. Although I had no way of knowing it then, I was already well on my way to becoming the anxious, somewhat directionless person my adulthood would fully cultivate. The parts of myself I didn’t like had already been subsumed into my personality, no
more malleable than the sound of my voice or the arches of my feet. I chewed my nails and tried very hard to be amusing and felt insecure around almost everyone. I hated my hair, my clothes, most of the things I said in public. I still do.

When I look back at the few pictures I have of myself during that hazy, almost incomprehensible time in my life, I’m always shocked by how much of me looks nearly the same. I stood just an inch or so shorter, one last, subtle growth spurt already settling into my bones like dust or nuclear radiation. My cheeks were a bit fuller before the last remnants of my baby fat finally melted away. My hair still grazed the bottom of my rib cage, not yet chopped to my jawline in a fit of rage or experimented on with endless, unflattering shades of drug store dye. The only jarring, always unanticipated thing that stands out to me is the way I carried myself. I held my body like it was about to detonate – mostly embarrassed, almost cringing out of the camera’s grasp, but also burning with something I can only describe as the yearning to be displayed and wanted and understood by whoever would happen to see me. I remember living inside of that tension every single day and hating it. The worst of puberty had ended, but I still felt so awkward in my body, like my skin was an ill-fitting costume I didn’t want to buy but had been coerced into trying on by a wheedling saleslady hunting for commission.

There was nothing I particularly liked about being sixteen. It was a year full of feeling like a cheaply-built kitchen appliance, short-wiring constantly, one bad day away from burning the entire house down. I was sullen, restless, and sick of almost everyone I knew. I was angry, always, full of an energy I didn’t understand and had nowhere to put, like a classroom hamster trapped on its exercise wheel. More than anything, I wanted out. I wanted to get as far away as possible. A rebellious streak long festering inside me had finally bloomed, hungry and insistent, turning the smallest, most practical rules I had to follow into prison sentences. Everything I
thought resembled freedom was painfully, tantalizingly, just out of my reach—close enough to graze a fingertip against, but too far away to grasp.

But regardless of the distrust I had in my body and the staggering boredom I felt almost every day of my life, I had reason enough to celebrate. A long summer stretched greedily before me, and all I had left to survive were two weeks of my junior year, five exams I was struggling to care about, and the last few games of a soccer season which was memorable only for a horrendous shin guard tan and two near-concussions. Sports were something that made sense to me then. I still believed in things like winning and losing, scoreboards and numbered uniforms, competing for trophies and feeling disappointed, even furious, when they were not earned.

In a lot of ways, it was an era of my life made distinct by an incessant desire to prove myself, to justify the space I felt I was occupying without having earned. I had things to accomplish, tests to pass, parties to sneak out to, boys to impress. At that age, anything that happened seemed monumentally important and completely original and like it would last forever. A bad grade, a social snub, a particularly nasty rumor spreading through the halls: these were fatal afflictions.

The spring of my sixteenth year, the Virginia heat had settled and rolled across the Shenandoah Valley before anyone planned for its arrival. For about a week too long, we still wore long sleeves instead of t-shirts, boots instead of sneakers. Countless winter coats were left to rot in backseats, redundant in the sun’s indifferent glare. But that’s how it always was in Huntersville. It was a town full of people who never seemed particularly prepared for anything, even that which should have been expected or had announced its coming arrival. Growing up, I felt like I was always overhearing shocked conversations about the way seasons changed from one to the other; how the neighborhood children tended to turn a year older, every year; how a
new chain restaurant had popped up out of nowhere after being advertised for months. I don’t really blame anyone for making up reasons to get excited, for contorting the mundane into the amusing. There wasn’t much to do or see or think about in Huntersville, just acres of farmland, strip mall tanning salons, and one-lane roads leading to other towns just like ours. There were conservative values and Civil War battlefields and multiple churches on every street corner. There were the Blue Ridge Mountains, my favorite part of home, the only part I miss. The turquoise peaks rose and fell magnificently in every direction, filling every stretch of sky with austere, grey beauty in the winter when the leaves fell and lush, glorious vitality when they returned, making me feel small and nameless when I walked within them, but never insignificant. Never even scared. Like I was part of something sentient and huge, something there long before me that would exist long after I was gone. It was as close to spirituality as I could ever come.

But before you found the mountains, at the western edge of town, two interstates met near a Sheetz convenience store. One stretched wide, all the way to California, the other stretched long, from the Canadian border to Mexico. This interlocking roadway meant my town got a fair bit of traffic. Lots of truckers and road-tripping day-travelers, but also a fair number of tourists, there for hiking and apple picking and complaining about the lack of cell reception. No one stayed in Huntersville for very long, but many drove through, and many brought drugs with them. It was the perfect place for business – anonymous, convenient, and utterly naïve, a town oblivious under the weight of its Christian morals and the belief that regardless of the petty theft and the meth lab explosions and the countless cases of domestic violence, crime was just not something that happened in Huntersville. So, without much fuss, crack went to Philadelphia, New York City, and Los Angeles. Meth was delivered to Fresno, Phoenix, and Houston. Bath
salts got sent down to Orlando, Tuscaloosa, and Knoxville. But more than enough got left behind in the Valley.

I was a student at Huntersville High School, home of the Huntersville Hornets, an underfunded and overworked institution where a third of students lived below the poverty line and people graduated without ever becoming functionally literate. Less than half of any graduating class applied to college, and most of those that actually went moved directly back home after they finished if they made it to senior year.

The social groups were obvious, stratified, and rarely ever transgressed. The majority party was made up of the proud and self-titled rednecks. They were the kids who lived way out in the boonies, who spoke with thick accents and drove trucks with Confederate flags trailing defiantly behind them. They wore full camouflage and cotton shirts which proclaimed, “The South Will Rise Again.” They skipped school during deer season. They pinched dip in their mouths and spat it into all of our water fountains. They often frightened me with their ideologies, maxims of glory and history they lived by that I would never understand. But regardless of our differences, most of them treated me with kindness. I wasn’t one to get in anybody’s way.

Aside from them, there were the Young Lifers – the kids who actually prayed during the moment of silence each morning, who got up early before school for Bible study and breakfast from Chick-Fil-A. There was a small flock of punk kids who had swoopy bangs, wore all black, and ate their lunch in the art room. The pregnant girls. The three-sport athletes. The guys who made smoking weed their entire personality. The very few non-white kids who faced racial slurs on a daily basis while our teachers pretended not to hear. And then just the smattering of everyone else, students the guidance counselors probably had marked in their files as “normal,” who, aside from a few cultural specificities that came with growing up in rural Virginia,
probably could have gone to school anywhere and been fine, nearly the same. Some partied, some studied, some played sports. Some did it all, some did nothing. This is where I fell into place. I didn’t feel like my presence ever made much sense in Huntersville, so I stuck a foot in every group I could, playing soccer and doing extra credit assignments to make my teachers like me and starting to drink as soon as anyone offered, hoping that eventually, something would stick and make sense. I made friends easily enough, but for the most part, I felt more adrift than ever grounded into place.

Junior year had been difficult. I was taking mostly advanced classes, motivating myself through endless physics quizzes and Latin translations and calculus assignments with the nightmare of not getting into college and having to live at home, with my parents, forever. I was also vying for captain of the soccer team, but the competition was fierce, and Maddie Miller, our lead scorer, was our coach’s favorite. Home was little relief from it all – my parents had been fighting their whole married lives, but the past six or so months had been particularly nasty. Their blowouts had become weekly occurrences, and my father came home from work later and later and then sometimes not at all. I would try and talk to Christopher about everything, but he barely answered my calls anymore, most of our conversation relegated to quick email or text exchanges. I still missed him, but his leaving had become easier to bear over the past three years. Instead of him watching out for me, essentially raising me when our parents proved distant or useless, I had learned to take care of myself.

When the weather turned warm, the schooldays became wistful and slow – ideal for staring out the windows and not paying attention during U.S. History class – while the afternoons burned sadistically, sending sweat flying across the field as we did endless drills to buff up our footwork. Each day, I prayed for lightning or locusts or anything that might send us
home early. Finally, our coach, a somber young woman named Amy, would blow the last whistle, the sun would begin to set, and the air would stop simmering, turned breezy and fresh with the smell of grass and dirt disrupted by our cleats. The promise of summer – of no looming deadlines or outdated textbooks or assemblies about the warning signs of sex trafficking – made me hopeful again. Life had returned after a winter of slush and tedium.

On a Wednesday in the middle of May, Chelsea Finnegan and I were walking to her car after soccer practice. It was a day I would never forget, though it had started and threatened to conclude without anything particularly interesting happening.

Chelsea pulled her ponytail loose and started detangling a clump of knots that had formed in the past two hours. “Coach Amy needs to get laid, like, tonight,” she said. “She has been so bitchy lately.”

Amy had made Chelsea run laps around the field for “having a bad attitude” while we were practicing penalty kicks. Amy and Chelsea had a long-standing feud, stretching all the way back to our time on JV. Chelsea wasn’t a particularly gifted or motivated soccer player, but she had a lot of opinions about our team’s management and wasn’t afraid to take them right up the chain of command, usually in a rather blunt and accusatory manner. Our schedule, our uniforms, our warmup music – she had a bone to pick about it all. Anyone else would have probably been kicked off the team a long time ago, but for all of her bullshit and boldness, Chelsea had plenty of charm and a unique brand of self-deprecating humility when she chose to turn it on. Most importantly, she knew when to stop bulldozing and start sucking up. Her apologies were legendary. I suspected that Amy, like most of the adults Chelsea tormented, had a secret soft spot for her reckless, baffling ways. And if nothing else, she was always decent entertainment.

“Right?” Chelsea asked me, demanding agreement.
I didn’t know what to say. They were both probably wrong, Amy being arguably bitchy and Chelsea having a consistently terrible attitude, but Chelsea never wanted to hear about her own misdeeds in comparison to her enemies.’

“I mean, yeah. She definitely kind of sucks the past couple weeks,” I said, taking Chelsea’s side – the easier one.

Chelsea nodded solemnly. “I just think she’s, like, horny. And she has no one to give it to. It’s really sad, if you think about it.”

I crinkled my nose. “You’re gross.” Although Amy was probably only in her early thirties, to me, she was way too old to have any sort of sex drive. As a teenager, I couldn’t imagine any of the adults I knew having lives outside of my immediate interactions with them. I pictured my teachers going home to empty houses and sitting in the dark, plugging themselves into wall sockets and recharging like cyborgs.

“I’m not gross. I’m perceptive.”

“I’m sure she has a boyfriend, or whatever.” There were actually rumors floating around that Amy was a lesbian. Sarah Carlyle, the JV goalie, swore she once saw her with another woman at the Applebee’s in Deerfield, twenty minutes away. They were apparently holding hands. But practically speaking, this seemed impossible. Back then, being straight was an unspoken rule of living and working in the Valley.

“Do you really think someone in love could have that much hate in their heart?”

“Oh, my God, Chelsea. It was, like, four laps,” I said.

“Next time she pulls something like that, I’m walking off the field. I swear, I’ll do it,” she said. “And I’m making you come with me.”
I just nodded. We both knew that neither of those things were ever going to happen. All that mattered to Chelsea was the fantasy of revolt.

Chelsea Finnegan was my closest friend in high school. We met in ninth grade when her middle school and mine both funneled into the same high school. I remember being equal parts terrified of and intrigued by her. She was one of the shortest girls in our grade, barely topping five feet, but there was no way to lose her in a crowd. She was loud and crass and ridiculous. She snapped cinnamon gum all day long and painted her nails in shades of neon during class, looking up, annoyed, when interrupted with a question on the homework. When I first met her, she wore her bright red hair in space buns or French braids, and her t-shirts rode high on her pale stomach to show off a sparkly bellybutton ring. My mother, upon meeting her, called her “trouble.”

Before Chelsea, my best friends were three girls whose names I don’t remember anymore. They were all nice enough, if not mousy and slightly dull. By the beginning of ninth grade, I was only close with them because of how long we had already known each other. They were easy enough to exist around, and over the years we had had fun binge-watching shows like *Lizzie McGuire* before binge-watching was even a thing; playing *The Sims* on someone’s ginormous, overheating Dell computer; gossiping about the same people in our grade over and over to the point of exhaustion. Being with them was unchallenging, familiar.

But after eighth grade, I had begun to feel like I wanted something more than they could give me, something I didn’t already have. And when I started flaking on plans and ignoring their phone calls, they eventually stopped asking me to hang out. It wasn’t really anything to do with them specifically – I was just superficial. I’m not saying our friend group wasn’t well-enough liked or invited to things. We were. But the most exciting thing my friends ever went to were pool parties with the parents home and watching from their deck chairs, one eye on a People
magazine, the other planted on us. I thought of high school as a source of opportunity, a place of reinvention and mystery and a little bit of danger. So many embarrassing incidents and terrible outfit choices were finally being left behind, and I wanted to lean into something new or at least different. So I spent the summer after eighth grade avoiding my old friends, the ones who reminded me of everything I didn’t like about myself and wanted to overcome – my shyness, my awkwardness, my fear of the uncertain – and fantasizing about what was to come.

But then the first day of ninth grade arrived in real life, concrete and separate from my daydreams, and nothing magical happened the moment I stepped inside the door. Instead, I was met with a swarm of people, all of them much louder and more confident than I knew how to pretend to be, and I soon began to feel like I had been locked inside a zoo exhibit while all the guards went out for drinks. Within the first half of the day, I witnessed a teacher yell at a student for tardiness and the student actually yell back, four different couples make out against their lockers with varying levels of intensity, and a fight nearly start in front of the gym. The details of the altercation were hazy, but from what I could hear, it primarily concerned a bonfire, a street-race, and a shattered bong. The boys were pulled apart by the biology and world history teachers who were unfazed by the whole ordeal. Overall, I just remember feeling sad. Everyone was already tired, the hallways were dirty, and I didn’t feel comfortable talking to anyone I didn’t already know.

I felt like everything I had watched and read about high school was a lie. I had been stupid to think I had a chance of remaking myself into the person I wanted to be. I didn’t even know where to start. Before lunch, resigning myself to failure and no remarkability, I quietly reacquainted myself with my old friend group, and they let me follow them to a table in the back of the cafeteria. The conversation at my table was flat, and I saw the next four years unfold
before me like a bland, monochromatic series of still images. Although it seems ridiculous now, I felt so dejected I could barely eat, even though I had skipped breakfast and knew I should be hungry.

But then, out of nowhere, Chelsea sat down next to me, smacking her tray right onto the table like it had belonged there all along. Her chicken tenders nearly bounced out of their waxy carton. My friends, quiet, largely-unsmiling girls who would soon join Young Life and start ignoring me entirely, stared at her in horror. This was a major social breach.

“Hey. I’m Chelsea,” she said to us. She shoveled a couple of mustard-soaked fries into her mouth. “All of my friends go to Central Valley now. I’m just over the district line.” When no one said anything, she shrugged her shoulders, unperturbed, and kept eating.

My friends tucked their heads together, raised their eyebrows, and said nothing to her, returning to their own conversation with clear dislike for this stranger at their table.

“That sucks,” I said, several seconds too late. “I’ll bet you wish you were with them.”

“I don’t know,” she said. “Not really. Central Valley is even shittier than here.”

I had no idea if that was true – it hadn’t even occurred to me some high schools could be worse than others, but I said, “Totally. That place sucks.”

She smiled, graciously not exposing my obvious bluff.

Chelsea and I talked for the rest of lunch without a moment of awkwardness or silence between us. Within minutes, it felt as if we’d known each other for years. She had a dirtier mouth and a darker sense of humor than almost anyone I knew. Especially any girl. And to make her even more intriguing, she already had a boyfriend who went to Central Valley. His name was Justin, and he was a sophomore. She told me they’d gotten drunk together over the summer. To
someone like me, burdened with innocence and a competing desperation to grow up, this was invaluable information.

“What’s being drunk like?” I asked, jealous and enthralled. The only alcohol I’d ever really had was a glass of champagne at my cousin Brendon’s wedding in early June. The taste had been unexpected at first, either too sweet or too sour, I couldn’t decide, but I quickly started to enjoy the bubbly feeling in my throat as I drank it. I liked that by the time my glass was empty, the whole world had turned a bit fuzzier, glittery around the edges.

“It was so much fun. I mean, the actual drinking part wasn’t that fun. Beer tastes kind of gross. But the rest of it was great,” she said. “You should hang out with us some weekend.”

I was shocked with how quickly she had extended me an invitation. With anyone else, a casual hangout like this one, especially with an older boy, would have taken at least a few weeks to cultivate. Up until then, all of the friend-making I had done was determined years ago, either on an elementary school playground where the rules were fluid and universal, or orchestrated by my mother with her choice of Sunday School class. The older I got, the more I began to realize that making a new female friend was a slow, often arduous process with unspoken levels to conquer and countless social hoops to hurl yourself through. But Chelsea was different – rules like that didn’t apply to her. I doubt she noticed them at all. She didn’t mind imposing or making herself familiar with people she barely knew, and everyone was charmed by her nerve. She could make you feel special, included, with very little effort.

“I don’t know if my mom would let me,” I said, so lame I wanted to die. My mom rarely allowed me to hang out with guys, especially ones whose mothers she didn’t know. Besides her own sons, in her eyes, all boys were dirty, more or less animals, not to be trusted or let inside the house where they could get too comfortable. She was stiff and frosty to my handful of male
friends and downright rude to the couple of harmless semi-boyfriends I had invited over for
chaste afternoons of pizza bagels and *The Real World*, usually with Gabe and Natalie hanging
around the living room with us.

Chelsea looked at me like I was a moron and stole a fry off my tray. “Just lie,” she said.
“I mean, you don’t even have to really lie. Just say you’re hanging out with me. And I’ll be
there, so it’s not even not true. See?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said. “I guess that’s not really a lie.” This was the first of countless times
Chelsea would convince me to act beyond the boundaries of my moral code, flimsy as they
might’ve already been. She had this uncanny way of explaining to me, very patiently, how
something she wanted us to do wasn’t technically breaking a rule. With Chelsea, it was never
*exactly* cheating or stealing or telling a lie, although on the rare occasions we got caught and I
was asked to explain myself, I could never recreate the train of thought that led me to believe
what we were doing was okay. I needed Chelsea to get me there.

“What class do you have next?” she asked as lunch came to an end. She was sticking
Chips Ahoy crumbs to her fingers and sucking them clean.

“Earth science,” I said. “With Mr. Tyler.”

Her face lit up. “Me too.” So we walked there together, Chelsea parting the crowded
hallway with magical ease. In class, I took notes while she texted her boyfriend under her desk.
She would snicker loudly every couple of minutes and nudge my shoulder to show me something
I didn’t really understand but would smile anyways. Boarding the bus home, she pulled me by
the wrist to one of the last rows – usually reserved for the rare seniors without cars and freshmen
on varsity teams – and shared her headphones with me. I didn’t know any of her music – her
iPod was stocked with artists like Lil Wayne, Kanye West, Common. My parents hated rap, so
anything I heard with friends I had to pretend to know the beat to, picking up lyrics and inserting the more common refrains as soon as I could anticipate them.

As the bus roared to life, Gabe turned around from his seat to watch us. He was sitting with a cluster of his twig-legged orchestra friends. They were eating Sour Patch Kids and arguing heatedly about something related to Dungeons and Dragons, their current obsession. I hadn’t even noticed him when I had gotten on the bus.

When the bus stopped at my driveway half an hour later, Chelsea and I realized we lived only about ten minutes apart. It felt like unbelievable luck. I gave back her earbud and followed Gabe off the bus. I was about to start walking up the driveway when I heard the distinctive sound of flesh against glass. It was Chelsea, her hand pressed against the grimy bus window.

“See you tomorrow,” she said, grinning.

And so our friendship began. Within days, we were inseparable. We practiced for soccer tryouts, we wrote biting, red-sharped comments in our yearbooks about the girls we didn’t like, we traded clothes and lip gloss and paperback books, we had sleepovers that lasted whole weekends, sometimes only ending when one of our parents would drop us off for school on Monday morning. The rest of our grade, and not shortly after, the whole school, soon realized what I was the first to see – that Chelsea was naturally cool, something priceless at that age and for most people, unattainable. She quickly rose through the ranks of popularity and happily took me along as her second-in-command. We started lying to our parents and going out together, drinking and smoking and, as soon as Chelsea broke up with the guy at Central Valley, hanging out with boys. Although we eventually admitted a few more girls into our circle, we always put each other first, like planets orbiting the same precious, scorching star.
By junior year, we both had our driver’s licenses, but Chelsea usually gave me rides because Gabe and I were forced to share a car – an overheating, refrigerator-white Nissan Versa our father bought for next to nothing. Because Gabe had orchestra rehearsal every day before school and practice with his band every day afterwards, I only had reasonable claim on the weekends. Chelsea was generous enough to take me to and from school, sort of out of kindness, but mostly because my riding the bus would be too humiliating for her to handle. This was a pretty perfect arrangement, but if I wanted to go anywhere else during the week without Chelsea, and my mom was using her minivan, I was forced into the degrading position of begging my other friends for rides. It wasn’t worth asking my father – he would never let any of us drive his precious Mercedes-Benz, a vintage 230 SL he cherished and had owned since he was a teenager himself.

On the outside, I’m sure Gabe and I sharing the Nissan made perfect sense. It was a practical arrangement – economic and more than fair for a pair of twins. It was actually uncharacteristically generous of our father to get us a car at all. He made Christopher pay for his own vehicle completely by himself. My poor older brother spent an entire summer toiling away at the McDonald’s grill line until one night when he drove home in a very used Toyota Corolla with a dented bumper and no air conditioning to speak of. He stepped out of the car beaming, probably expecting praise. In most households, that’s what hard work like his would have earned. But our father rolled his eyes and said it would break down within a year or two. “That’s one ugly waste of money,” he told Christopher, circling the Toyota with a critical eye.

The rest of us watched on, horrified, while Christopher’s proud grin faded into an angry, vacant glare. Our mother kissed him on the cheek and touched her hand to his back, the most comfort she could offer him with Dad right there, expecting her compliance. We never talked
about it – how threatened our father was by Christopher, how he took every possible chance he could to undermine his oldest son. But we all knew. With my father and my brothers, it was a complicated sort of dynamic. Gabe was afraid of Dad and couldn’t pretend otherwise – it was as obvious and excruciating as anything you might see between the lions or wolves on Animal Planet. My father took full advantage of his power, and Gabe was no real threat to his authority. But with Christopher it was different – Dad couldn’t control him. His threats, his put-downs, his temper – it all fell flat because Christopher refused to show him that he cared. It didn’t stop Dad from trying, though. The episode with the car was just one of a thousand examples.

When Gabe and I turned sixteen, we prepared ourselves for a similar sort of contract. No car, awful jobs, humiliation at the end. Gabe was especially ready. But for reasons still unknown, we were given a pair of keys instead. “Happy birthday,” Dad told us at breakfast while Mom served us heart-shaped pancakes, her birthday morning tradition. “Don’t even think about asking for gas money.”

The fundamental problem with the car was that that Gabe and I were remarkably different people with very little overlapping interests, and sharing a car only exacerbated what separated us from each other. He wanted to plaster our bumper in socialist stickers and pool our funds to have the Nissan painted black – two things that would have alienated us from the rest of our peers and perhaps even put us in danger. I wanted cherry-scented air fresheners and a hula girl ornament for the dashboard. We settled on nothing, both of us quietly angry at the other, and the car remained an object that didn’t really belong to anyone. I hardly understood how I could have a brother, much less a twin, so different than myself. But it had always been that way. Even as a child, Gabe was weird and distant with the rest of us, far more occupied with writing sad music and playing *The Legend of Zelda* alone in his room than he ever was in other people or the
outside world. Besides birthday parties when we were really little and a bedroom one dreadful
winter after Natalie was born and our grandmother moved in, we never had to share much, which
made the car situation all the more difficult. Whenever I got the Nissan back from Gabe, it
always smelled like Wendy’s and skunk weed, and he had ruined all of the radio pre-sets. But I
didn’t ever confront him, and I never complained to my parents, even when I really wanted the
car. Gabe had way more dirt on me than I ever had on him, and as annoying and useless as I
thought he was, he never snitched on me. Not even when it probably could’ve earned him
something with our parents – an extra hour before curfew, a spare ten bucks. So I led by his
example, and I never got burned. I was mostly just lucky Chelsea didn’t mind driving me around.

She and I were putting our bags in her trunk when we noticed a few members of the
boys’ team walking towards us from their own practice field, just a bit down the gravel road.
They waved as they approached, and Chelsea slammed the trunk shut with a satisfied smile. She
was entering her element.

Chelsea and I were friends with most of the soccer boys. There was a healthy rivalry and
maturing flirtation between our teams, and since we spent our afternoons on fields only a
hundred or so feet away from each other, a good portion of mental space during practice was
absorbed in hoping for some sort of forced interaction with the guys. We nursed a collective
fantasy that one of them might kick a ball to our field on accident, that we might have to share a
bus to the state semi-finals, that someone’s bored and overly-invested mother might plan a joint-
team dinner before the season’s end. We craved their attention, and we liked to think they
wanted ours as well. As soon as it got warm enough outside, skin became currency. They would
go shirtless, and we would roll our shorts up as high as they would go without Coach Amy
yelling at us to get our heads on straight. But it felt worth it. The thrill of being seen, hopefully
even admired, by any of them was intoxicating, even if it left a shameful taste on the tongue after the moment had passed.

“Hey Finnegan,” said Garret Winters. He had raced a bit ahead of the group, sliding up to Chelsea and leaning his body against her car. “Gallimore,” he said, nodding affably at me. I nodded back. He smiled with both rows of his perfect, spearmint teeth, and I almost shivered. Garret was one of those boys who was keenly aware of both his own physical attractiveness and how to use it on women to his advantage. He was sharply charismatic and so amiable that it frightened me. There was something in him I understood as capable of getting basically anything he wanted, something that didn’t like to fail. But I had no one to tell these suspicions to – Garret was a god at Huntersville, and no one would have wanted to believe me.

“What’s good?” he asked us.

“Nothing much. Amy’s just riding our asses,” said Chelsea without looking at me. She inched closer to Garret.

“Damn. That really sucks,” said Garret earnestly, angling his body towards her.

“I know,” said Chelsea. She stared at him, and he stared back. I looked away.

I felt like I was lingering in the background of a group photo with a bunch of people I barely knew but were trying to be gracious and include me. But this was a common occurrence whenever Chelsea was around Garret. She was in love with him, and he was finally starting to come around. They had been hooking up for most of the school year – only as friends, Garret took every possible opportunity to remind her – but everything changed for Chelsea when he asked her to prom at the end of March, leaving a bouquet of white roses and a note on her windshield after class. He even made the whole night a real date – going inside her house to meet her parents, buying the exact corsage she wanted, picking up the bill for her dinner at the Italian
restaurant where we took shots in the parking lot before heading to the dance. Since April, they had been working closer to a relationship, moving as quickly as possible for two people who refused to publicly admit they liked spending time with each other. It was a competition in withholding vulnerability.

Nate Fisher, Caleb Smith, and Miles Towson caught up to us. Nate and Caleb were friendly, unsurprising people with temperaments that would make them good dads and great healthcare consultants one day. They both high-fived me upon arrival. Miles and I made brief eye contact, enough to acknowledge each other’s existence without being affiliative. The boys flanked Chelsea and me against the car, the smell of sweat and body spray and PowerAde mingling powerfully together. I chewed my thumbnail, feeling nervous and excited in their presence.

The conversation turned to the party Nate and his older brother, Tyler, were throwing at their house that weekend. Like Christopher, Tyler was finishing up his junior year of college. He was coming home for the summer to help out at their dad’s auto body shop.

“You guys are coming, right?” Nate asked Chelsea and me.

“Hell yeah, I’ll be there,” said Chelsea. “Someone has to make it a party.” Garret watched her mouth while she spoke.

“That’s the spirit, Finnegan,” said Caleb. “I’m ready to get fucked up.” The boys echoed his sentiments by slapping their hands together and making guttural noises.

“You coming, Jane?” Garret asked me, smiling like I almost didn’t have a choice. Chelsea looked at me with piercing, do-not-disappoint-me eyes.

“Hopefully,” I said. “I want to, for sure. But Christopher gets home, I think, Saturday, so I don’t know if I’ll be able to get out of family stuff.”
I doubted we had much, if any, family stuff planned, but I was really looking forward to seeing Christopher. He hadn’t been back since January because he’d gone to Florida for his spring break. Usually, we supplemented these absences by me and whoever else I could rally travelling up to Vermont to see a basketball game and spend some time with him in Burlington. But this year, it hadn’t worked out. I had asked if I could visit a bunch of times, but each weekend I’d offered, he’d been too busy with team stuff or his girlfriend or school. I was trying as hard as I could not to take it personally or read too far into it, but it was the most distance I had ever felt between us. Something was off whenever we managed to speak – he sounded preoccupied, unenthusiastic, sometimes even defensive. I just hoped that this summer would set things back to normal.

“Just bring him,” said Caleb. “A bunch of guys from his grade are gonna be there. At least Tyler and Dustin and Ryan, for sure.” These were all guys Christopher had played sports with in high school. I didn’t think they kept in touch very much anymore, but there was no reason for me to think my brother wouldn’t want to see them. Maybe he would even be excited about it.

“Oh cool,” I said. “Well, yeah, I’m sure I’ll be there then.”

“Cool,” said Nate, slapping his hand on my shoulder. “Tyler’s getting tons of shit. It’s gonna be off the hook.”

“That’s what I like to hear,” said Chelsea, wiggling her body around.

The boys started talking about the team they were playing the next night. Caleb and Nate got into a semi-argument about Shenandoah High’s defense, while Garret egged them on and Chelsea laughed at everything they said, her head bobbling from Garret to Caleb to Nate and back again. Miles peppered his opinion in every once a while, and it was always met with
unanimous approval. Although Garret was louder and tried harder when he bantered, Miles was the leader of their clique, an implicit but undoubtable role that clung to him like a shadow. I wondered what it would be like to command a group like Miles could, to drive it forward with an unspoken authority and find validation in every interaction I attempted.

“We’re gonna get crushed, dude,” said Caleb, still harping about the game. “Be fucking realistic. Jack Farley has been unstoppable this season, and their goalie is on steroids or something. Kid is massive and fast.”

“He’s not that fast,” said Nate, his face beginning to turn red. “Miles is faster.”

“I don’t know about that,” Garret said in fake-whisper to Chelsea, who cackled.

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, mate,” said Miles, playing into the joke. “It’s nice to feel so supported by my friends.”

I couldn’t help but laugh myself, but I stopped myself quickly. Miles’ head jerked in my direction and then away. I looked anywhere but at him.

After a few more minutes, the banter started to hint at ending, and I was grateful. Talking with Nate and Caleb quickly became uninteresting, and Garret made me nervous. Miles was the only one I would have wanted to talk to for longer, but that wasn’t really an option.

“Y’all better not lose tomorrow,” said Chelsea as the boys started to back away from us. She had a strand of her hair wrapped around her finger.

“Hey, you’re talking to the Hornets,” said Garret with overblown, jaunty confidence.

“We don’t know how to lose.”

“Yeah. No matter what our record says,” said Miles.
A breeze whipped past, causing the hair on my arms to prickle up. I rubbed my skin and held my arms close to my sides. In a small, inanely hopeful sliver of my brain, I thought I felt Miles looking at me while it happened.

They waved goodbye and walked off in their Adidas slides, laughing about something Chelsea and I couldn’t hear.

In the car, I blasted the heat and Chelsea tuned the radio for today’s top hits.

“Jesus, Garret looked so hot,” said Chelsea, turning out of our school’s compound and onto the backroad that would take us home. The oak trees lining the passage encroached from both sides, shutting out most of the light with their newborn leaves and turning the lane cavelike and safe. Chelsea checked her teeth in her rearview mirror, running her tongue from molar to molar. “Like, what the fuck? Who allowed that to happen.”

But I couldn’t really think about Garret at that moment. My mind was turning around Miles like it always did after I saw him, trying to make sense of him, everything he said and everywhere he looked, dissecting my limited data for possible meaning.

I knew Miles well enough for a number of reasons. Besides being on soccer and the surface-level, unsolicited knowledge everyone had of each other due to our school’s small size, my father worked with his mother at the same mid-sized university about thirty minutes north of Huntersville. She was the music department’s secretary, and my dad taught guitar, composition, and a bit of music theory. When Miles and I were slightly younger, we were both often dragged by our parents to the department’s lifeless summer picnics and holiday parties. There, we spent most of our time half-ignoring each other at the table for the faculty’s children, or, if we were lucky enough to be outside, kicking a soccer ball back and forth, saying nothing and making minimal eye contact. I never knew what to talk to him about, and I didn’t want to make a sound
unless I could muster up something hilarious or fascinating, but the whole ordeal always made me so nervous that I ended up not saying anything at all. When we were about fifteen, Miles stopped coming with his mom. After a few disappointing events, I stopped going also. I stood my ground on the principle that I was too old to be forced, but it was really just because there was no point if Miles wasn’t there.

Miles’ father was never mentioned and his mother was British, which, when he transferred into our school in the seventh grade, made him incredibly exotic and instantly the most popular boy in our year. New students were rare in Huntersville – some families could claim last names and farmland and cemetery plots from over a hundred years ago, so an attractive boy – from Europe of all places – was bound to cause an uproar. But besides that, he had an innately likeable quality about him. A smile that was easy to trust, an effortless sense of humor, a way of walking that signaled you were welcome to join him wherever he went.

It goes nearly without saying that I harbored a massive, incredibly conspicuous crush on Miles for years. This was hardly an unusual sentiment among the girls in our grade – practically everyone was in love with him, determined to separate herself from the pack and claim him for her own. But if he knew about the uproar he had caused among most of our school’s female population, he never let on, regarding all but the most conspicuous flirting with good-natured friendliness. He didn’t even get his first girlfriend until sophomore year – Rosalie Chapman, a volleyball player with perfectly flat-ironed hair and a father on city council. They were the Huntersville it-couple for four months before they ended things at Dairy Queen after rumors of Rosalie’s infidelity finally reached Miles’ ears.

When they broke up, I entertained a growing desire to tell him how I felt. It wasn’t completely out of nowhere – we had started hanging around together when he was dating
Rosalie. As if by magic, but really just due to Chelsea’s incredibly skilled social manipulations, our friend groups began to morph together, linking up at parties, at Buffalo Wild Wings after football games, and at lunch, occupying the long table in the middle of the room, right where I had wanted to sit since the first day of freshman year. It was a joining of people and personalities and relationships that made sense on both paper and in practice, and I have to admit that I reveled in feeling so accepted. Even if at my core, I knew I didn’t relate to or particularly enjoy most of them, I liked the idea of us all being friends. I liked our inside jokes, the nights we spent with nothing better to do than rotate through each other’s basements, the slang we traded back and forth. I liked knowing I would almost always have someone to talk to in the kitchen at a party if I got bored in the living room. More than anything, as ugly and shallow as it feels to admit, I liked belonging to something the majority of people did not, and I liked that they knew they didn’t. And it didn’t hurt that the closer we all became, the more time I got to spend with Miles.

An individual friendship had also started to form, tentatively, between us. I had finally recovered from my crippling silence around him, now able to keep up with his humor and make conversation with him like an actual human being. He even seemed intrigued by what I said, which rarely happened with the boys I knew unless I was purposefully trying to please them. Miles and I sat next to each other in Latin and instant messaged about the homework from time to time, slipping in the occasional joke, music recommendations and recent bit of drama circulating through our friend group. I somehow lucked out with the seat directly across from him at our lunch table, and we would talk the whole hour about what his life was like in England before he moved, where we wanted to travel when we were older, how much we were looking forward to the 2002 FIFA World Cup. Sometimes, I swore I could feel his eyes following me
when I wasn’t really paying attention – resting on my knees when I wore a dress to school, my hands when I scribbled down the gerundive rules in Latin class, the back of my neck when we all stood in line to buy tickets for the newest Lord of the Rings movie. I thought about him constantly – the clean smell of his laundry detergent, the mole below his bottom lip, the way he cleared his throat before talking when called on in class. I was infatuated.

But just when things seemed most fortuitous for something to happen between us, he turned cold on me.

I was slowly building up the courage to ask him to be my partner on an upcoming Latin project. If he said yes, we would get to work together outside of class, just the two of us. I had rehearsed what I wanted to say on a Sunday night, not wanting to sound uneven or pitchy when the moment came. Chelsea and I spent at least an hour on the phone planning out my every word. She coached me, patiently, and I felt confident thanks to her guidance. But Monday morning, he walked into the classroom without so much as a glance in my direction. Anything I said, he would barely respond to. I knew my brilliant plan to linger by his desk while we packed our books away, effectively cornering him into the conversation, had to be abandoned. And it wouldn’t have worked anyways – he practically sprinted out the door the moment the bell rang. From the day on, it was never the same between us. We went from being sort-of-friends to basically enemies, and I had no idea why. He ignored my messages, responding days later if ever. He switched seats with Caleb so he was no longer directly across from me at lunch. When we hung out in a group, he acted like I didn’t exist.

It was my first real heartbreak, and it somehow hurt worse because it was so unfulfilled. His dismissal stung in places I didn’t know were exposed. I felt like this fragile, beautiful thing I had cultivated out of nothing and made important, filled with hope, had been smashed to bits
before me. I took my anxieties to Chelsea, like I took everything back then, and she was shocked. She had no idea what happened. Everything had been going according to plan. She hugged me and let me cry and told me we would find someone even better. We would pretend like nothing ever happened, and we did. It got easier once I stopped trying and finally accepted that he hated me. I thought about asking him what I had done, but I knew the truth might have been more painful than I could handle. A year had nearly passed, and it had become so typical I wasn’t caught off guard by his coldness around me. For the most part, I didn’t care anymore. I had Chelsea to thank for a lot of it – she taught me basically everything I knew about boys and dating, games of affection. After the disaster with Miles, she refused to let me wallow, reassuring me constantly and introducing me to every single boy she knew within the county line.

I knew I owed her the same loyalty with Garret. It was just hard to give, somehow. He made me afraid for her in a way I didn’t know how to express, and that made it all the more terrifying. I felt disloyal for my suspicions – I had no concrete reason to distrust him, just alarm bells ringing in my head whenever I saw him coming closer, circling her like a shark.

“Come on,” Chelsea said, prompting me when I said nothing and didn’t affirm Garret’s appeal. “You have to admit he’s, like, crazy hot.”

“Yeah, for sure,” I said, apparently unconvincingly. It’s not that I didn’t agree with her, but it didn’t feel worth mentioning. Garret was attractive in the way water could freeze into ice and then melt back down into water. It was factual, not interesting.

“You really don’t think so?” she asked, slightly indignant. “Shut up.”

“Chels, of course he is. It’s, like, obvious.”
“But what?” Chelsea frowned at me. She would never admit it, but I knew part of the reason she wanted him so badly was because so many other girls did. I didn’t think she liked someone questioning what she believed to be universal appeal.

“Can you chill out? He’s just not my type.”

“Hot isn’t your type?” she asked, defensive.

“Do you want me to find your boyfriend hot?”

“He’s not my boyfriend,” she said coyly. “Yet.”

“Yet,” I agreed, trying to stop a fight from happening.

She smiled, a bit smugly. “Whatever. You’re only saying all this because you have someone. It’s kind of cute, actually.”

I shrugged, wanting to seem indifferent to her patronizing comment, but I didn’t even convince myself. I did have someone, and I was actually pretty happy about it.

I had been dating Joey Russo for almost eight months. After Miles’ rejection and a few other test runs, he was the target Chelsea finally selected for me, and this time, things fell right into place. Joey had graduated from Huntersville when I was a sophomore, making him almost three years older than me. He had enrolled in the local community college afterwards where he took classes in communications and advertising. On the side, he dealt weed to his new classmates, his buddies from high school who also hadn’t left Huntersville, and occasionally, to me and my friends, although he didn’t really want to. “I hate mixing business with pleasure,” he would say every time I talked him into it, handing me the prescription bottle before kissing me, hard. I always got a discount.

Joey was doing surprisingly well in his college classes, and I was proud of him – partly because I actually was, but also because that’s what I thought I should be. Being in a relationship
with Joey often made me feel like I was rehearsing to be a girlfriend, and so much of what I said and thought about our relationship was informed by teen television shows or my more experienced friends’ instruction. I remember believing wholeheartedly it was my job, and my job alone, to encourage him with his classes, to make sure he didn’t drop out, to pick up the slack he couldn’t carry.

Academics had never been Joey’s thing – he was the first to admit it. When he was still in high school, he had a pretty terrible reputation, and I had a small but potent crush on him. A big name at Huntersville, he was understood as something between class clown and degenerate, and I liked both sides of him, the charged chaos he represented. Generally hostile to authority of any kind, he managed to charm and terrify our teachers in equal measure, usually succeeding in his efforts to avoid either discipline or encouragement in his studies. He was a lost cause and a begrudging source of amusement for the administrators, and I don’t think anyone thought he was worth trying to change. His intentions were clear. The only thing he ever cared about was football, and when he blew out his knee and couldn’t finish out his senior season, he redirected all of his efforts into getting drunk, derailing his classes – one time even making a student teacher cry during an in-class dramatization of Julius Caesar – and flirting with anyone who caught his eye. Luckily enough, I thought at the time, that included me.

We met in fourth period study hall. Joey actually had Algebra II during that block, but the teacher overseeing the class doubled as an assistant football coach, and he let Joey and his friends have the run of the place. There was nothing about Joey I wasn’t instantly, absurdly attracted to. I loved the crookedness of his face: his gapped front teeth and his off-center nose and the pink scar tissue slicing his jaw into almost perfect halves. I loved his legendary status, the insane, almost mythical stories about him, and I loved them even more when he took me out
for the first time over summer break and told me the truth, dispelling the watered-down, secondhand version of events I had been told – that he and his friend Tim had fought five guys at once in a Wendy’s parking lot, not three; that yes, of course, he had been the one to set off fireworks in the bathroom during standardized testing last year; that at Clay McKinley’s prom after-party, he had shotgunned nine Rolling Rocks in a row without puking, don’t believe a word anybody said otherwise. He exhaled dominance and crude humor and a primal sort of magnetism, able to command any room he entered with very little effort. Being his choice made me feel that some of that prestige was also mine to enjoy.

With the exception of Miles – and perhaps exacerbated after my disappointment with him – the boys I usually found myself interested in were all sorts of wrong for me, at least according to my grandmother. Joey was my first serious boyfriend, but the handful of boys who had kissed me and passed notes to me and offered to sneak me out of my house for rides in their Chevys all had a few overlapping characteristics. None really wanted to go to college or live anywhere other than Huntersville. Some were pretty heavily tattooed, Grim Reapers and Bible verses and giant, heavy crosses slouching across their shoulder blades and biceps. They all smoked a lot and drank even more. They were all older than me – some of them had actually been in high school with Christopher.

When my brother heard from Mom that Joey and I were dating, he called me and went on a short but condescending rant about how Joey was a complete dirtbag: What about all of the terrible things he did to Hannah Bolton when they were dating, why was I being so stupid, didn’t I know I could do so much better? The longer we talked, the angrier I got. It was the first time we had ever gotten in a real fight. Besides his breaks from college, Christopher hadn’t really been around when I started high school, and at moments like this it became clear that the person he
imagined me to still be was wildly different than the person I was becoming. In his eyes, I would always be the little sister. I would always need his protection.

“You’re going to get hurt and look like an idiot,” he said. “You already look like an idiot.”

I hung up the phone.

We didn’t talk for weeks afterwards, at that point, the longest time we had ever gone without speaking, and he hadn’t brought up Joey since. He never apologized, but he learned to tactfully steer the conversation towards something else if it ever drifted too close to the subject of my boyfriend. On some level, I knew he was right, but that didn’t make me want to break up with Joey. If anything, it just pushed me further towards him. I hated knowing that Christopher didn’t respect my decision, that he looked down on me because of it, and I resented him for it. And I couldn’t help wanting to be with Joey, and that desire ultimately outweighed anyone’s disapproval. The truth is, I wanted so badly to unearth the brokenness I believed he had to have. I could almost sense it lying somewhere, shamed and silent, beneath layers of swagger and bravado and Hanes undershirts. I longed for private access to the parts of him other girls had been denied, the small, hurt core I hoped to be the one to heal. If I could do that, I would be special, and we would finally, maybe, be equals. I would give him something he couldn’t reach on his own. I would free him, save him, love him like he hadn’t known he could be loved. But so far, despite all my efforts, I hadn’t found what I was looking for. I hadn’t gotten close.

I don’t know why I always seemed to go for guys like Joey, why they were the ones who saw me. My therapists have offered plenty of theories over the years – my low self-esteem, my self-destructive tendencies, my troubled relationship with my father, and so on – and they might all be right. But I think I’ve just always wanted someone bolder, louder, fuller of life than I could
be. I watched Joey fight for things he wanted, sometimes fighting just to fight, and it made me imagine a day I could replicate him. I think I believed that if I could be loved by someone who demanded to be noticed by the world and would not be humbled by it, who didn’t shy from the wild, scary things inside them, I could do the same. The problem, I would painfully learn, is that relationships like those don’t leave much room for compromise. Someone always ends up burning through the other.

Chelsea and I spent the rest of the ride theorizing about every possible thought running through Garret’s mind. She was nearly shaking with excitement for Nate and Tyler’s party.

“You are coming, right?” she asked me, suspicious when I went silent.

“Like, ninety-nine percent yes. Coming. Probably.”

“Do not bullshit me. You have to go. I need you there,” she said.

“You’re just going to ditch me anyways once you and Garret start talking,” I said. This momentarily stunned her.

“Well, Brooke and Allison are also going to be there! And all our other friends,” she said. “And I promise not to completely dip.”

“You say that every time. Like, really. Every time.”

Chelsea moaned. “Come on, Jane.”

“I am probably going to go. It really just depends on Christopher.”

“Do not use your family as an excuse,” she said, a bit threateningly. “You’re always fucking doing that.

“No, I’m not,” I said, even though it was probably true.

“Just bring him,” she ignored me. “Nate was serious. He’ll have people to talk to. It’s just our friends and a few other people he also knows.”
“Yeah,” I said. “I’m not worried about that part.”

“Then what?” she asked.

“Christopher has never seen me, like, drink or anything before. I feel like it might be weird.”

“Why would that be weird?” She said, slightly softer.

“I don’t know. It just is, I think. When he left, I wasn’t doing any of that stuff. And now, everything is different.”

“He’s not your dad, Jane. If he cares, that’s what’s weird. Plus, he’s, like, a college athlete. I’m sure he’s fucked up all the time now.” But that’s what Chelsea didn’t understand. He wasn’t actually my dad, I knew that. But he had raised me in some ways more than my actual father ever had. He had taken care of me for most of my childhood, and the thought of disappointing him any more than I already had by dating Joey was almost unthinkable.

“Maybe,” I said. We sat in silence for a few moments.

“Please come,” Chelsea said as we neared my driveway. She smiled plaintively. “Please. Please. You’re my best friend. Please, Jane.” I couldn’t help smiling back at her. With Chelsea, I always wanted to say yes. She had done so much for me, had made me so much better over the years, and I wanted to be able to give her what she asked from me. I didn’t know how else to repay her.

“Fine. I’ll come,” I said. “But you can’t totally leave me for Garret. I’m serious this time.”

Chelsea squealed and squeezed my hand. It felt nice to be able to make her happy.

Both our houses were tucked on a backroad that split off one of the busier routes through Huntersville. She stopped at the end of my driveway, giving me a hug around the neck and a
promise to call later before speeding off to finish the mile or so left to her own house – a huge, brand new McMansion crowded by faux-Corinthian columns in the front and a heated pool in the back. Chelsea’s parents were old Huntersville money. Her father’s family owned half the county’s dairy farms, and her mother’s family operated several car and tractor dealerships throughout the area. Her father was always working, and her mother spent most weekends on trips to places like Charleston and Savannah with her sorority sisters. Once in a while, when they were both home and I was at their house, they would embarrass Chelsea by offering to fix us cocktails and telling us with a wink to invite over whoever we wanted – they would stay out of our way. Chelsea didn’t like them very much, but I found them funny and harmless. Going to their house was like staying at a resort with no rules and very eager housekeepers. My own domestic reality couldn’t have been more different.

At the end of my gravel driveway loomed an American Foursquare-style house, cube-shaped and logical in structure, not unlike the many other homes extending from this section of hillside, though we had no real neighbors. Our drive, sprawling yard, and tree line enclosure took care of that.

The dulling, lemon-yellow paint was always in need of a new coat no matter how recently my mother had it touched up. The grey shingled roof blended right into the sky on cloudy days, and the steps to the front porch were missing railing on the right side. Above her cluttered desk in a corner of the kitchen, my mother kept a sprawling, scratched-up list of house projects – “repaint front door,” “regrout half-bath tile,” “pave driveway” – that saw many more added items than subtracted ones. There was never enough money and never any time.

Our house had been built in the early 1900s and bought by my parents when they were newly married and my mother was pregnant with Christopher. It was about five years before
Gabe and I were born. They got the place for a steal, my father often said. The last owners had kept the house in their family since the 1930s but it had fallen into further disrepair with each generation until the sole dweller was an elderly lady with terrible eyesight and a posse of cats who used most of the downstairs as a litter box. My parents had their work cut out for them, and my mother wanted to pass. She suggested a place in the brand-new subdivision, Emerald Point. Something cleaner, easier, with more children for her unborn son to play with one day. The whole neighborhood was only a few minutes away from her own childhood home, where her parents still lived. It was closer to schools, parks, the library. Whenever she tells the story, I can almost hear her begging my father to see her side, clutching her pregnant stomach and trying not to get emotional. But my father saw potential. A project. The way he tells it, he fell in love with the house – its huge windows overlooking all sides of the property, its history, its space and its privacy. He insisted, and when my father wanted something, he always found a way to get it. So my mother gave in, and slowly, with a loan from my grandfather and the remains of my father’s savings, the house regained some of the charm years of neglect had stolen from it. Walls were repainted in shades of beige and white; carpet was ripped up, and the floors beneath were buffed into submission; tulips and pansies and gardenias were planted around the porch. But there weren’t enough months before Christopher was born, and my mother’s time was suddenly occupied like she hadn’t imagined. At that point, my father had settled in, pleased enough with his half-completed ventures. He claimed the downstairs suite as a home office even though my mother had dreamed of it being a guest room, a luxury her own mother never had, and hired a locksmith to set a deadbolt on the door. He said the lock was there in case they ever decided to make it a bedroom after all, but we all knew that wasn’t ever going to happen. He just wanted to keep the rest of us out of his space.
I rarely looked forward to being home, but two parts of my house I especially enjoyed were the front yard and the driveway that sliced through it. I liked the unkempt grass, the bugs, the birds, the smell of dirt and earth and once-living matter decaying back to nothing. I liked the peace I felt while making the walk, the calmness that flooded as my head cleared, if only for a few seconds, before I stepped inside and faced God knows what on the other end. I liked that deer would roam through our trees in bands of three and four, creeping close enough for us to count the spots on their backs and distinguish them from one another. I liked that if I ever wandered through the grass, I would stumble upon a graveyard of forgotten toys, deflated soccer balls, broken Nerf guns left behind in battle. From far enough away, the house looked lovely and storied rather than creepy and broken, the way I felt it really was. But the walk was never quite long enough, and that evening, like all evenings, I reached the front door far too quickly.

I took stock of who might be home. We had a square patch of gravel to the left of the porch where we parked our cars since our house was too old to come with a garage. My mother’s van was in her spot, and Gabe had parked the Nissan right behind it. It was barely past six, so he must have only just gotten home. All that was missing was my father’s Mercedes. This was something of an ominous but not unusual sign. When he was in a good state of mind, my father raced home from work as fast as he possibly could so he could have an hour or so to himself in his office before dinner. When he and my mom were fighting, or when he was just generally pissed off, he avoided us at all costs. He would camp out at one of his favorite bars for hours, reading and drinking and grading papers, chatting with anyone willing to entertain him. On those nights, he was never back before we went to bed, but if I was up late enough, I would sometimes hear the door open and shut before a pair of feet would slink clumsily up the stars, each step creaking unevenly on the warped floorboards. I could gauge how drunk he was by counting his
smacks on the wall to steady himself, how many times his shaking palm would miss the master bedroom’s doorknob when he reached for it. How he got home those nights, I hate to think about, but his car was always waiting in its spot each morning. Noting its absence, I supposed this was just going to be one of those nights.

I let myself into our peeling front door, immediately kicking off my cleats and dropping my backpack and sports bag beneath the coat hooks. I smelled dinner cooking, toasted bread and the mingling of meat and tomatoes.

“Rich?” called my mother from the kitchen, hoping for my father. She sounded flustered and irritated, and I could tell from her tone that he was the one to blame.

“No,” I said. “Just me.”

“Oh,” she said, disappointed. “Help me with the food,” she called.

“I wanna shower,” I said.

“Now, Jane,” she said. I knew better than to argue with that voice.

In the kitchen, my mother was standing before a bubbling pot. Natalie sat at the table doing her homework. The Carpenters were playing softly in the background, a sign my mother was trying to calm herself down.

“Hey, Nat,” I said to my sister.

“Hi,” she said, not looking up at me. She seemed frustrated, staring at her half-done worksheet with an open mouth, her normally hyperactive eyes glazed and tired.

“Natalie needs help with long division. Do you know anything about that?” my mother asked, stirring languidly.

“I thought you wanted help with dinner?”
“Please don’t start with me,” she said, sounding more exhausted than angry. “Not right now.”

“I’m not,” I said, instantly guilty. My mother had an uncanny ability to instill such feelings with just the turn of her head or a well-placed sighed. “Sorry.” I sat down next to Natalie and looked over her homework. She had only done one problem correctly. I started erasing and correcting her mistakes as gently as I could.

Natalie smacked her pencil to the table. “I hate math,” she said, after failing again to divide sixty-four by eight.

“That’s fair,” I said. “I don’t like math very much either.” I wanted to tell her it wasn’t really her fault. We weren’t a family that had been especially endowed with mathematic or scientific skills. The left halves of our brains lagged significantly behind the right. Gabe and I got lucky – on some off chance, we had been tested young and shuttled into the gifted program, where we were bombarded with math worksheets and chapter books years beyond our grade levels. We had teachers who seemed to believe in potential I doubt we ever would have cultivated on our own. But Christopher and Natalie never got that special treatment. It wasn’t fair – our school district had no money to spare, so it threw anything extra at the handful of kids they thought might make it into good colleges, while everyone else got left with outdated textbooks and broken calculators. It’s not that Gabe and I were truly any smarter, I don’t think. But we got lucky, and that luck got us more practice, opportunities our siblings didn’t have.

“I don’t want to go to school anymore,” Natalie said with the conviction of someone absolutely self-assured, like she had made up a pros and cons list weeks ago and was finally ready to come forward with her decision. To me, she often seemed so much older than her nine years. I frequently worried I would shut my eyes for a second and open them to a fully-grown,
annoyingly sophisticated woman sipping a soymilk latte and chatting to me about mindfulness meditation.

“Well you only have…” I pretended to check an imaginary watch. “Nine more years until you can call it quits.”

Natalie glared.

“Plus college,” Mom called from the stove. “So, thirteen years.”

“I am not going to college,” said Natalie, disgusted.

“You barely even know what college is,” I said to her.

“I know I’m not going.”

“You’re going to college, Natalie,” said my mother.

“No, I’m not.” The more Natalie talked, the more determined she sounded.

“What do you have planned instead?” I asked.

“Don’t encourage her, Jane,” my mother interrupted, almost fearful. “And help me set the table.”

I groaned and rose to gather a stack of plates from the cupboard. The same dinnerware we had used my whole life, almost all the dishes were chipped around the edges.

“I’m just going to be famous,” said Natalie, graciously lifting up her math worksheet so I could set a plate before her. This was a typical response from my little sister – whenever she was grilled with the dreaded, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” by some irritating family friend, it always came back to fame. Most everyone laughed when they heard it, charmed by her pluckiness, such a large, striking personality contained within such a small body. But a steadily growing part of me believed she was completely capable of getting there. Many a teacher had commented upon her flair for the dramatic – usually in terms of her ability to derail a lesson plan
– and I often caught her rifling through my makeup and clothes, snatching sparkly tank tops and tubes of hot pink lipstick. When caught, she would always say, unembarrassed, that she needed these things for her “costumes.” It was a rare weekend in our house when she wasn’t putting on some sort of musical act – usually an overly-choreographed interpretation of a song from *The Little Mermaid* – for an audience of her bored siblings and bleary-eyed parents. For Natalie, every meal out at a restaurant and descent down the stairs was an opportunity for performance. We sometimes joked she should start charging us for tickets.

“Famous people still go to college, Nat,” Mom said.

“Not Hilary Duff. Or Lindsay Lohan. Or Amanda Bynes.” Natalie had gotten up to shove her unfinished homework back in her binder.

“How do you know all that?” I asked.

“E! News,” she said.

My mother balked. She had little, if any, idea who these people were, but I could practically see the montage winding through her mind – too-thin girls wearing short dresses and lots of eyeliner, battling drug addictions and getting divorced from Hollywood moguls twice their age.

“Well, that’s probably just because they didn’t have mothers who love them enough to make them go to college,” she said, lowering her voice to a gentle whisper but hardening its edges all the same. She was especially skilled at that – mingling an admission of love with a semi-veiled threat should we fail her.

She bent down to hug Natalie around her neck, kissing the top of her bright blond head. I looked away, feeling, as I often did, like an interloper in their presence.
Natalie was my mother’s favorite child. From the day my little sister was born, it had been that way, and we had learned to accept that a space inside her heart, one that had clearly always existed, had finally been filled. And now there would always be less for the rest of us. Mom had a patience for her baby’s daydreams and worries and ramblings that she never had for her older children. She indulged Natalie. She let her play with the magic inside her head rather than contorting it into practicality, dulling out its shine. Whereas the rest of us grew up trying to please our mother by being quiet and agreeable, as little in her way as possible, Natalie overwhelmed our home from the moment of her arrival. She moved through the world with an intensity beyond action or emotion. It came from somewhere deep within, this relentless demand for attention and adoration that our mother, strangely enough, delighted in. Her preference for my sister was so obvious and unabashed it shouldn’t have hurt anymore, but it still did.

By the time the forks and knives were laid and the soap-stained glasses were filled – milk for Natalie, water for Gabe and me, white wine for Mom – Dad still wasn’t home. Usually, we would have just started dinner anyways, but for reasons I didn’t understand, we waited.

My mother tapped her foot and stared at the table like it was a piece of abstract art she didn’t quite understand. I glanced at the time on the microwave. It was already almost seven, and I was ready for this family ritual to be finished.

“Go get your brother,” Mom told me after a minute or so of Natalie and I observing her.

I walked to the foot of the stairs and shouted Gabe’s name. He did not respond.

“I said to get him! Not to yell!” my mother called from the kitchen. I could hear her setting down platters of food.

Bristling already, I went to follow her orders.
At the top of the stairs, my parents’ room faced directly across from me, keeping guard over the upstairs foyer. My mother’s cardigan hung sullenly on the doorknob. To the right was Christopher’s room – now a seldom-visited tomb of boyhood accolades, years-expired protein powder, and dirty clothes left festering in musty piles. My room and Gabe’s were on the left side of the stairs, two identically-sized boxes with paper-thin walls and not enough outlets. Natalie slept in what was supposed to be the sunroom, a tiny little corner chamber wedged between the edge of Christopher’s room and the wall of my parents’ master bath. She hated it. Her room trapped cold air in the winter and heat in the summer and was far too bright in the mornings, even with black-out curtains blocking any sliver of the sun. She pouted for a week when she was old enough to realize how poorly she had made out, so my mother promised she could have my room as soon as I left home. Not Christopher’s, the one already lying unoccupied. Mine. Not that I had been consulted about that decision. But Christopher was her second favorite after Natalie, and a close one at that. I don’t think she ever imagined disturbing his sacred ground.

“Not Sorry” by The Cranberries blared from behind Gabe’s door. I knocked three times. When I got nothing back, I slapped the door with my palm and shouted his name.

The song didn’t pause, but I heard a faint, “What?”

“It’s time for dinner,” I said.

“What?”

“Dinner! Jesus Christ.”

The door flew open, Gabe’s gangly, misplaced body filling the frame. I could see the dirty sprawl of his room peeking out from behind him.

“What?” he asked, more annoyed now that he knew I was the one disturbing him.

“Mom has dinner ready?” I said, like it was a question and he was an idiot.
“Okay?” he said, mimicking my tone. “Tell her I’ll be down in a second.” He slammed the door in my face.

Back at the table, Mom was staring at the house phone intently, and Natalie, seated next to her, was humming the tune to something I didn’t recognize but felt confident I had heard on the radio. Already at that age, she had a pretty singing voice, flutelike and smooth.

I took my seat next to Natalie and picked up my fork, officially starving, but Mom shot me a look. She had turned up the volume on the kitchen stereo, so “We’ve Only Just Begun” sounded into the dining room. But she didn’t seem any more relaxed. A few minutes later, Gabe joined us, taking his seat across from mine. His skin and hair looked unwashed, as usual, and his black t-shirt had a huge bleach stain down the front I somehow hadn’t noticed earlier.

The worst part about having to look directly at Gabe’s face was being forced to acknowledge its similarity to mine. Same pale, almost translucent skin, revealing veins and blood beneath. Same celery-green eyes, watery and vulnerable. Same unremarkably blonde hair, a color between ash and dust. I caught myself scowling at him without meaning to.

“What?” he asked, rubbing his nose with the back of his hand.

“What.”

Gabe rolled his eyes at me. “Can we eat? Dad’s obviously not coming,” he said to Mom. A wounded-animal flash of sorrow filled her face before she recovered herself. “Sure,” she said, faking subdued merriment. “Dig in.” She scooped spaghetti, meatballs, and green beans onto Natalie’s plate and buttered her a slice of bread. Natalie didn’t thank her.

For a few minutes, we ate in near silence, just the clink of silverware, nervous gulps of water, and the Carpenters. Gabe was ravenous, as always. He never exercised – I suspected the most he worked out in a day was lugging his cello across the auditorium stage for orchestra
practice – but he was always eating. It never seemed to make a difference – he grew taller by the day without gaining an ounce of fat or muscle. His skin just stretched with him.

Finally, Natalie intruded through the quiet. She talked at length about a sleepover birthday party she would be attending the coming weekend, giving us a rundown of the guest list and throwing in tidbits of gossip whenever necessary: Sarah invited Lucy but not Anna, even though Anna is best friends with Zoe, and Zoe and Lucy do cheer with Sarah and Becca, et cetera. She had a busier and more complex social life than any third grader I knew.

Gabe answered a few of my mother’s unwelcome questions about his bandmates. They were all doing fine, they didn’t have any new songs, no, they didn’t want to come over anytime soon. His group was called The Bronze Rush, and it was made up of four guys who – although they were all decent musicians, Gabe especially – spent most of their time getting high and starting heated debates about the artistic merits of bands like Jane’s Addiction, the Smashing Pumpkins, Alice in Chains. They were always talking about booking gigs and then never actually booking them.

Watching my mother try to make conversation with Gabe was at the very least a bit uncomfortable and sometimes downright painful. It was like they were strangers who spoke the same language but in drastically different dialects, and neither wanted to ask for a translation.

When my mother ran out of things to say to Gabe, she turned and told me she would be able to make my game the next night after all. I was happy to hear it – any opportunity I could find to possibly please or impress my parents was a welcome one. Secretly, I was also excited that I might be able to observe her in that environment, surrounded by the other moms guarding the snack table and judging each other’s shoes. Besides her years in college and a few brief, chaotic months on the road with my father, my mother had lived her whole life in Huntersville.
She’d graduated from the same high school as her children, and we’d even shared a few of the same teachers. To Mrs. Henderson of ninth grade English, I was always “Amanda Kelly,” no matter how many times I corrected her. Every sporting event or parent-teacher conference or awards ceremony she attended for her children, she would see at least a dozen people she’d known for decades. Watching her switch back into her high school persona – a floatier, chattier, less mournful version of the woman I had grown up with – was always strange and hysterical to watch. I had no idea how much something like that must have cost her. As a teenager, I couldn’t begin to comprehend how miserable my mother was. How badly she had wanted to leave and how close she had gotten. How much resentment she held towards us and my father and her life for keeping her stuck here, fitting into patterns that left her unfulfilled and angry. To me, who had never understood her and sometimes even feared her, it just seemed kind of funny, watching her transform into a woman I didn’t recognize but others seemed to expect and even welcome.

I was prodding at the last of my green beans and texting Joey under the table when we heard the front door open. My father’s unmistakable footsteps, heavy and resolute, landed in the foyer. Gabe straightened his back at the sound.

“Hello?” Dad called.

“Dining room,” Mom said. She placed her elbows on the arms of her chair and laced her fingers together. Her face was blank as a plaster cast.

“Hey guys,” my Dad said, looking at no one in particular. Beneath the benign smile on his face, his features looked pained and rubbery. My mother stared at him, biting her top lip. He tousled Natalie’s hair.

“Hi, daddy,” she said.
Dad sat down opposite of my mother, at the other head of the table. His eyes seemed distracted, almost unfocused. He looked at his empty plate and said nothing.

“Are you hungry?” my mother asked him. She sounded nervous but restrained. Gabe and I made brief eye contact. This was getting bizarre.

My father didn’t respond.

“Dad?” I eventually asked.

His eyes snapped awake. “Yeah, hon?”

“Are you hungry?” my mother answered for me.

“Sure,” he said. “Looks great, Mandy,” he said to my mother.

“It’s not,” whispered Natalie. It was an incredibly bold statement for her to make at a dinner table like ours, but if anyone else heard, they didn’t say anything.

Dad handed me his plate to give to Mom. She wordlessly fixed him some food and passed the dish back down the table. He didn’t seem interested by the time it reached him.

My father didn’t eat. My mother stared. Natalie leaned far back into her seat, unimpressed with us. I sat with my hands in my lap as unexplained discomfort filled the room.

“Can I be excused?” Gabe finally asked Mom. “I’m supposed to meet the guys to practice.” I figured this actually meant watching Buffy the Vampire Slayer and getting high with twenty minutes of practice interspersed. If we were friends, it could have been a joke between the two of us. But we weren’t, so it wasn’t.

“May I,” she said, correcting him. “And no. Your father’s still eating.”

“You can go,” my father said, his voice eerily peaceful instead of dismissive and irritated – how he usually sounded whenever Gabe brought up his band. “Have fun.” He still hadn’t touch
his food. Mom narrowed her eyes at him, annoyed at being contradicted, but she said nothing.

Gabe left the table without pushing his chair back in.

I was about to try and escape myself but then my mother asked, “So, did you talk to him?”

My father took a sip of Gabe’s water. His own glass hadn’t been filled. “Yes,” he said.

“And?” my mother asked.

“Seemed fine,” he said, nodding in a way that also meant she should stop talking. I saw his eyes flick to Natalie and me. My own gaze darted back and forth between the two of them. I felt like I was observing a particularly bewildering match of tennis.

“Who are you talking about?” Natalie asked.

“No one, sweetie,” my mother said.

“Who?” I asked. No one answered me. My father rubbed his neck. “Christopher?”

My mother wouldn’t meet my eyes, but I knew it was the right guess. In truth, there weren’t many people my parents held a mutual interest in and would discuss like this. But more than that, lately they had begun acting strangely whenever my older brother was mentioned. I sometimes heard his name whispered angrily in the kitchen when I came down for a glass of water late at night, and more than once I had caught my mother leaving Christopher tense, clipped messages I don’t think he ever returned. I just attributed all of this to my parents’ general weirdness with all things Christopher-related and his own desire to find distance from our family. But this felt different. The room buzzed with a heavy, unpredictable tension. My heart began to pound.

My mother started clearing the table and walked out of the dining room. Natalie followed her, probably hoping for dessert.
“Is he, like, okay?” I asked Dad.

“He’s fine,” my father said. “You don’t need to think about these things.” I could tell he was trying to remain calm with me.

“What things? What are you talking about?”

“Drop it, Jane.” He shot me a dangerous look and I nearly flinched, effectively silenced. My father’s temper was vicious and abiding. Like a natural disaster, once he was provoked, there was nothing to do but endure and pray the damage would be minimal. He never hit us, really. He yelled. He threatened. He could land a low blow out of nowhere. After a bad outburst, he would be contrite and overly attentive, arriving home from work early with strawberry ice cream and a bouquet of plastic-wrapped tulips – my mother’s favorites –pressing twenties into Gabe and my hands before we slipped out the door. It was almost enough to make you forget about it, what he had said and how scared and hollow you had felt when it was happening.

“Okay,” I said in a voice I hoped was effectively small. He left for his office, and I cleared the rest of the table.

After I showered, I put on a Wilco CD and tried to unwind. I sat on my bed and debated whether or not to call Christopher myself. I thought maybe I should actually just drop it, like my father said. I hadn’t been given any real reason to worry. It was probably all just in my head, the strangeness from my mother, the coldness from my father. But when I tried to think of the last time Christopher and I had talked, just the two of us, I couldn’t remember. Had it been a week? Two or three? Maybe even a month? I had no idea, and the forgetting of it, of him, made me feel like I had done something wrong.

I lit the candle on my desk and promptly blew it out. I combed through my wet hair and popped a whitehead on my chin. I responded to an AIM message from a friend in my calc class. I
sat in my desk chair, swiveling around until I got dizzy. Finally, I dialed Christopher’s number, telling myself he probably wouldn’t pick up anyways. And if he didn’t pick up, that had to mean he was busy. And if he was busy, he was fine. Maybe a part of me just didn’t want to talk to him either way, afraid of what I would learn if I did.

*Don’t pick up. Don’t pick up,* I chanted in my head. *Please don’t pick up.* The phone rang and rang, and I felt like things were going to be okay. He was gone. Out. Happy.

But at what had to have been the last ring before voicemail, he answered.

“Hey,” he said.

*Fuck,* I thought. “Hey.”

His breathing was heavy and labored, almost pained, like he was calling from somewhere with a limited oxygen supply, deep underwater or way out in space. Nowhere I should have been able to reach him.

“What are you up to?” I asked.

“Nothing,” he said slowly. “Just thinking.”

“What about?” I asked, trying to sound cheerful, forcing the normalcy I wanted.

“I’ve been meaning to talk to you,” he said, changing the subject jerkily. His cadence was proving unpredictable, ricocheting from soft and sluggish to surging and intense.

“Oh yeah?” I asked. “Why?”

He waited a long time to respond. “God, I don’t remember now,” he said. He laughed abruptly, a barking, ugly noise. “I’m so fucking exhausted.”

I took a deep breath. “Is it, like, school? You just finished exams, right?”

“Yeah, I’m done,” he said.
“Well, that’s good. Maybe you can relax soon. Rest up.” When he stayed silent, I said, “We all can’t wait to see you.”

“Do you ever wonder if any of this is worth it?” He asked me, blunt once more.

“Any of what? Like, college?”

“Just all of it. All of this bullshit. Everything. Doing things that don’t matter, what other people want you to do. I feel so stuck right now. And I’m sick of it.” He paused. “I don’t know if it’s worth it.”

“I don’t really get what you’re saying. Do you want to drop out or something? Quit basketball?”

“No,” he said. “No, that’s not it.” His breaths settled over the speaker one by one.

“I’m sorry, Christopher,” I said, feeling nervous. None of this sounded like my brother. He was the optimist. He always had hope, sometimes to the point of being annoying. I didn’t think he had quit anything in his life. “Can I do anything to help?” I asked.

“I don’t think so.”

“Well, you’ll be home soon. Maybe that’ll make things better.”

“Maybe,” he said, but he sounded unsure. His breathing was still loud in the receiver.

I then wondered, with a naïve sense of hope, if he might just be drunk. That would explain everything – the weirdness, the despondency. Maybe it had been an emotional day, and now, an emotional night. It was kind of early still, but wouldn’t people be celebrating the end of their finals? Couldn’t that be true?

“I’m really sorry,” he said suddenly.

“For what?”
“I feel like I haven’t been very good lately,” he said. His words were turning sleepy and distorted again, like he was trapped inside of a dream. “I haven’t been a good brother. I haven’t been there for you.”

“What are you talking about? You’re a great brother. You always have been.” The words were getting tangled in my throat.

“I shouldn’t have left you there. I still feel guilty about it.”

Retroactively, I felt embarrassed about making a scene all those years ago. “What are you talking about? You had to go to college, what?” I said. “I don’t get why you’re apologizing.” I didn’t know if I felt sadder or just more distressed by what he was saying. We had never spoken like this. I didn’t think he had ever thought about that day before, what him going would have felt like for me. Now, it seemed ridiculous for me to have been so upset. I just didn’t get it then, that most of life was a series of growing out of places and sometimes returning to them, but I had begun to understand that perspective. I had adjusted.

“Still,” he said. “I feel terrible.”

“Well, you shouldn’t.” I said. “You don’t need to apologize to me. I’m doing great, I promise. Really.”

“Thanks.” He sounded more relieved than I thought was necessary, and it made me anxious. No part of it was his fault. I had never purposefully placed the blame on him, but now I worried that I had done something to make him feel that way.

I wanted to ask him more questions, but he cut me off before I could.

“Well, I think I’m gonna try and get some sleep,” he said.

“Okay. See you soon. Love you.”

“Love you too.” He hung up the phone.
I stared up at my ceiling, trying to convince myself what had just occurred wasn’t alarming. Or at least that it was normal enough to ignore. But overlooking what he said was impossible. Within seconds of him hanging up, I felt sick. My stomach churned and my palms started to sweat. I felt like I had made a mistake somewhere in the span of that conversation. I should have forced him to stay on the phone. I should have gotten up and driven to Vermont that very second. Maybe I shouldn’t have called at all.

I felt like I had forced my way into a space I was not welcome in, a part of Christopher’s brain I felt alienated by and almost ashamed of witnessing. And now I didn’t know how to make sense of my surroundings, the onus of my knowledge. The person I had just encountered was not the person I had known for all my life. I couldn’t understand how or why he was saying those confusing, almost disturbing things. I had a sticky, nervous feeling that something was happening completely out of my control. But I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t think calling him back would do any good. I didn’t want to tell my parents – my father would just be angry I had interfered, and my mother would panic and tell my father. So I did nothing. I called Joey to come pick me up. I wanted a distraction.

I asked my mother if I could go over to Chelsea’s to study, and she said it was fine as long as I got home before ten. A Disney movie was playing in the living room as I left – Natalie had her eyes glued to the screen. I felt a sliver of guilt walking out the door without telling my mother what had happened, but I left anyways.

Joey knew the drill: on weeknights, when visits with my boyfriend were strictly off limits, he parked at the edge of the driveway, far enough my mother could only see headlights from the living room window. My father’s office, where he spent most of his time at night, was on the ground floor, facing the back of our property. I was safe on both accounts.
The passenger-side door was locked when I got to Joey’s car, and I shivered slightly waiting for him to let me in. My hair was still wet, and the night was chillier than I expected.

“Sorry babe,” he said as I climbed in.

“No worries,” I said. He started to drive. In the left side-view mirror, I watched my house get smaller and smaller behind us.

Joey’s Silverado was a comforting place. The leather was worn and soft, and he kept the whole interior surprisingly clean. The cab always smelled like citrus and dead leaves, and when the old radio played country music – basically the only genre that held Joey’s attention – it sounded crackly and authentic, like Merle Haggard’s voice box had been transported right inside the truck, a private concert just for us.

“Where to?” he asked. “Are you hungry?”

“I already ate. Are you?”

“Kind of,” he said. “But how long before the warden needs you back?” He grinned lazily.

I rolled my eyes. My mother and Joey had an almost comical dislike for each other. She took one look at him the first time he picked me up and made up her mind, forever. “He’s not a nice boy, Jane. I can just tell. I can always tell,” she said. Joey just thought she was a bitch.

“I have to be home by ten,” I told him. We had a little under two hours.

Joey took this as an incentive to drive to the parking lot by the abandoned building that was once a TJ Maxx. This meant he wanted to have sex. On the way there, he talked about his friends, the NBA playoffs, how much he hated his classes. I nodded along to his stories, still distracted by the conversation I’d had with Christopher. I didn’t even notice when we’d reached the destination. Joey nodded towards the backseat, the gesture more of a direction than a question. He always just climbed his way over the emergency break, but I used the door.
Outside, the air smelled like gasoline and asphalt. When I got back in, Joey pulled me close to him, his hand curling tight around the back my neck. He began to kiss me, but I felt so disconnected I could hardly pay attention.

“Today was really weird,” I said. He didn’t move his lips from my throat.

“Hmm,” he said, clearly uncurious. His free hand was gripping my thigh, pressing his fingers so deep into my skin it started to hurt. Normally, I wouldn’t have pushed a conversation. I would have stayed quiet. But tonight, I wanted something more from him. Reassurance, maybe. Just someone to listen to me talk.

“Like, super weird. I don’t know.”

Sighing, Joey pulled away from me and checked the time on his cellphone. “Do you really want to talk about this right now?” The sting of his brush-off shocked me out of any confessional mood. *We didn’t have to be the couple that tells each other everything,* I told myself. *I can have other people for that.*

“No,” I said. “I actually don’t want to at all.”

He smiled and dragged me back to him.

I got home thirty minutes late. I let myself in as quietly as I could, not wanting to expose that I had broken my curfew – now for the third time in a row. I snuck up the stairs but stopped at the very last one. I could just barely hear my parents arguing through their door – no specific words, only a mess of vowels and the clipped ends of sentences. They were fighting the way they did when they thought they were being quiet, meaning this was definitely not something meant for my ears. I heard my mother crying. I stood against the bannister, contemplating whether I should keep eavesdropping or just go to my room, turn on my music, and tell myself nothing was wrong.
The door opened before I could make my decision. It was my father, shutting it behind him and shaking slightly. He was breathing hard, not totally unlike how Christopher had on the phone. He turned and saw me standing there, watching him. I expected anger, but all I saw was a broken sort of sadness.

“You’re late,” he said. He patted my arm softly, holding his hand there for a moment before sliding past me, down the stairs. I heard the door to his study shut and lock. To this day, I still feel I should have followed him downstairs, burst my way in, and told him I was worried about Christopher. Maybe he would have understood this one time. He might have even known what to do. Everything could have been different.

But I went into my room, turned off all the lights, and sat in bed with the covers pulled up to my lap. I braided and unbraided my hair several times, feeling the stillness of my house all around me. I could hear nothing but my own breathing, the distant whirring of our air conditioner, the grandfather clock in the hallway ticking through the hour.

I fell asleep thinking about my mother crying. Christopher on the phone. Miles after soccer practice. I had no idea how different everything would be in just a few short hours – I wouldn’t know for days. My dreams that night were filled with terrifying distortions – Chelsea driving towards me at full speed in her Jeep Grand Cherokee, trying to run me down; Natalie a strung-out baby starlet, her wan face streaked with glitter and mascara; Nate, Garret, and Caleb swarming around me like killer bees; my father standing a thousand feet tall, towering over the house; Gabe drowning in a fathomless pool of bleach.

I had no way of knowing that although I would wake up drenched in sweat and less rested than before, it would be one of my last decent nights of sleep for a long, long time.