

Development: A Collection of Short Stories

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by

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Second Position
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Mason Young lay on the carpet in his basement with his eyes shut tight, hidden by piles of construction material he had just purchased from the hardware store. That morning, he had raced around Lowe's with a metal cart, grabbing things that he thought could possibly make a dance studio for his daughter Aileen's ballerina-themed birthday party. When he got home, he had only gotten as far as mounting one mirror on the basement wall before sinking into the floor. He thought he had pulled a muscle while unloading the materials from his truck; he now felt a stab in his upper back whenever he breathed or looked sideways. He thought it might be serious, but he refrained from yelling for Aileen or his sister-in-law Jane who had recently moved in. He would take any moment of solitude he could.

He had only lain in silence for a minute when he heard their footsteps coming down the basement stairs. Aileen spotted the mirror right away and began practicing turns, spinning on her toes, which were softly encased by a pair of pink ballet slippers.

Jane stood behind her, catching her when she spun too hard and went twirling towards the wall.

“Aunt Jane, I want my hair in a bun,” she said, raking at the hair in her face.

“All right,” Jane said. She carefully coiled Aileen’s hair on top of her head. “Hey Mason, you really should get cracking on this ballet room. Aileen should get to practice on it before the party. She’ll be in *The Nutcracker* before we know it.”

“I just got the materials this morning,” he said. It was because of comments like these that he had always hated Jane. He assumed that her husband in Phoenix had put up very little protest when she said she was making a trip to the Young house for an indefinite amount of time. Their children were grown and had escaped to college, meaning she devoted all of her nagging to her husband. “I can only do so much with the little time I’ve been given.” He wrapped his can of Budweiser in a hand towel and placed it over his eyes.

Aileen was turning nine on Sunday and her friends from the Bijou Dance School were coming over for the party, which had been changed to a ballerina theme at the last minute. He had called the mothers of all the guests so they would know to wear ballet attire to the house. None of the mothers could hide the surprise in their voices that they were actually speaking to Aileen’s father. “My,” one mother said. “We were starting to think you were a ghost. It’s good to finally meet you. I assume now we’ll be seeing more of you?” It was the closest he had ever been to socializing with neighborhood parents, and realized then why he had always chosen to avoid it. He couldn’t believe that they would try to sound clever by commenting on his new domestic position, their voices pleasant but with a hint of derisiveness that seemed to say, “You thought this would be

easy.” He hung up the phone with each mother using the same sound off, “Well I’m glad _____ will be coming over on Sunday. It should be a really great party.”

The party, which had started out simply with ice cream and cake, had swelled into an ambitious, intensive project overnight. In addition to having to build the dance space, he had to give his credit card to Jane to purchase yards of pink tulle, crinoline, and elastic so she could make tutus for the girls as party favors.

“Don’t they already have tutus?” he had asked, as he handed her his Visa. He didn’t let go of the card right away and they stood there, each with a thumb and forefinger gripping one end of the silver plastic.

“You obviously don’t understand ballet,” Jane said. “One tutu is for performance and one is for fun. We can’t ask them to wear their performance tutus to a party.”

“Can’t we ask them to wear their casual tutus?”

“Not all girls have casual tutus, Mason.”

“Fine, let’s outfit the entire dance school. And while you’re out, you can start each of them a college fund. Jesus Christ.”

“I didn’t exactly hear you scream with protest over the ballet room, Mason. I’m making tutus; you’re reconstructing the entire basement.” He let go of the card. She flipped it over to look at the back. “Do you think the fabric store is going to ask me for ID?” She stuck the card into her pocketbook before he could answer. “If they ask, I’ll just say I’m Beth.”

Beth, his wife, had left the family exactly two Sundays before, leaving Mason a note saying that she had already arranged for Jane to move in temporarily because in her words, “Isn’t that what happens when a mother leaves? I’m sorry; I don’t know what I’m doing. I never did.” Mason had found the note at breakfast and let his orange juice spill

onto the table. He swirled the note in the puddle of juice, trying to use it to sop up the mess before throwing it into the trash. He picked up the wastebasket and carried it upstairs to their bedroom, looking for remnants of her belongings to throw away. As he combed through her side of the closet, he noticed she had taken only her best clothing, leaving behind her bulky turtlenecks and sweatshirts so it didn't look like anything was missing. She knew even Mason would notice that one half of the closet was completely empty. "Of course you knew what you were doing," he said aloud. He stuffed as many of her clothes into the trash as he could, smashing them in on top of chicken bones, soiled napkins, and expired yogurt. For three nights, he had taken the trash upstairs and filled it with her clothes until they were all gone. He thought it would be cathartic, getting rid of the evidence that she had once lived in the house. But every morning when he pulled out a shirt and tie to wear to work, the bare white walls of the closet only reminded him of whose clothes used to hang there.

Mason told Aileen that her mother had gotten a job as a flight attendant for a Hong Kong airline and would be spending an indefinite amount of time flying back forth between Asia and various west coast cities. It was a ridiculous excuse, one he had improvised while taking Aileen out for dinner for the third night in a row after Beth left. He didn't think Beth deserved a dignified reason for her absence, like she was caring for a sick relative. He was sure Aileen hadn't bought it. Aileen was what one of her teachers had called "gifted...but trouble." It was startling to him how sharp she was, in and out of school, and how well she could read adults, especially when they didn't want her to. It was probably why she adjusted so well to her mother being gone. Maybe she had been able to see the signs in Beth that he could not while he was at work all day. She had

probably heard her mother crying, saying some of the lines that would appear later in her letter: that he should be there to help out, that she couldn't do it all alone.

There was nothing Beth had feared more than becoming a mother and since they began dating, she had kept her plastic clamshell of birth control pills with her at all times, as if it were insulin or an asthma inhaler. She had never liked herself and the last thing she wanted was someone with her genes running around under her care. Aileen had been conceived by accident, and Mason had talked his wife out of an abortion, promising her that a child would bring out the best in her. She agreed, but throughout her pregnancy she would watch Mason with watery eyes, like she knew she'd been duped. He would bring her a new book on prenatal care or read off a list of potential baby names, trying anything to placate her. He wasn't ready to be a parent either, but knew that if they didn't have this baby, they would never have one. He didn't stop to think that it might break her.

She performed her tasks as a mother with almost robotic efficiency, doing everything expected of her like filling bottles with formula and delivering kisses upon the forehead. But she carried her resentment around with her, as if every day she just tucked it in next to Aileen in her stroller before heading out to the park. She had an even harder time when Aileen started school and her teachers praised her intelligence in letters they sent home which Mason would find in the trash. The letters felt soft, like someone had been crumpling and smoothing them repeatedly. He was scared to know what went on in the house during the day, so he had never asked.

He knew Aileen had suspected something was up when she saw her aunt unpacking her beige luggage in the spare room. While Jane sliced Aileen's pork chop into ten uniform squares for her at dinner, Aileen started to stare at him, perhaps to see how long he could hold out before telling her what was really going on. The image of his

daughter fixing her eyes on him while coolly nibbling on a string bean had made him want to run from the room, especially once she started asking questions.

“How come Mommy didn’t say anything about being a flight attendant?” she had asked. Jane narrowed her eyes at Mason. He cleared his throat.

“Well, she was worried she wouldn’t get the job. You know, our Cantonese is kind of rusty. She didn’t want to be embarrassed if she wasn’t hired,” he said. Jane let her fork drop onto her plate. Aileen flicked her eyes back and forth between her aunt and father.

“When do I get to talk to her?”

“You know, she’s really busy training and everything,” he said. “It might be a while.”

“She’s going to be here for my birthday, right?”

“She’s going to try,” he said, rubbing his mouth with his napkin. Of all times to leave, he couldn’t believe Beth had left so close to Aileen’s birthday. “But I know that she has a great big present for you. I’ve seen it, it’s pretty cool.” He made a note to himself to pick her up another gift for her before the party.

She nodded and then took a long drink from her cup. “Can I go watch TV?”

“Sure,” he said, ignoring her plate, still half-full.

“Aileen, at least take your dinner with you,” Jane said. “You can finish it while you watch TV.”

Aileen scooted out of her chair and walked to the living room, empty-handed. She didn’t seem to make the full connection, but had figured out that the combination of mentioning her mother and getting her way seemed to go together nicely. Mason preferred it this way, preferred catering to her instead of telling her about Beth. He was

even a little fascinated that she had known how to work him. It made him wonder how he could have ever ignored her. At the bakery while they were picking out her birthday cake, she had spotted one that had plastic ballerinas fixed in the icing, which must have sparked some ideas. The next morning, Mason found himself in an aisle in Lowe's, wondering what the hell to do.

Mason removed the towel from his eyes and popped open the beer, forgetting that he couldn't sit up to drink it. Aileen stepped up onto the foot-high stack of wood and began skating across the top in her stocking feet. Jane had moved to the far corner of the basement, using his wife's old sewing machine to finish the tutus. Since Beth had left, he was never alone. He thought he should be able to cry or punch holes in the wall, the basic entitlements of deserted husbands. But because of his work schedule, he had to share many of his new responsibilities with Jane. She got Aileen ready for school each morning and walked her home from the bus stop each afternoon. He took her to ballet on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday evenings, watched her from the side of the room until class ended, and then took her home. On those nights, he left his briefcase in the car so that he wouldn't be tempted to work, even when the sounds of the same soft piano number played for the entire hour and made his eyes drift. He would then blink hard and sit up in his folding chair, watching Aileen practice in loose synchronization with the other girls as they stretched and posed through each position at the call of their instructor. No one had suggested that he start sitting in on classes and he surprised himself that first night when he found himself following Aileen into the studio and not wanting to leave. Aileen's ballet teacher had set up a chair for him after shaking his hand and saying, "It's nice to

meet you. We always missed you at recitals.” He couldn’t remember if he had apologized.

Soon, teachers and neighbors knew that Beth was gone and that Jane was acting as stand-in mother. He hated that her being in the house was all part of a plan, like sneaking clothes out of the closet. The morning she left, Beth had gotten into a taxi and Jane had gotten on a plane, all while he was still asleep. If he had known that Beth had sent for her beforehand, he would have never let Jane into the house. He had thought that Jane was visiting for the weekend and that it had just slipped his mind; that his wife leaving was as much as a surprise to her as it was to him. But when he started to tell her about Beth and the note, she had just nodded and said “Hmm” while running a dishcloth in circles across the countertop. Somehow he knew she was in on it. It seemed that everyone knew that he couldn’t take care of Aileen by himself. He had to admit that Jane’s parenting was classic, full of nutrition and discipline but also tenderness towards Aileen that he had never seen in her, even when with her own children. And her presence meant he wouldn’t have to stick Aileen with a babysitter or sling a house-key around her neck so she could watch herself after school, like a tragic figure of single-parenting. He didn’t want to disrupt her life just because his was in disorder.

“Daddy, when’s the room going to be done?” Aileen walked across the wood like an acrobat, her arms sticking straight out at her sides. Jane looked up from her seat at the sewing machine, frowning.

“Aileen, get down from there, it’s not safe,” she said.

Mason rolled his eyes and exhaled loudly. “It’s only a foot tall, Jane. I’m right here watching her.” He lowered his voice. “Stay in your corner.” Jane said nothing but pressed harder on the sewing pedal, letting it rev and whine for her.

“Can you get the bar up soon?” Aileen asked. “I want to practice pliés.”

He looked at the wooden handrail he had purchased, which was the closest thing to a ballet bar he could find at the hardware store. He would still have to find a way to make it freestanding so that it wouldn’t tip over when Aileen and ten Bijou ballerinas propped their legs on it. He didn’t want to ask for help at the hardware store, afraid that once he explained the ballet room he’d have to go even further. The last thing he wanted was to talk about coddling his young daughter to avoid telling her she no longer had a mother, especially with a hardware store employee in coveralls. He preferred to just wing it.

“I’m working on it, sweetie,” he said. “I’m just making sure I have the design ready.” She hopped off the pile of wood and joined her father on the carpet, nestling her head in his armpit. He ran his hand over the smooth wreath of hair on top of her head. Jane had done a good job.

“What’s it going to look like?” she asked.

“Well,” he said. “I’m going to lay down the floor in this corner. Then I’ll put the mirrors side by side on both walls. And then you can move the bar to wherever you need it.”

“What if we want to leap?”

“Say what now?”

“In class we take up a lot of room when we do jetés.”

He suddenly felt very tired. “Maybe we can move the bar over to the carpet, and while some of you guys are using that, a couple of you can leap around over on the hard floor.”

“But then the girls on the bar can’t see themselves in the mirror. And when we use the bar in class, we’re always on the hard floor.”

He sat up, wincing from the pain in his back as he took a sip from his beer. He could see she had a point. But the studio was already taking up half the basement. To give her what she wanted he would have to clear out the rest of the room and then buy more mirrors and wood. He had originally thought he could just lay the wooden planks over the carpet, but he wasn’t even sure how he was planning to secure them to the floor. And now he realized that he should have bought wider mirrors.

“Aileen, I’m gonna get started. Why don’t you go upstairs and watch TV?”

“I don’t want to.”

“Why not?”

“Aunt Jane’s blocked all the good channels.”

He looked over at Jane who took her foot off the sewing pedal.

“Just the questionable channels,” Jane said. “A nine-year-old does not need MTV.”

“She blocked The Discovery Channel,” Aileen said. “I can learn from that channel.”

“They’ve been showing all those autopsy specials, Mason. It’s gruesome.”

“Aileen, you can watch TV in my room. Go on now.”

She ran upstairs. Jane emerged from her corner and took a seat on the stack of wood in front of him.

“I see you haven’t thought this ballet room out,” she said. “What are we going to do?”

He closed his eyes for three long seconds and then opened them again. “You are going to finish those tutus and not worry about what I’m going to do.”

“You should just have ordered real ballet equipment.”

“That would have been a great idea,” he said, rubbing his face to wake up. “Had I known about this earlier.”

“You’ve worn that excuse out. You’re the one that agreed to do this,” she said. “You can’t even put your foot down about the television.”

“Who told you mess with the TV anyway?” he asked.

“You can’t raise a child without setting boundaries,” she said. “Lately you’ve been letting Aileen do whatever she wants.”

“Well, it’s not exactly the right time to start being a hard-ass, Jane.” He got onto his knees, slowly making his way to his feet and trying to keep his back straight. “Her mother did just abandon her.”

Jane’s posture stiffened. “It wasn’t like that.”

“Why? Because she sent you as a replacement?”

“She knew you wouldn’t be prepared to take care of Aileen by yourself,” she said. “It was the best thing she could have done.”

“Well, that’s funny,” he said. “Because I would think sticking around and being a mother would have been the best thing to do.”

“She was a zombie, Mason.”

“There’s therapy for that. There’s medicine, there’s counseling, there’s vacations, there’s a million things that could have helped her.”

“Did you ever ask her if she needed any of those things?”

He walked over to his tool chest and started rummaging through it, knocking metal against metal to make as much noise as he could. He decided not to answer any questions that she already knew the answers to. He was still reeling from the word “zombie,” and how well it described her.

“Mason, she knows how bright Aileen is. She didn’t want to mess her up.”

“You don’t think this will mess her up?”

“In the long run,” she said, “not as much.”

“What did you guys do, make a graph to project how dysfunctional she’ll be in the future? Jesus.” He picked up the handrail and walked it across the room. “You guys did devise this master plan together. She called you in since you had already fucked up your own family. Who else could drop everything to come here?”

“I’ve made my mistakes,” she said, looking down. “I admit that.” She crossed her legs and pulled at the fabric of her long skirt. “Now I know what it’s like to live with your family and not know anything about them. And not want to know anything about them. I constantly pushed my kids and now I’m lucky if they fly in for the holidays.”

“What does that have to do with me?” He nudged her off the stack and started to lay the wood onto the floor. He wondered where he got the energy to keep denying things, to constantly come up with smart-ass responses. But he didn’t want to say, aloud or to himself, that he and Jane were the same and had ruined similar things. And here they were, trying to redeem themselves through tutus and a dance studio for the same little girl. Like everything else these days, the thought made him tired.

“I know you’re angry,” she said. “But you can’t just blame everything on Beth.”

“She’s the one that left.”

“You could have done something.”

“I didn’t think she’d actually leave.”

“Well, you were wrong.”

“Obviously,” he said silently, mouthing the word.

“When are you going to tell Aileen about Beth?” she asked.

“She knows about Beth.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me. The flight attendant story?”

“It’s the best I could come up with.”

“Imagine that, a story that makes her mother look like a moron.”

“Coincidence.”

She shook her head. “Look at you,” she said. “You don’t even seem sorry.” She headed back to the sewing machine, saying softly under her breath, “No wonder she left.”

He had heard the words clearly somehow, loud and dull like a cowbell. He had been waiting for her to say it, knowing that she was probably keeping it ready for the right moment when he pushed her too far. Or maybe she had said something entirely different, and the words that he heard were the ones that had played in his head on a loop since the morning he found the note. He had blocked them out that morning and every morning that followed. He laid the last plank on the floor.

“I want you go to home,” he said. “You can stay for party, but after that I want you gone.” He said it because he knew she didn’t want to leave. She was right about him and he couldn’t handle hearing his faults and mistakes detailed out loud. But telling her she was kicked out had only felt good for a second. He waited, hoping to hear her try to change his mind so he could take it back, knowing he needed her there. But, she just sat in her corner and worked until she had finished the party favors. He had begun mounting

mirrors on the wall when she gathered the tutus in her arms and walked upstairs looking like pink ball of fluff. If she hadn't won that last argument, he would have laughed at her. He wasn't sorry about Beth.

He let Jane cook dinner that night while he made another trip to Lowe's for more materials. He still didn't ask for help, and when he got home, the problem of how to install the flooring was still waiting for him. As Aileen and Jane ate upstairs, he ripped up the carpet and spread putty on the concrete floor, placing the wood on top. He walked across the planks, spreading his feet and weight around to let the wood stick to the adhesive. As he kicked a pile of plastic wrapping and shopping bags into the corner, he found a sheet of instructions that must have come with the wood. It told him about special materials he was supposed to have used before installing the floor. He hadn't known to buy those things anyway.

He didn't sleep that night and didn't finish the room until the morning, when he heard Jane in the kitchen making breakfast without being asked. He mumbled a quiet "Thanks" to her. He surveyed the room and hoped that Aileen's friends would be too young to notice his shoddy construction work. The bar was crooked and there were divisions between each mirror, though he had tried to line them up perfectly. He hoped that nine-year-old bodies wouldn't have enough force to move the floor. The main thing, he told himself, was that Aileen had asked for a ballerina party, and he had it completed before Sunday, just as he said he would. He tried not to think about how absurd a project it was. Or, that in a year, Aileen might take up soccer or the violin and they would be stuck with a hideous dance studio in the basement; a constant reminder of her ninth birthday when her mother left.

He started cleaning up, even though the pain in his back made him shuffle his feet rather than pick them up. He knew the ballet room would look better if the whole basement were spotless. He pulled out a vacuum from the closet and pushed it like a walker along the remaining bits of basement and carpet. He didn't hear Aileen walk down the steps and when he turned around he saw her on the dance floor, turning in front of the mirrors.

"You like it?" he asked, walking over to the dance floor and taking a seat. "I just finished it."

"It's nice," she said. She came up behind him and wrapped her arms around his neck and shoulders, sending twinges through his back. "And big."

"Well, it's all for you." He wanted to lie down before the pain made him cry out, but he didn't want to take her arms off him.

"Is Mom coming to the party?"

"No," he said. "She won't make it."

"Oh." She moved her hands to his shoulder and rocked them back and forth.

"But it's partly my fault," he said, closing his eyes. "I forgot to do something, so now she can't come home like she wants to."

"What'd you forget to do?"

"It's hard to explain," he said. "But now she won't be here for a really long time. Do you understand what that means?"

"Yeah," she said. She let go of his shoulders and turned back to the mirror, standing in first position with her heels together and her toes turning out. "I can't see her."

“Right.” He lay down on his side. He watched Aileen as she moved her feet apart into second position, her face glum but not broken, and he wondered how he and Beth hadn’t messed her up thus far. He worried that his back would take more than a heating pad and some ibuprofen to fix. His pride would keep him from seeing a doctor until after the party, where he would blow up balloons and slice cake with a shaky, clenched smile. If Beth were here, he’d able to crawl upstairs into bed and heal up in time to enjoy himself at his daughter’s birthday. But she wasn’t. So he would continue to lie on the floor for a bit, finally feeling something other than anger towards his wife and bracing himself from the sadness that suddenly hit him like a sucker punch.

Nerve Damage
Sylvie Kim

When Simon Park learned that his diabetic father Jack could no longer live on his own, he phoned his sister Carrie to begin negotiations on who would take him in. She argued that her seventh-floor apartment was not appropriate for a man with nerve damage in his feet. He pointed out that her building had three elevators and a doorman. “What if

there's a fire?" she asked after ten seconds of deliberation. "Besides, you have that nice place in Bethesda. The perfect place to raise a child."

"Dad's sixty," he said.

"I know how old he is," she said.

He told her he would call her back, pretending that the discussion wasn't over. But that night he took out extra blankets and threw them into the guestroom. He sat on the bed and bounced up and down, thinking he should flip the mattress. He decided against it, knowing that had their situations been reversed, the issue of his comfort would have never crossed his father's mind.

Jack arrived a week later at his door, leaning on a cane, but looking trim and wearing a pair of high-end running shoes with built-in shocks. A tan young woman with a pretty face stood next to him. Simon was immediately irritated at the sight of his father enjoying what looked like the spoils of his third life crisis while Simon had yet to experience one.

"Hey Dad," he said, pulling the door back all the way and stepping aside. Jack walked in and slapped him twice on the shoulder. The young woman followed behind him carrying two suitcases. "Here, let me get those," Simon said, taking the bags from her. He put them down and then pulled out his wallet and a couple of bills. "Thanks for dropping him off."

"She's not the cab driver, genius," Jack said, shooing the money away. He always called him genius when he made a mistake, and he said it so often that Simon had decided long ago that he'd rather just be called moron or retard. "This is Annie Vo. She takes care of me during the day."

“Sorry about that,” he said, glancing at her face for a second and then sticking his hand out for her to shake. “I’m Simon.”

“You don’t have to apologize,” she said, taking his hand. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“He does have to apologize,” Jack said. “He assumed that because you’re dark that you’re a cab driver. Simon, I’ll have you know that Annie got her bachelor’s in nursing from George Washington. You went to Virginia Commonwealth. Annie, you ever hear of Virginia Commonwealth University? It doesn’t even sound real.”

“Dad, I didn’t assume anything,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck. “You could have told me that you had a nurse. If you had just introduced her like any person with manners—”

“You’re talking about her like she’s not standing right here,” Jack said. “Manners. You’re hissing at me when I’m ill. And maybe you would have known about her if you ever called.”

“You know what? You—” He wished he had had a comeback before speaking up. Jack lifted a hand to his ear, listening for it. Simon breathed out loudly through his nose and then left his father and Annie in the foyer as he banged the suitcases down the hallway to the guest bedroom. He heaved them on top of the bed and sat down. When he was younger he had always fantasized about the day his father would show up at his door in need of help. Simon would then tell him what a horrible father he was, delivering a speech with well placed swear words and without stuttering before kicking the door shut in his face. Nowhere in the fantasy was there anything about his father being sick.

He heard a knock and looked up to see Annie standing in the doorway. He stood up quickly and didn’t know what to do with his hands.

“Should I come back later?” she asked.

“Oh no,” he said. “I’m sorry. Just to let you know, I’m not racist. I thought you were a driver, but that had nothing to do with your skin color—”

“It’s okay,” she said, laughing. “I know he sounded a little crazy when he said that, but Jack’s just looking out for me. We’ve gotten some comments before. Our trips to the Korean supermarket can be very intense.”

His jaw stiffened when she said, “we’ve” like they were a couple. “That’s understandable. Well regardless, we shouldn’t have carried on like that in front of company.”

“Don’t think of me as company,” she said. “I’ve actually grown really close to your dad.”

“You’ve been his nurse for a while?”

“A month.”

“How’s that been going?”

“The job itself is going great. But, your dad’s really not doing well.” She said it calmly, like she had taken a class on how to deliver bad news in a soothing tone. “He may seem as lively as ever, but he’s just trying not to scare you.”

Lively, he repeated to himself. He wondered what kind of show his father put on for this girl. She made him sound like Santa Claus.

“His doctors are worried that they may have to amputate his foot,” she said. “He gets dizzy, fatigued. He’s had to get stronger eyeglasses. He looks fine, but he really needs me to help keep all these medications and things in order.”

“He’s never told us about any of this.”

“That’s the kind of man he is. But I thought you should know.”

“Well, thanks. I’ll be looking out for him.” He stuck his hands in his pockets, wiggling his fingers and waiting for her to leave. He wished she hadn’t told him. It was hard enough for him to dismiss his sick father and now she was suggesting that he actually had a heart.

“We’re just going to be watching TV,” she said. “Maybe you can come join us.”

“No, I’m gonna get his things unpacked and then start dinner.”

“Okay,” she said, heading out. She stopped and stuck her head back in the doorway. “Virginia Commonwealth. That’s in Richmond, right?”

“Yeah. I guess one person’s heard of it.”

“He actually talks about your college days a lot. He says you were the first in the family to get a degree. He’s very proud.” She smiled and then left to join Jack in the living room. Simon opened up the suitcases and started putting clothes away into the dresser, placing rows of white underwear, white socks, and white undershirts into the drawers. He wanted to find some sort of pleasure from hearing Annie say his father was proud. But something about her seemed unreliable. He figured his father had pumped her full of these false sentiments so she would dote on him and think he was nothing but a big misunderstood sweetheart. Her eyes were clear and bright and her smile was comfortable and formed easily on her face. No one Jack and Annie walked in, taking a seat at the kitchen table.

“You’re making vegetables, right?” Jack asked. “Annie doesn’t eat meat.”

Simon turned to Annie. “You’re staying for dinner?”

“If that’s okay,” she said.

“Yeah, it’s okay,” Jack said. “He doesn’t mean to be insulting. He’s just not used to being around girls, that’s all.”

“Dad—”

“But it worked out for me in the end, since he’s able to take me in,” Jack said.

“He’s got all this space here.”

Simon opened the oven to check on dinner and then slammed it shut. Annie tapped her fingers on the tabletop.

“You have a nice place here, Simon,” she said. “You must do pretty well to have your own house already.”

“I guess,” he said. He tried to smile at her but could only manage to twitch his mouth. “But it’ll take me a while to pay it off.”

“Still,” she said. “It’s amazing that you could even afford the down payment. Real estate around here is crazy.”

“You know what would be amazing, Simon?” Jack said. “If you got married. Your mother would turn in her grave if she knew you and your sister were still single.” He turned to Annie. “She was a very traditional woman,” he said. “She knew that after high school she wanted marriage and children. She was such a nurturer. You would have loved her.”

“Oh, I’m sure I would have,” she said.

“You’re a lot like her,” he said. “She wasn’t too much older than you when she passed. The kids were so young.” He took off his glasses and wiped them on the corner of his t-shirt. Simon saw Annie put her hand on his father’s shoulder and he wanted to pick it up and move it, to tell her it was all just a front. That shortly after his mother’s funeral his father had dated a chubby woman who they called Mrs. Yu, who was later replaced by Mrs. Song the hairdresser, followed by Mrs. Choi who used to chain-smoke on the front porch. They were a series of local widows and divorcees that had gone to

church with Simon's mother. They stayed in the house long enough to line the bathroom counter with their cold cream and a toothbrush and to send Simon and Carrie off to school with a sandwich wrapped in plastic. They stayed in two-month shifts with a month in between each new girlfriend, when he and his sister would microwave their meals and catch rides to school plays with neighbors. He would watch his father pace and fidget and could tell he was starting to feel the itch of being the sole adult in the house; the new, enormous responsibility he held even with children that had learned to be self-sufficient. He no longer had someone to buffer his impatience and insensitivity, to calm the children after he had lost his cool. And soon a new caretaker would be found stirring a pot in the kitchen in the evenings and sleeping next to his father in the mornings. But Simon thought it was too much to put on Annie, too much for him to even process and form into words. He just turned back to the stove and lifted lids on pots to pretend like he was absorbed in cooking.

“Simon, are you at least seeing someone these days?” he asked.

“No, Dad,” he said, reaching into a cupboard for some plates. “And I doubt it's causing Mom much grief in the afterlife.” He was twelve when his mother passed away, so he held distinct images of her in his memory. He always pictured her glancing at him and his sister while easing their father into a freshly ironed shirt. Her eyes were narrowed into tired, cautionary slits, warning them of what they might become as adults: a neglectful man and a domestic woman.

“Don't be so sure. Aren't there any available women in your office?”

Simon set the plates in front of his father and Annie and then placed two hands on the edge of the table. “Probably.” He rubbed at his brow and then picked up a blue gingham oven mitt. “The fish is ready. Are you hungry?” Jack pointed at the mitt.

“Where’s the matching apron?” he asked. “I don’t know what went wrong. I got a son who cooks more than he dates and a daughter that’s living the bachelor’s life somewhere in DC. You’d think if my kids were going to be screw-ups, they’d at least act according to gender.”

Simon pulled a baking pan out of the oven and walked back to the table. “Are you hungry now?” He repeated.

“You’re dodging my question.”

“No, I’m not.” He knew his father was waiting for him to say in front of Annie that he hadn’t had any luck with women as of late and that most of his peers in their late twenties were engaged or married. Simon wanted to explain that to get women one had to have some scrap of knowledge of how real relationships operated, relationships, which he had never seen prior to leaving his father’s house at eighteen. “I just don’t want to rush into getting married and having kids,” Simon said. “I wouldn’t want to become selfish and resent my kids or my responsibility to them.” He scooped a piece of fish from the baking pan and let it plop onto his father’s plate. The juices from the fish and lemon juice spurted, sending spots on to the sleeve of Annie’s sweater.

“Ah,” she said. “I better blot these out.” She got up to go the sink. Jack looked at Simon and smirked.

“Nice one, genius.”

Annie took the Metro to and from Bethesda every day to watch Jack from eight to six. Simon saw little difference between her and any other babysitter. Since his father was retired, they didn’t do much aside from hang around the house or go for walks around the neighborhood. He almost wished that she was a live-in nurse and that he wouldn’t have to

tend to his father alone from six to eleven every night. The evenings were tense, even when they just sat on separate sofas watching TV. His father kept his comments to a minimum, which Simon attributed to the lack of audience. It was like they had forgotten how to function without Jack yelling and Simon brooding. They just sat and waited for one of them to say the right or wrong thing to get things going. The evenings at the kitchen table on nights that Annie didn't stay for dinner were the worst. They sat across from each other like chess players, watching each flick of the eyes or move of the hand and preparing to react.

“When's that sister of yours going to visit?” Jack asked, sipping his water. “She knows I'm here, right?”

“Yeah, she knows,” he said, wishing he could tell him about their phone call before he arrived. “She's pretty occupied these days.”

“With what? Racking up all that debt at school for some useless degree?”

“She was on scholarship. And she just graduated.”

Jack put his fork down. “No one called me about her graduation.”

“You didn't ask.”

“Well, she's been at that damn school for five years, I figured someone would give me heads up. You kids, I swear.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“Don't think you're a saint for taking me in,” he said. “I know if you had gotten out of housing me, you wouldn't have come to see me either.”

“If you gave me a reason to, maybe I would.”

“I'm dying, isn't that a reason?”

Simon slumped back in his seat. “You’re not dying, Dad. You’ve just haven’t been taking care of yourself. There’s a difference.” He found it interesting that his father had yet to figure out how to live without a caretaker, that the minute he didn’t have a wife, or children, or girlfriends around he had almost lost a foot. He wondered how his father could have gone through that experience without anything clicking, without realizing he needed to change.

“I’m glad I’ve got Annie. Otherwise, who would take care of me?”

“I don’t know.”

“She’s a good girl,” Jack said. “I’m lucky.”

Annie had started training Simon on certain procedures he would have to perform when she wasn’t there. She showed him how to test Jack’s glucose, when to give him an insulin injection, and how to check his feet for swelling or infection. She wrote instructions down on index cards for him to keep and had him practice the procedures on her.

“Take that lancet and prick my finger,” she said, holding out her fingertip. His hands were shaking and he pressed the lancet in too deep. “Ouch.” She let a drop of blood fall onto a test strip and slid it into the glucose monitor before sucking on her finger.

“Man, I’m sorry,” he said. He grabbed a tissue and held it near her.

“It’s nothing,” she said, laughing. “But try not to do that to your dad.”

“If I did that to my dad, he’d probably beat me with that cane of his,” he said.

“Even though I was just doing him a favor.”

“I feel like we’re talking about two different men sometimes,” she said.

“You have no idea.”

“Well, give me an idea, Simon.”

“You really want to know?” He had wanted to tell her what kind of man his father was, to show her what was underneath his sweet grizzly bear facade.

She squeezed her fingertip to see if it had healed. “I think this relationship problem between you two is making his condition worse,” she said. “I know that sounds corny, but I believe it. And I think he really wants to mend things with you.”

He had been sitting with her, as he had done for several evenings, admiring the care she took in her job, a natural selflessness that she possessed. Now, he wanted to shake her by the shoulders and clear her head for her.

“Do you not hear anything that comes out of my father’s mouth?”

“Yeah, he’s abrasive, but—”

“Abrasive with me, not with you,” he said. “Doesn’t that tip you off?”

“Tip me off to what?”

“Just because he’s nice to you, doesn’t mean he’s a nice guy,” he said. “He hired you because there’s no way me or my sister would ever shower him with all this attention.”

“Why not?”

“Because he’s a jerk and has been since we were kids. That’s why he hired a complete stranger to be his nurse. He had to find someone who didn’t know him.”

“Are you calling me naïve?”

“He’s just showing you off, Annie. He’s saying ‘Look at me. I’m an asshole but I can still get some goodhearted, pretty girl to take care of me. Look how unfair life is.’ I

mean, do you really think he's the kind of guy to just randomly tell you how much he appreciates you? You don't know that it's bogus?"

She bit at her lip while she assembled syringes for their next lesson. She didn't look up at him when she spoke. "Your dad's sick, Simon. Can't you put that other stuff aside for a second and think about that?"

"That doesn't mean he can still treat me like this. Is that a symptom of his illness, belittling his son every chance he gets?" He grabbed the stack of index cards and pretended to rifle through them. "Let's see, how am I supposed to treat that one? We got a card here for swollen feet, a card for fatigue." He flung the cards into the air and let them flutter into her face and onto the carpet. "Nope, no card for belittling your son. Are you saving that for next week? I'm sure you'll have all the answers for that one."

She picked up the two oranges from the coffee table that they were going to practice injections on, her cheeks pink and slightly puffed out. She smacked one into his palm and then handed him a syringe. "You have to be quick and gentle when you deliver the shot. The quicker you do it, the less pain it causes." She stuck her syringe into the orange and pressed the plunger in one swift move. "Got it?"

"Look, I'm sorry about that," he said, lowering his voice. "I know you're trying to help. You just don't know how frustrating it is to be his son."

"No, don't apologize," she said, pulling the needle out of the orange. "It was a good speech." She ran an alcohol swab over the needle and then disassembled the syringe. "But I think it would work better if you actually said it to your dad. And I think he was wrong. I think you do mean to be insulting." She packed up her supplies and walked out of the living room, stepping on top of the index cards. By the time he had

practiced a few injections and picked up the cards from the floor, she had grabbed her purse and jacket and walked out the front door.

The next day she left Simon a phone message at six in the morning saying she couldn't come in for a few weeks due to a family emergency. She talked quickly and had a newscaster's coolness to her voice, like she had rehearsed a few times before dialing his phone number. He listened to the message, knowing that even after two weeks she would probably have a new excuse for not coming back. He knew he shouldn't have yelled at her, thrown the cards in her face, and exposed her to the messiness of how he and his family worked. She didn't deserve it. He loosened his tie and unbuttoned the cuffs of shirt. He would have to call his secretary and arrange for him to start working out of the house. He walked into the living room where his father was dozing on the couch in front of the TV already. He looked like he had fallen asleep there over night. Jack's wristwatch sounded an alarm, a string of high-pitched beeps.

"Dad, you have to get up," he said. "It's time to eat breakfast."

"I'm going to wait until Annie gets here," he said, looking at his watch. "She's late. Did she call?"

"Yeah," he said. "She had an emergency and won't back for a couple weeks."

"A couple weeks?"

"I'll bring your breakfast to the living room." His father didn't answer and just looked out the front window. He finished the cereal and fruit Simon brought him while staring blankly into the television screen, mechanically bringing his spoon to his mouth. He refused to let Simon test his blood sugar, give him an injection, or check his feet.

"I'm not an invalid," he said, snatching the syringe kit from Simon's hands. "You forget how long I've been doing this." Simon read his newspaper while his father

narrowed his eyes and fumbled with the syringe, his fingers like pipes, unable to bend. Simon had read a full page of *The Post* by the time the injection was done. With Annie it usually took a minute. "I'm going back to bed," he said. "Don't wake me for lunch, I've got my alarm."

Simon lay on the couch, thinking about his father's shaky fingers and the stiff, slow gait he had adopted from the damage in his feet. He would have to think about these things now that Annie was gone, now that he was his father's caretaker. He wouldn't be able to tell him off, to repeat what he had yelled at Annie. He thought saying it out loud would make him feel better even if it was directed at an innocent. He could sense a change in the atmosphere of the house now that she gone. It was still tense like the evenings when she went home. But now there was a thick silence and the sense that things would be moving slower and heavier, and Simon knew that he had made it that way.

Simon sat on the front porch, standing up every time a car passed by, hoping it would be Carrie. His boss had allowed him two weeks off to care for his dad, but needed him back the following Monday. He had called his sister and promised to pay her rent and student loans for a month if she stayed at his house, the amount of time he thought he needed to get Annie back. Carrie came up the driveway in a cab, got out with her duffle bag, and signaled to him to pay the fare with a nod.

"Tip him well," she said. "He took me on the extra-long scenic route."

"You're pushing it," he said.

“You’re right.” She opened the cab door and started to climb in. He grabbed her by the elbow and tugged it until she stepped back out. He handed some bills to the driver and tapped the roof of the cab.

“Sorry,” he said. “I’m forgetting that you’re saving my ass. My wallet is your wallet, okay?”

“You’re lucky I’m currently unemployed,” she said. “And just desperate enough to do this.” She dropped her duffel bag at her feet and scratched her head. “So he’s inside?”

“Yep. He even postponed his afternoon nap to wait for you.”

“God,” she said. “How sad.”

She followed him into the house, leaving a couple feet between them as he led her through the foyer and into the living room. Jack was sitting on the sofa with a blanket draped across his lap and he pretended to be engrossed in a ball game on TV.

“When did you get here?” Jack asked, trying to sound casual.

“Just now,” she said. “How are you feeling?”

“I’ll probably be gone pretty soon. But not too bad.”

She rolled her eyes and hitched up her bag. “I’m going to unpack. Where am I sleeping?”

“I cleared out my office and made a bed for you,” he said. “Here, I’ll help you settle in.” Jack’s wristwatch alarm sounded, signaling his snack time. “Hold on a minute, Carrie,” he said. “I have to get Dad his fruit.”

“Dad’s got legs,” she said. “I thought exercise was good for diabetics.”

“I don’t have legs for long,” Jack said. “No use exercising them when the doctors are going to cut them off soon anyway.”

“God, it’s like living in a telethon,” she said. “Go on,” she said to Simon. “Go fix his fruit.”

“Come help me,” he said, leading her by the arm into the kitchen. He took an apple and orange from a bowl on the counter and ran them under the faucet. “Look, I don’t want to tell you what to do, especially since you’re helping me out. But maybe you could try to be a little more pleasant to him.”

“Well, I know I could be more pleasant but that doesn’t mean I will.” She picked out an apple from the bowl and bit into it. “Disease or no disease, he’s still Dad. You should know that firsthand. He’s just as bad as ever only now you’re responsible for whether or not he dies.”

“We’re responsible.”

“For a month,” she said. “And then it’s all you.”

“Could you be a little less cavalier about this whole thing?”

“Simon, if the world was fair, Dad would have died long ago and Mom would be alive right now. And if that were the case, I’d be all about serving fruit.” She made a sour face and tossed her apple into the trash. “But that’s now how things happened.”

“We have an obligation to take care of him.”

“Are you serious?” she asked. “We argued on the phone for half an hour over who would have to take him in.”

“That was before I saw how sick he was.” He set the fruit on a tray along with a fork and paper napkin. “It’s really bad, Carrie.”

She leaned forward and rested her head on the countertop. “I don’t think that’s enough to forget who he is.” She stood up and then headed for the door that led to the backyard. “And it’s pissing me off that you don’t agree with me.”

At dinner, Carrie focused on her meal rather than the attempts at conversation by Simon and Jack.

“So Carrie,” Simon said. “You happen to have any friends in nursing school?”

“I thought you were trying to get what’s-her-face back,” she said, swirling dressing onto her salad and licking her finger.

“Her name’s Annie,” Jack said. “Not what’s-her-face.”

“I didn’t mean any disrespect,” she said. “She had to have been a smart woman to get the hell out of here.”

“You think you’re so clever,” Jack said. “Hiding out at school with the rest of your unemployed friends to avoid being a real adult. At least your brother here has a job, a good job. And a nice house.”

Simon stopped chewing and let his food sit in his mouth. He had never heard his father approve of him, even if it was to criticize someone else.

“Simon’s very successful,” she said. “And I can say with confidence that his success has nothing to do with you. Unless you count him saving money obsessively so he could move away from you.”

“Jesus, Carrie. Back off a bit,” Simon said. “Let’s just get through dinner.”

She turned to look at him, her eyes wide. “Don’t tell me you’re letting one compliment go to your head.”

He looked down into his plate, moving his food around with his knife and fork.

“He deserves a compliment,” Jack said. “He’s done good.”

“Then why have you never told him that before? Why choose the night that I get here to suddenly start praising him?”

“Don’t be jealous of your brother,” Jack said. “Just because he’s made something of himself.”

“You’re so full of shit, Dad.” She looked at Simon for some kind of support. He continued to stare into his plate. She drew her chair back. “Well, you can go back to treating Simon horribly. Because it’s obvious that you’ve guilted him into being your nurse for life. Even though we all know you don’t deserve it. I guess there’s not much to be said for family history.” She got up from her seat and left the kitchen.

After cleaning up the kitchen, Simon walked his father to bed, leaving a glass of water on the bedside table for him.

“I don’t know what do with your sister,” Jack said. “She must have been born this way.” Simon said he’d see him in the morning and turned out the light. He shut the door behind him and went to the living room to lie on the couch, drifting in and out of sleep late into the night. He didn’t know why he didn’t defend Carrie like he should have, like he had wanted to. He knew guilt was what woke him up early in the morning to fix his father breakfast and to pat down his feet before walking with him around the block. He had failed at laying into his father and now he had regressed into the angry but compliant young man that he had spent the last ten years trying to abandon. His father had only been in his house for four weeks. It had only taken Carrie three hours to tell their father off like he had always wanted; she had done it perfectly.

Simon got up from the couch and walked to his room, grabbing his work suit and stuffing it under his arm. He went downstairs to his office where Carrie was sleeping on an air mattress. He nudged her awake and told her to take his room, draping his suit over the desk chair. She picked up her duffel bag and headed out, turning around in the doorway.

“I’m still mad, you know,” she said.

“Mad at me or mad in general?”

“Both.”

“Me too.”

She fiddled with the doorknob. “How come you’re not as mad as me?”

“I just don’t show it.”

“Why not?”

“Because, I can’t walk out of here,” he said. “It’s just how it is now. It had to be me. It wouldn’t make sense for him to stay with you, even if you did let him. You’re not ready for that.”

“That’s big of you.”

“No, it’s not,” he said. “It’s just what I have to do. Good night, Carrie.”

“Good night.”

He sat at his desk and turned on the lamp, taking out his checkbook from the drawer. He made a check out to Annie since she had left without asking for her last paycheck. His father had refused to mail it to her, saying that he would just give it to her when she came back. Simon wrote the check for a generous amount and signed his name, a shallow pay-off for using her to hurt his dad. He didn’t have the spine or the legs to stand in front of Jack and spit back all of his anger into his face. He had to be a nurse now and a son who had to be more concerned with nerve damage and low blood sugar than childhood hurt. He slipped the check into an envelope and licked the adhesive flap, wincing from the taste as he sealed it shut.

He went to his father’s room, opening the door without knocking and letting in a shaft of light from the hallway. His father spoke without opening his eyes.

“I’m sleeping,” he said. “Get out of here.” In the dark, Simon scooped him up in his arms and lifted him from the bed and into a nearby armchair, surprised by how light he was. “What the hell are you doing?” Jack asked. Simon shoved the covers and pillows onto the floor and then picked up a corner of the mattress, flipping it over. He straightened it on the bed frame, pushing at it with his knees until all the edges lined up. He threw the pillows and covers back on, layering the sheets, blankets, and comforters. He picked up his father and laid him back into bed. He left the room quickly and silently, closing the door behind him before Jack could say a word.

Development
Sylvie Kim

It was the summer of stealing. Reggie Lee had just turned thirteen and his parents decided that Camp Eagle Rock was the biggest financial rip-off of their lives and that he would not be returning for his fifth summer. He was left to shuffle around the house in the Sycamore Woods development, whose identical four-bedroom homes were now empty after the exodus of its children for tennis camp and summer school in early June. It only took him a week at home to realize that he never saw his parents and that his sister Tina hated him.

Marie Hurley was his only friend who hadn't left the neighborhood for the summer and like him, had an entire suburban home to herself while her parents were at work. Together they watched television on her sofa and when they grew bored, they looted her sister Janet's bedroom.

They usually checked her dresser first for cash, rifling through a top layer of white cotton underwear that covered a deeper layer of fuchsia lace bras and leopard prints. Marie was usually the one to find any money, tirelessly rooting through the closet until she found a tiny wad of bills in the bottom of a snow boot or in the folds of a turtleneck. She had introduced him to her ritual of casing the room for spending cash. He would always join her when she went out at Janet's expense, but tried to sit out from the actual theft. He usually opened a few drawers without looking inside before taking a seat and chewing on his bottom lip while watching Marie work.

He and Marie had been inside Walgreen's buying Cokes with Janet's cash one afternoon when he saw Tina in aisle 3. He didn't walk up to her to say hello or even wave from a distance. He hadn't had a real conversation with her since she herself turned thirteen three years before him. They didn't normally fight, but instead they kept up a feigned politeness when passing each other on the stairs, using the same smile and nod

for each other that they typically reserved for the family dentist. He had never acted on his urge to ask her what she was doing or thinking, perhaps because he was afraid to upset the distance but peaceable balance between the two. And recently he had noticed how irritable she was around him and that her perfunctory smiles gave way to narrowed eyes and cuss words.

A stock clerk was whispering something to her and pointed to the pocket of her jacket, a baggy windbreaker she was wearing in the eighty-degree weather. She started to walk away and he grabbed her elbow lightly, reaching for the walkie-talkie clipped to his belt as if he were about to call a manager. Reggie saw her stop and press her face into her palms. The clerk's hands went into the air like he had just dropped a vase. He looked around and then whispered again. She removed something from her pocket and handed it to him and walked quickly towards the exit. Reggie almost couldn't recognize his sister in this scenario: the oversized jacket, her face pale and crying, merchandise stuffed in her clothing. She stopped when she saw him. They just stared at each other, one of them unable to speak and the other unwilling. Then she turned and walked out of the store as if she hadn't seen him at all.

"Did she just get away with shoplifting?" Marie asked, as they went to the checkout counter.

"She really is good at everything," he said.

"I never pictured her as the stealing type."

"She's not."

"I didn't mean it like that. It's just weird. What would she need to steal?"

"How should I know?" They bought their Cokes and left, squinting from the wave of heat that hit them in the parking lot. He wanted her to drop the conversation so he

could have time to think about it. He had never been more curious about anything in his life.

The automatic doors to the drugstore slid open and the stock clerk stepped out.

“Hey,” he called out, jogging up to them. Reggie pulled his receipt from his pocket and showed it to him.

“I paid for this, man,” he said.

“No, no, no,” the clerk said. “Um...I saw you talking to that girl in the jacket?”

“Yeah, that’s my sister,” he said. “You’re not turning her in, are you?”

“Nah,” he said. “I won’t tell anybody. Will you give her this?” He handed him a small plastic bag. “It looked like she needed it.” He went back into the store.

“She just got the stock guy to steal for her,” she said, amazed. “That’s how the honor roll kids do it.”

“You don’t know she did that.”

“What’s inside?” she asked, trying to peer into the bag.

“Hold on,” he said, reaching in and pulling out a home pregnancy test. He had only seen them in television commercials that featured women curled up on a bay windowsill or walking alone by a lake. He had never understood those commercials and didn’t understand what was happening in the Walgreen’s parking lot, but he knew that the white and pink box felt like a barbell in his hand.

“Oh man,” she said.

He held onto the test for the rest of the day and overnight, trying to figure out how he was going to give it to Tina. He didn’t let it out of his sight, though he wasn’t sure why; his parents were never in his room. He wrapped it in cocoon made out of the plastic

bag and slept with it in the pocket of his pajama pants. He didn't like to think about the reason Tina would need the test. He knew she had a boyfriend named Jason who she broke up with every other week in front of the cinnamon bun stand at the mall. He had seen her come in the house after a night out, looking almost exactly as she had when left, minus a few details: her pony-tail a little off-center, the tag of her shirt sticking out. Her face would be too poised, like she was holding something in until she made it to her room. Sometimes he wondered what her face looked like as soon as she shut her bedroom door; if it broke into a smile or if it did something else.

The next morning, he walked into the kitchen and saw her on the kitchen floor with the coiled phone cord draped around her knees while she whispered into the beige receiver. Reggie took a seat by the compact television on the counter and fixed a bowl of cereal. The volume was so loud that he didn't hear his sister's feet pounding on the linoleum and was unprepared to field the smack she delivered upon the side of his head.

"I am on the phone," she said. "There are a hundred fucking TV's in this house, you have to use the one that's five feet away from me."

"What is your problem?" He rubbed at his head and returned to his bowl, lifting it up to drink the sweetened milk. Her anger was somehow not enough to deter him, which surprised him the most. It wasn't that he enjoyed making her yell and throw fists. In the mornings when he woke and shuffled down the stairs, he gravitated towards the nearest warm body that he could share space with. Because his parents left extra early in the morning to beat freeway traffic, that body happened to belong to Tina. He had begun to notice the silence of the house that seemed to blanket the sounds of refrigerator hums, the ding of the microwave, and other signs of life. Something about the silence made him actually think about his family, the people that he shared this house with. He didn't know

them, but thought he might want to. The kitchen was Tina's domain, the first place she stopped when waking up or coming home. It had since become a battlefield, where Reggie's daily mission for breakfast cereal and human interaction almost always ended in injury.

This is an important call," she said. "Can I have some privacy?"

Reggie wiped at his chin with the back of his hand. "There are a hundred fucking phones in this house, Tina," he said, imitating her shrill voice. He would always push her one step beyond her threshold, because he thought a furious reaction was still a reaction. "It's not like you don't talk to Jason four thousand times a day anyway."

"Stay out of my goddamn business, Reggie," she said, grabbing an apple from a fruit bowl and throwing it at his head. It struck him near the temple and he was shocked more by the fact that she had actually thrown it than by the pain. He was mad that she was mad, that his presence was enough to make her mad. He reached into his pocket and took the test out of its wrinkled plastic bag, throwing it directly at her chest so it would be easy for her to catch. She seemed to know what it was without even looking. She ran towards him. He jukeed to the right before she could hit him and grabbed the underside of her arm, his forefinger and thumb clamping onto a bit of tender flesh. Her yelp sent him running for the backdoor and into the safety of the backyard, where he cut through the Anderson's hedges, snaked around the Garcia's pool and ran up the wooden deck of Marie's house. He rapped three times on the door, thinking about the tears that had spilled over in Tina's eyes before he had fled the kitchen.

Marie let him and suggested they go to the mall to blow the rest of Janet's money. He waited in the living room while she got ready, listening to the gurgling of the Hurley's aquarium. He scanned the interior of the house that was exactly like his but in a shade of

yellow that his mother would call “garish.” He stretched out onto the couch and covered his face with a throw pillow. There was something comforting about Marie’s house even though it was just as empty as his until Mr. and Mrs. Hurley came home from work in the evening. It was a place to be, a place to go after he woke up and ate breakfast. Her house was a different kind of quiet; it wasn’t the quiet that comes after a scream or the quiet between people who don’t know what to say to each other.

“Ready?” Marie joined him on the couch, her hair still wet and flicking beads of water onto his arm. She propped a foot up on the coffee table to tie her shoe, a fluorescent green Band-Aid pasted underneath her kneecap and a strip of stubbly hairs on the front of her shin. He smiled, imagining her in the shower cutting her knee and just giving up on the leg-shaving process all together, tossing a pink plastic razor over the shower curtain.

“What’s so funny,” she asked, standing up.

“Nothing.” He got up and followed her to the door. “Why the mall again?”

“There’s nowhere else to go.”

They sat on a sidewalk on Sycamore Grove Road, waiting for the number 6 bus in silence. The bus stops around Sycamore Woods were pristine and practically untouched, most people in the neighborhood having an odd reluctance to take public transportation. He pressed his thumbnail into his arm, making a pattern of half-moons around a fresh mosquito bite.

“You know, that makes it itch more,” she said.

“Yeah, I know.”

“So you think you can convince your parents to pay for camp next summer?”

“I don’t really care if they do or not,” he said picking up a rock and throwing it into the street. “I may be too old for it by then anyway.”

“I don’t know why you go there at all. You just see all the kids from school. And a bunch of kids from other schools that are just like them.” She picked up a rock and handed it to him to throw. “I like it when the neighborhood’s empty like this. Don’t you?”

“I guess.” He lay down on the grass, his arms tucked behind his neck. He wondered why Tina had risked having the entire development know her business by trying to lift the test from the store. Any of the remaining neighborhood kids either worked there or are bought snacks there; their mothers and fathers filed through the line at the pharmacy counter waiting for their little white paper bags that looked innocuous enough. Maybe she didn’t have the money, he thought. He wished she had known that he and Marie had cash. She could have waited until their parents got home and taken their car to a remote drugstore in another part of town where seeing Tina Lee buying a pregnancy test would have meant nothing. He closed his eyes and lay still, letting the sun grow hot on his skin and his dark hair, trying to ignore the grass that made him itch and Marie staring down at him.

“Are you going to tell me what happened or what?” she asked. “I’m dying here.”

“I gave it to her.”

“That’s it?”

“And now I’m probably brain-damaged,” he said, rubbing at his head.

Marie lay down next to him. “Do you know the results?”

“She would never tell me,” he said. “Besides, I had to run out of there. I don’t even know if she took it or not.”

“If you had to guess,” she said. “Do you think she is?”

He thought she was. “I don’t know.”

“Just make an educated guess.”

“Well, I don’t know how to guess. I don’t know anything about this stuff.” He did know that she began hating him a few weeks ago when summer started. Now he couldn’t tell if she was stressed out from knowing or not knowing. He knew that he grew to miss her generic but warm nods of acknowledgement when they saw each other around the house.

“She looked pretty torn up about something,” she said, shielding her eyes from the sun. “I mean if she is pregnant, your parents would kill her.

“Not literally. But they’d probably make her wish she were dead.” He scratched at the bite on his arm, raking his fingernails back and forth across his skin. “My cousin in Maryland had one in high school.”

“And what happened?”

“Our aunt and uncle sent her to live with our grandparents in China and work in a church.”

“Damn.”

“Yeah.”

“But your parents aren’t even religious,” she said. “Maybe they’ll just ground her until college or something.”

“My aunt and uncle aren’t religious either.”

“You parents don’t have to know, do they?”

“She doesn’t have money for it anyway,” he said. “Why else would she be stealing?”

They sat up when they heard the hiss of brakes and the bus door slide open. He held out an arm to help her up and they boarded. They sat in the seats reserved for the handicapped and elderly, facing the window and watching the neighborhood go by.

“I know we can get her some money,” she said.

“How?”

She turned to look at him, the sunlight blanching the skin on her face so that her nose and mouth seemed to disappear. She pulled the rest of Janet’s money from her pocket, a crumpled roll of ones and fives.

“We’re not gonna find that much cash in Janet’s snow boot,” he said.

“It doesn’t have to be from Janet’s room,” she said.

His face grew hot at the idea of stealing more than pocket money and he turned and slumped in his seat. “We’d never get away with it.”

At the mall, she had suggested that they talk but he refused. Because the silence was killing her, she used up much of the stolen roll of bills buying them snacks. They sat in the food court with their soda and soft pretzels, nibbling halfheartedly after having already eaten calzones and cookies the size of their heads. She had a notepad in front of her that she bought from the bookstore clearance rack for ninety-nine cents. While she made her purchase, Reggie, struggling to be nonchalant, browsed the Women’s Health section. He flipped through the pregnancy books quickly as if they were Playboys and his mother were the clerk shelving books two aisles away. He wanted to know what was happening to Tina; if not in her head, which he knew she would never reveal, then in her body. He felt oddly privileged to be one of only a few people to know this secret and felt he now had a responsibility to his sister. He looked at the illustrations and ran his fingers

along their captions, absorbing the information with a quickness that he had never possessed in the classroom. There was a line of women standing in profile, each one with a belly more protruding than the one before her. The illustrator drew each woman as if her stomach were translucent, with the developing fetus in full view and colored in a shade of salmon pink. He mouthed the words silently as he read, a habit he had never successfully kicked. *Mother at four weeks, mother at sixteen weeks, mother at twenty-eight weeks.* He snapped the book shut when Marie called his name, and carefully placed it back onto the shelf.

“You don’t want to hear my plan?” She sipped the last of her drink and swirled the remaining ice around in her cup. He shoved the rest of his pretzel in his mouth, hoping that if kept his mouth full and working, he wouldn’t have to answer her. She waited as he chewed the food into submission. He finally swallowed.

“I don’t think we should do anything without Tina knowing,” he said. “You know she didn’t want us to see all that.”

“It doesn’t matter if we’re supposed to know or not. We know about it now, we should do something.”

“What’s your plan?”

She flipped open her notepad and started writing down addresses. He leaned over and read along. *Greenwalds 1460 Sycamore Forest. DeStefanos 6521 Sycamore Leaf. Pittmans 3443 Sycamore Ridge.*

“They’re friends of my parents. They all got some group deal to spend the weekend at the beach. They leave on Friday. I’m supposed to feed their pets and take their mail inside for them.” She leaned forward. “I have their house keys.”

“What, you want to steal from actual houses?” He slumped back into his chair and tucked his arms behind his neck. “Stealing from Janet is one thing, but I don’t know about this.”

“I don’t want to,” she said, lowering her voice. “But how else can we get Tina the money?”

“I don’t even know if she’s gonna get it done—”

“So what,” she said. “You said she doesn’t have any money. You’re her brother. You should help her. It doesn’t matter what she needs it for.”

“What’s it to you? You barely know her.”

She leaned back to grab a rubber band from the front pocket of her jeans and then pulled her hair up into a haphazard ponytail. He saw the redness creep into her cheeks and neck.

“I know you,” she said. She started to write the details of the plans down one by one as if they were collaborating, but eventually she dropped her pen altogether and just told him what they were going to do. “They’re leaving really early in the morning, around six. We’ll go over there sometime in the afternoon after the mail comes. That way if anyone asks what we’re doing, we’ll just tell the truth. We’re taking care of the pets and mail while the adults are away.”

“How much do you think we could get?”

“How should I know?” she said. “I’m not psychic.”

“Well, I thought you were the expert on this.”

“I’ve never done it like this before.”

He watched her scribble some more notes, pausing intermittently to read her words and then scratch them out. It reminded of him of being in Algebra with her, how

he could never cheat off of her during tests because she was constantly erasing and rewriting her answers. She had whipped through Janet's room easily, but he wasn't sure she would be as skilled in houses she had never been in. He wanted at least one of them to know what was going on.

They rode home in silence and walked from the bus stop back to her house, where he fell asleep on the sofa. At some point she had draped a blanket over him and took a seat on the floor, watching the TV on low volume. Before he'd drifted off, he tried to remember if Tina had looked fatter or if he had ever heard vomiting noises coming from the bathroom. But, he could think only of the events that had taken place earlier that morning when he had pinched her arm with the intent to hurt her, wanting her to feel his presence, to let her know he existed. He wondered how she went about her daily routine with a fetus in her body, picturing her as one of the women from the book with the see-through belly. He wondered what week she was in.

When he woke, it was six o'clock and he heard the noisy entrances of Mr. and Mrs. Hurley as they tossed keys onto countertops and slammed around the kitchen as they started to prepare dinner.

"Marie!" Her mother called from the kitchen. "Did you forget to leave the steaks out to thaw?"

"Here it comes," Marie said under her breath. She nodded at him and they got up to walk to the kitchen. "Sorry," she said to her mother. "I forgot."

"Well, we have to eat later now," Mrs. Hurley said, breaking apart a bouquet of broccoli and tossing the pieces into a pot to steam. She looked at Reggie with sagging

eyes and a tight smile that seemed to say, 'God, you're not staying for dinner again, are you?' It was the same expression she used every time he caught a ride with them to school, a look of forced politeness and unconcealed resentment as he climbed into the back of their red Explorer. "How are you, Reggie?"

"Good, how are you?"

"Oh, busy as always," she said, putting an apron on over her stone gray business suit. "We've got one kid in college, one on her way. Thank God Marie's still got five years until we start shelling out tuition for her, too."

"Don't depress the kid," Mr. Hurley said, smiling at him. "Be glad you're thirteen, Reggie. Money makes you mad." He stuck a plate full of frozen steaks into the microwave to thaw. "Staying for dinner? I can pop a steak in for you too." Reggie looked over at Mrs. Hurley, who was now furiously scrubbing at her hands with dish soap, her mouth tighter than ever.

"No, thanks," he said. "My parents are probably going to be home soon."

"Your parents have time to cook?" Mrs. Hurley said above the rushing of sink water. "With how much they work, you'd think they'd rely on others to feed you and your sister."

Dinners at the Lee house were eaten at lightning speed. Everyone was either in a hurry or exhausted from having been in a hurry, so their food was just inhaled. Then someone left to go to a meeting or to the den to fall asleep covered in the newspaper or in front of the television, flashing like a strobe light. That summer, Reggie had begun eating by himself before his parents got home, nourishing himself on a steady diet of macaroni

and cheese and frozen pizzas. He knew what time his parents came home from work, and that they made enough food to feed four. But sitting with the entire family at dinner was more awkward to him than sitting with the Hurleys while trying to avoid the disdainful stares of Marie's mother as he scooped mashed potatoes onto his plate. At his family's dinner table, he had to time his bites so they would synchronize with his parents', hoping that at one point they would all have their mouths clear and maybe a conversation could be started. And when the opportunity opened up, he'd usually let it pass; he couldn't think of anything to say anyway.

Tonight, he ran around to the front of the house, hoping to get there before his parents did. He grabbed a stray basketball that he had left in front of the garage and started to dribble. He had made his third successful lay-up when he heard the hum of his mother's car pull into the driveway. She got out of the driver's side and then pulled her briefcase and a steaming pizza box from the backseat.

"Here, here, here," she said, handing him the box. "Your dad and I have to go downtown for dinner with his boss." He followed her as she half-ran in her heels through the house in a hurry to freshen up. He took the pizza to the kitchen table and set plates and cups for himself and Tina. He heard the slam of the front door as his father came in, running to the kitchen to grab a drink while loosening his tie.

"Is your mom ready?" he asked, sipping from a bottle of water.

"Probably not, she just got here."

"Great," he said, rolling his eyes. "She picked up dinner for you and Tina, right?"

"Yeah," Reggie said. He counted in his head how many times he and his dad had had conversations strictly based around food and whether or not he had eaten. Sometimes he wanted to tell him, 'No, I haven't eaten in weeks. I think I'm dying,' just to get a

response from him other than ‘Good.’ His mother came down with make-up dotted on the dark circles underneath her eyes and the hair at the crown of her head spooled in bright pink rollers. “Where’s Tina?”

“Probably in her room,” he said, drawing pictures into the fog building up on the glass table from the pizza. “You guys going to be out late?”

“I hope not,” she said. “But if your dad’s boss starts drinking, we’ll be there all night.”

“Hey, if he drinks enough, I may get a raise,” his father said. He looked fidgety, feeling his pockets for something. Reggie figured he started smoking again. He had formally quit two years ago after the brother that he never talked to was diagnosed with lung cancer. Reggie could still smell the faint traces of cigarettes on him, mixed with the stinging scent of breath spray and mints.

“You need a haircut,” she said, reaching over to brush the hair out of his eyes. He scrunched up his face like he was annoyed, but didn’t jerk away. “The neighbors will think we’re raising a hippy.” She pulled out a twenty-dollar bill from her purse, tucking it into the chest pocket of his t-shirt. “How’s your summer going?”

“All right,” was all he could say.

“Make sure your sister gets something to eat, okay?” His dad gave his arm a squeeze and his mom kissed him on top of the forehead and headed for the door. He wanted to yell after them that Tina wasn’t all right, that he wasn’t all right. Even if he had, they would assume it had to do with allowance or friends and say they would talk about it later. He waited five minutes before venturing to Tina’s room. He dragged his feet up the stairs and gave a light knock on the door. He was surprised by how swiftly it opened and waited for a smack.

“What?” Tina’s voice was low. She had her glasses on and was already in her pajamas. She looked better than she did earlier that day, like she had scrubbed her face and taken a nap. He was surprised to see her hands hanging by her sides and not primed to strike him in any way.

“Mom and Dad are going out, so they got us pizza,” he said. “It’s downstairs if you want some.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“But I thought you were—”

“Thought I was what?” she asked, her voice turning sharp.

“Nothing,” he said. “The food’s getting cold.”

She took off her glasses.

“What kind of pizza?” she asked, pushing him out the door.

They ate in front of the little TV in the kitchen. She only ate half a slice and ate it tentatively, as if she knew he was watching her every bite. She seemed engrossed in the cop drama she was watching. A skinny man had a harried detective screaming in his ear, asking him “Who you working for?” Reggie’s gaze volleyed back and forth between the detective and his sister, the skinny man and the leftovers on her plate. He was still hungry after eating four pieces, but left the remaining slices in the box for Tina. She had crumpled up her napkin and left it on top of the uneaten pizza crust on her plate. He thought she must be hungry, that the baby in her stomach was still hungry. Pregnant women always said they were eating for two, and Tina had barely eaten for one.

“Man, I’m full,” he said. “The rest is all yours.”

“I’m good,” she said, not moving her eyes from the screen. “You can eat them for lunch tomorrow.”

“Nah, I’ll probably go eat with Marie.”

“Is she your girlfriend now?”

“What?” He tried to screw up his face into an incredulous expression. “We’re just friends.”

“Really? It seems like more.”

“She’s not exactly the dating type.”

“Why not?” she asked. “She’s a cute girl.”

“I guess. But she’s more like one of the guys. She’s not into talking on the phone and putting her picture up in my locker or anything. She’s cool.”

“Well,” she said, facing him. “It sounds like she’s perfect girlfriend material.” He rested his hands on top of his head and let a tiny smile form on his lips. She picked up the remote and turned the volume down a bit. “So make sure she keeps her mouth shut. I go to school with her sister; I don’t want anything getting out. Same goes for you. On the off chance that you actually talk to Mom and Dad, everything is fine. You don’t know anything.”

“But is everything fine?”

“What the hell do you think?”

“We can help you,” he said. “We’ve got a plan.”

“Oh, a plan,” she said, smacking herself on the head. “What the hell have I been worrying about all this time? My thirteen-year-old brother and his little girlfriend have devised a plan. I bet it’s a real meeting of the minds, with all that wisdom between the two of you.”

“Look, we can get everything together by this weekend if we need to. How much time do we have?”

“All the fucking time in the world,” she said, scooting her chair back, letting it squeal against the wooden floor. Her hip bumped the table as she got up, tipping over a plastic bottle of soda onto the tabletop. She left the kitchen and he could hear her stomp up the stairs. He ran to grab paper towels and sopped up the mess, tearing off a new sheet every five seconds and swirling it around the table. He wished it were yesterday, when Tina was just his irritable sister who was fair game to hit back. He couldn’t understand why she wouldn’t take his help, why she would be annoyed that he’d even try. He wanted to stop worrying about it, to get on with his summer. But he could only think of the day that her stomach would really start to show, when she would no longer be able to contain it in the unyielding waistband of her jeans. He didn’t want to see her like that, hiding hopelessly in sweats and big t-shirts.

He met up with Marie on Friday, surprised to find her already dressed when he knocked on her door. Her hair was neatly combed back into a ponytail and her face was still rosy from the shower. He ran his hands over his head, smoothing out hair still crinkled from sleep.

“Are you ready?” she asked. “You need to go over anything?”

“No, I think I got it.”

They stopped at the Pittmans’ house first, but walked in to find a Russian cleaning lady running her vacuum through the entire house. They went to the DeStefanos’ house next, where they had stood in the driveway for ten minutes while Marie tried to remember the code to open the garage. They eventually gave up and ran to Sycamore Forest to the Greenwalds’ house since it had three kids coming home from summer school in the afternoon. They let themselves in, and she went to feed their puffer fish

while he sat on the stairs with one hand on his cramping stomach. He figured he should save time and head upstairs but he sat planted on the bottom step, blinking every once in a while. Marie soon joined him, kicking off her sandals and examining the jagged pink polish on her toes. He liked her feet, how she had grown lazy with the polish job, just as she had easily tired from shaving her legs. He liked the pale tan-line from her sandals that marked her browned feet in the shape of a 'V.' He wanted to curl up into a ball and lie at those feet, walking his fingers up her slim ankles and shins. He wondered if she would let him do it in the first place. It was a weird thing to want to do, and it made him think something was off about him because he didn't want to kiss her or stick his hands up her shirt. He pulled himself by the railing and ran up the stairs.

"We're wasting time," he said over his shoulder. "Let's get this done." He walked through the hallway, peeking into doorways until he found the master bedroom. He closed the door behind him, even though he knew she was somewhere on the first floor. He told himself to focus, that he had a task to do.

He started with the dresser drawers, methodically filing through socks and plaid boxer shorts and stiff white bras. He lay on his stomach to look under the bed, feeling around for something other than dust bunnies and unused dumbbells. In the walk-in closet he frisked his way down a line of dark suits and wool overcoats, sweeping the inside of each pocket with his hand. He felt a spark run through his fingers each time they touched paper, thinking he had succeeded and could now make his way out the front door. But then he'd pull his hand out and find an empty gum wrapper, a grocery receipt, or a business card. He moved over to the bedside tables. Mr. Greenwald's drawer held a stack of *Men's Health* magazines with one issue of *Allure* stuck at the bottom. He flipped through it, expecting to see naked women but only saw articles about hair conditioner and

ads for lipstick. Mrs. Greenwald only had face cream and box full of Baby Ruth chocolate bars in her drawer.

He went downstairs with nothing in his hands or pockets. Marie had found grocery money left for the Greenwald kids in an envelope taped to the freezer. She took half of it, fifty dollars, and made sure to tuck the rest of the bills back into the envelope.

“A hundred bucks is just way too much for three days,” she said, slipping the cash into her pocket. “They’ll probably just go to McDonald’s every day anyway. What’d you find?” He gave her an apologetic shrug. “Well, I got lucky with this one.”

“I guess,” he said. “Can we get out of here?”

“Yeah, sure.” She twirled her key chain around her forefinger and led him out the front door, locking it on her way out. “Everything okay?” They began walking.

“That wasn’t as easy as I thought it would be.”

“I know what you mean,” she said. “Up until I saw that envelope on the fridge, I thought we were screwed.”

“You don’t feel guilty about this?”

She raised her eyebrows and shrugged. “I don’t think I should. I take money from Janet but only because she’s so mean. I’m taking money from my parents’ friends because”—she stopped to scratch her ankle—“I guess I know how horrible they’d be if they knew about Tina. And how horrible their kids would be and how horrible your parents would be.” She started walking again. “And I’d like to think that I would have someone to help me out if anything bad happened to me. Because, if I think about it now, I can’t think of anyone that would do that for me.” She bumped her elbow into his, which he thought she did on purpose but he didn’t mind. “I mean you don’t count because

you're not family. It'd be nice if it were someone from the family. And I think Tina might feel the same way."

They revisited the Pittman's house but had only managed to collect ten dollars, found in Mrs. Pittman's gym bag. He pictured all these adults spinning the locks of secret vaults hidden in the basement behind the wet bar to hoard all of their cash. Probably to hide it from people like us, he thought. From people who need it the most. They walked back to Marie's house in silence.

"I'll go through Janet's stuff and check my parents' room too."

"You want me to help?"

She scratched at her ankle again, a pink bump forming there from a bug bite. "I don't why, but, I kind of what to do this one alone. Won't you feel better going through your house if I'm not there?"

"Yeah," he said. "I would." She handed them the money from her pocket and they slapped hands like guy friends would, but lingered for a few seconds with her palm pressed into his, moving back and forth to keep the situation casual. He liked that they had a secret just between them, a miniature criminal past. If they got away with it, they would celebrate together and if they were caught, they would both go down, but as partners.

He walked into his house and went upstairs right away. He moved through his parents' bedroom the same way he had in the Greenwalds' house, starting with the closets and drawers and making his way over to the bed. He got to the bedside tables, saying a silent prayer before looking through the last two places that could be hiding money. He went through both tables, sifting his fingers through his father's hidden cigarettes and his mother's hidden anxiety medication but finding no cash. He sprawled

out onto the bed, tempted to just lie on his belly and sleep all day, sleep until his parents came home from work. They'd find him sprawled across their duvet, a spot he hadn't visited since he was in grade school. They'd see the drawers of their bedside tables open and panic. 'How much did he see?' they'd ask themselves. His mother would see the pack of Marlboro Reds that she could always smell on her husband's fingertips but didn't have enough interest in to feign concern about. His father would see the orange prescription bottle filled with white pills that he knew his wife was taking. He had never had the spine to tell her that he thought anxiety as a disease was a crock. Reggie wondered what difference it made that his father was addicted to nicotine or that his mother took a pill every morning so she could talk to her boss. Did they really think it was worth hiding cigarettes in the jacket sleeve of a novel or medication in the bottom of a tissue box just to avoid talking to each other about it? He assumed they just wanted to lie under that white duvet on their assigned sides of the bed so they could go to sleep quietly every night. He wished they still had some kind of parental intuition, that instead of sensing the presence of cigarettes and pills, they would sense that their children were on the verge of some kind of disaster.

He took the twenty dollars from his mother out of his shirt pocket and added it to the wad of cash from Marie. He took his father's cigarettes and stuck them into the pocket of his shorts. He didn't want to smoke them; he just wanted to know what it would be like to see his father stress over their absence, thinking he had hid them too well. Maybe he'd ask his mother about them and then she would know about his smoking, which would make her tell him about her medication and soon the entire family would take turns shouting out confessions. *I smoke. I take anxiety medication. I'm pregnant. I stole money from the neighbors.* He imagined the whole family hugging then, in a tight

embrace that would barely allow them to breathe, or laugh, or cry. Not like a sitcom hug, two people cheek to cheek with their faces angelic and well lit for an audience to see. But he knew it would never happen, and that no one would say a word.

He searched the house for his sister and found her sitting on the back deck, rummaging through her purse. He made sure to let his feet fall heavily against the wood so she would hear him coming. He sat next to her, leaving a good two feet between them.

“What are you looking for?” he asked, staring straight ahead.

“My cigarettes,” she said. “I think I’m all out.”

“You shouldn’t be smoking now, should you?”

“Well, I shouldn’t be smoking ever.”

“I meant—”

“I know what you meant.” She put her purse down and looked at him, her hand above her eyes like a visor. “You want to be a nurse or something? You grill me on my eating, on my smoking.”

He rubbed his fingertips up and down the wood of the deck, the texture smooth going up and rough on the way down. He reached into his pocket and took out the eighty dollars, sliding it to her without looking. “It’s for you,” he said.

“What’s this for?” she asked, picking up the money and discreetly counting it.

“Whatever you need it for.”

“Where’d you get it?”

He started tapping his feet on the deck steps. “Don’t worry about it.”

Her lips curled up into a faint smile. “When did you get so resourceful?”

“Since I had to.”

She stuck the bills into her wallet; a red one with a cartoon monkey stitched on the front, and put it back into her purse. “I wish you could have just gone to camp this summer,” she said.

“Why?”

“You should be running around, shooting the shit with your friends, kissing girls. I’ve probably scared you off of sex for at least twenty years,” she said, laughing, but dabbing a teardrop from the corner of her eye. “But maybe that’s not such a bad thing.”

“I’m glad I know.”

“Are you,” she said. He could feel her staring at him as he stared at the hedges.

“Is it enough money?” he asked.

“Enough for what?”

“For the operation.” He hesitated using the word ‘abortion’ as if he really knew anything about it other than what he’d heard on television. “You believe in that, right?”

She picked up her legs and twisted them into Indian-style position. “Yeah, I do.”

“So, when are you going to get it done?”

“I can’t.”

“Look, I can get more money—”

“I have to be eighteen,” she said. “I can’t get it done without Mom and Dad finding out. And we both know they can’t find out.” He felt his muscles seize up a bit. He and Marie had never thought about the terms and conditions, thinking that money was all they needed and their plan would be fail-safe. He thought it was odd that they had never once thought it wouldn’t work, that all it would take was making it out of the Greenwalds, the DeStefanos, the Pittmans, and their parents’ bedrooms without getting caught.

He couldn't imagine Tina telling their parents, trying to steal a moment at the dinner table in between the clank of silverware against plates and grumbles about work. He wondered if she would just wait for her belly to speak to their parents for her.

"Would that be too late," he asked, unaware that he was saying it aloud.

"Would what be too late?" she asked, reaching over to pick a piece of lint from his shirt. "You're trying to figure out how much time I have."

"Yeah"

"Coming up with a new plan already?"

"Trying to," he said. "What are you going to do?"

"Well, right now I'm going to try to find some cigarettes."

"You know how bad that is, right?"

"Yeah, I know."

She scooted over to lean on the railing by the steps and sat directly in the sun. He got up and joined her, closing his eyes and feeling the sunlight penetrate through his eyelids. He hoped she couldn't hear the crinkle of their father's cigarettes in his right pocket. He planned on returning them back to his bedside table drawer, tucked into jacket sleeve of a novel, where no one knew he kept them. He figured if anyone was going to spur a sudden burst in honesty, it would have to be Tina.

He opened his eyes and watched her. She looked like she was about to doze off. He took in this image of her in the sun, bathed in an orange light, her face peaceful and her body thin. This was how he wanted to think of her, even if weeks passed and her body and brain ended up giving way to a growing baby. "Are you going to quit?" he asked.

“What’s with all the questions?” she asked, shifting against the railing to get comfortable.

He reached his arm out and gently pinched her forearm, her skin warm between the light grasp of his fingertips. For a second he held his breath, waiting to see if it was appropriate or if it would bring tears like last time. “Are you?” he repeated.

Even with her eyes closed, she was able to hit him square on the shoulder with her fist, a firm hit that didn’t sting, but sent a dull soreness through his arm.

“I don’t know.”

Weekends
Sylvie Kim

Will Sakai felt the woman's hand fall lightly onto his leg as they sat together in a leather booth of a hotel restaurant, a warm palm and slight fingers enveloping his kneecap. She was twenty-one and called Lisa; half the age of Will and his wife Emily, five years older than their daughter Camille, and twenty years older than their child who had never made it to full term a year ago. He did the math in his head while simultaneously trying to remember the last time his wife had touched his leg other than to swat him away while they slept. His head began to hurt. Will's boss and best friend Patrick Hama had dragged him to a golf resort in Santa Cruz for a weekend vacation. He had spotted Lisa serving brunch on the patio earlier that day and told her to bring a friend to meet him and Will for dinner. She brought her cousin Casey, an attendant in the women's locker room who was now sharing a glass of bourbon with Patrick on the other side of the booth. Will couldn't figure out what they wanted with forty- and fifty-year-old men. When Lisa touched his knee under the dinner table he realized that for a few moments, he didn't care.

“So what does a CFO do?” Casey asked Patrick, leaning in and angling her face towards him. “Other than pick up chicks at a golf resort?”

“You don’t really want to know what I do,” he said, touching the underside of her chin with his forefinger.

“Of course I do,” she said. “I may switch my major to Business any day now. It’ll be good to make some contacts.”

Lisa stifled a laugh and Will began to tap his feet, as if he were preparing them to run. He looked down at the strip of white skin that encircled his wrist, contrasting with the rest of his browned arm. He had forgotten to take off his watch before playing in an endless, sorry game earlier that day. The tan line reminded him of how much he hated golf. Patrick looked at him and then signaled for the waitress to freshen his drink.

“I think Will’s looking for a new intern,” he said. “How would you like to work for my best financial analyst?”

Casey turned to Will with a smile and her eyes wide. The muscles in Will’s face tightened as he fought his natural urge to let out a sighing *goddamn*. He had to take these occasional hits from Patrick, the equivalent of a random beating from an older brother. Patrick had given him a senior position straight out of school when most other companies would have stuck him with \$30,000 a year for him, Emily and Camille, who was just starting to grow in her belly.

“Why did you take a chance on me?” Will had asked him once.

“Because you’re me ten years ago,” he said. “And what kind of a man would I be to keep you from supporting that beautiful wife and daughter of yours?” Will looked at him now, swirling the liquor in his glass and sliding his credit card across the table at the waitress; the performance of a man who really owned things.

“You know, Patrick’s so busy running his company,” Will said, “that he probably forgot I hired someone last week. Sorry. Casey.”

But she didn’t seem to hear him and instead was preoccupied with shimmying out of the booth and looping her arm through Patrick’s. Will was surprised by how affectionate he was being with her, when he knew they would be flying out in the morning back to lives and homes that didn’t and wouldn’t involve her. Patrick had married young once but divorced after a year, and his ex-wife moved to Hawaii with half of his money. He never found a reason to marry again, and instead went through a series of live-in girlfriends who had never lasted long enough to start redecorating. Vacations had become his new way to meet women who wouldn’t demand a spending allowance.

Most holidays and even Sunday dinners at the Sakai house held a seat at the table for Patrick, who preferred their suburban colonial to his vast, sterile home twenty minutes away. He had been a presence in their home since he first hired Will. He had even held Camille at her christening where Will had taken a photograph of them, his tiny baby girl swimming in a white jumper in Patrick’s tan hands. He had been at the hospital with the family when Emily had her miscarriage, bringing Will Styrofoam cups of coffee from the cafeteria as he sat in the ER waiting room. They admitted her that morning and she was discharged two days later. Her recovery seemed to be as quick as her hospital stay and she hurried to get back into her regular routine. She seemed to channel all of her sadness into her desire to look professional at work, happy in the neighborhood, and healthy at home. He never protested, thinking that she knew best on how to cope. When he wanted to talk about the baby, he would ask, “How are you feeling today?” or “Can I make you a snack?” He expected her to somehow know that he wanted to know and learn about her hurt. He had broken down in front of her as she lay in her hospital bed, resting his head

next to her hip. She had placed her hand on the back of his neck and remained silent, staring at the wall.

It caught up with her a few months ago and she began going to support group meetings every Thursday night at the local library. She and the other women met up a couple times a week on their own at restaurants or each other's homes. It was the type of group that Emily, had she never experienced such a loss, would have made fun of. Will once asked her if they sat in circles holding hands with their eyes closed, calling each other goddesses and sisters. It squashed any possibility of her ever telling him what they spoke of or did in their meetings. She began to really connect with Camille and they became closer than ever. But it seemed that she needed to cut out some element of her life in order to devote so much time to these women. It was as if she had drawn a line through the middle of their room which he could not cross, like he was a roommate she could no longer tolerate. She made sure to start the line above their headboard and run it straight through the center of their mattress. Soon after, Patrick began taking him on vacation with him.

"We'll see you two in the morning," Patrick said, looking behind him as he and Casey walked towards the lobby. "Good night." Will stopped tapping his feet and Lisa moved her hand from his knee.

"What's your last name?" Lisa took a seat on the center of the Will's bed.

"Why?" He tipped his head back and emptied his glass of wine.

"Relax, I'm not trying to blackmail you," she said, laughing in a high-pitched tone that made him aware of how young she was. "Your money is safe."

"What about Casey?"

“I don’t think she’s leaving that room until she gets an internship.”

He laughed and then took a seat on the floor, his back to the bed. “It’s Sakai.”

“Japanese?”

“Yeah.”

“My grandfather’s Japanese.”

“What’s his last name?” He turned to face the bed and rested his chin on the mattress.

“Sakamoto.” She ran her fingers through his hair and then traced his jaw-line with her fingertip. “Pretty close to Sakai. Hope we’re not related.”

Those words rang in his ears while he unbuttoned her shirt, while he moved on top of her, and later when he rolled onto his back, fatigued but wide-eyed. He didn’t notice he was mumbling to himself until she asked if he was okay. She squinted as he turned on the bedside lamp. He pulled one of the blankets off the bed and laid it on the floor. He grabbed a pillow and held it in front of him.

“I’m going to sleep on the floor. There’s towels and soap in the bathroom if you need them.” He lay down quickly, his ears surrounded by the plush pillow and expecting the insults to begin. He only heard the rustling of Lisa in the bathroom and the rush of water from the faucet. She got into bed and turned off the light, whispering “good night.” Will soon heard her soft snoring, as he lay on his makeshift mattress. She shifted in her sleep and dangled an arm over the edge of the bed. He watched it hover inches above his face, staring at the short nails on her slim hand. Her fingernails had a shine to them, similar to Camille, who with Emily spent what seemed like hours on the couch with bottles of nail polish. Emily used pink and Camille used clear polish that looked and

smelled like the varnish he used for the deck. Maybe she is what Camille will look like in five years, he thought.

It was seven when Lisa dressed and left his room. He said a little good-bye to her at the door because he knew she was a nice young woman who was probably just a little bored. He turned and saw Patrick at the door of his own hotel room slip something into Casey's back pocket and then kiss her good-bye. He wondered if it was a check, or a phone number, or maybe the contact for her new internship. He watched the girls walk down the hall together who were probably holding in laughter until they hit the elevator.

Patrick nodded at Will and smiled. "Beautiful morning, huh?" Will stepped inside his room and closed the door. The overgrown boy in him wanted to slap Patrick on the back, congratulating him on taking a pretty, young girl to bed. But all he could think about was finding ways to erase the weekend, to run home to his wife and daughter, lock the doors so they could never leave him. He headed to the shower and went through a handful of tiny hotel soap bars trying to get clean.

He sat on the edge of his bed in a bathrobe and called Emily, wiping away tears with the heel of his hand while she told him about her and Camille's Saturday shopping spree.

"We bought out the entire place," she said. "Can you believe that Camille is taller than me now?"

"No," he said. "It's crazy. I can't wait to get home and see you guys."

"You've been gone for like a day," she said laughing.

"I know."

“What, you’re not having fun?”

He played with the coiled phone cord, stretching it straight and then letting go to let it curl up again.

“I hate golf.”

At checkout, Will pulled out his wallet to pay but Patrick snatched it from his hand.

“My treat.” Patrick put his credit card on the counter.

“No, I got it.” Will said, making a grab for his wallet. Patrick was too quick and slipped it into his jacket pocket.

When Will got home on Sunday morning, he crawled into bed next to Emily, waking her up with a light kiss. He knew not to kiss her for very long, knowing that he would find himself opening his mouth a little wider and grazing her tongue with his. Then he would move a hand to her hipbone and slip a few fingers under the elastic of her pajama pants. She would then move his hand off her hip and turn her head to the side, rolling up in her blanket as she did most nights.

“How was golf?” she asked.

“It was okay,” he said, scooting underneath the covers. “Glad to be home. You girls have fun this weekend?”

“A lot of fun.” She turned and laid her head on his chest. “You and Camille should really try to spend more time together. She’s growing up at some abnormal rate. Do you know she takes her driver's test next month?”

“Don’t remind me,” he said. “Anyway, she’s always out. How can I spend time with her?”

“You have to find time,” she said. “Nights when I’m at group would be a good opportunity.” She always called it ‘group’ instead using its acronym MOM, Mothers Overcoming Miscarriage, maybe in the hopes that people would think she was going to a pottery class or a civic club.

“When she wakes up I’ll make her breakfast. How’s that?” he said.

“She’s still at Jake’s.”

He grabbed the alarm clock from the bedside table that flashed 9:13 a.m. “Please tell me she’s helping him with his paper route.”

“Don’t flip out just yet.”

“You mean she’s spending the night at a boy’s house?”

“It’s his birthday and he’s got all his guy and girl friends there for some overnight party. I talked to his parents and they’re very involved with the whole thing.”

“Are they giving out condoms as door prizes?”

“They’re watching them like hawks, Will. Let’s have some faith in our daughter.”

She fluffed up her pillow and turned her back to him, meaning the conversation was over. Soon she was back to sleep, leaving him to stare at the ceiling. Camille was changing. As a child, she was so fragile and her wishbone legs buckled underneath her as she ran around the yard. He had scooped her up from the grass thousands of times, brushing away tears and dirt. Even as she got older and stronger, he was still convinced she needed him, that she would shatter if she fell. She hit her early teens and to Will it seemed like she no longer had a use for him. He let her be, figuring that it was what young women did.

Her recent school photo that sat in his wallet was her first adolescent picture sans braces and showed her new even smile, a St. Joseph’s Academy shirt now filled out and a

wash of cosmetics over her eyelids. He stayed in bed until eleven when he heard the front door open and Camille's footsteps pad up the stairs and into her room. The sound was strange to him.

That evening while Will was grilling chicken and hamburgers in the backyard, he saw Patrick walking through the grass with metallic gift bags in his hands. He stepped back as a wave of heat from the grill hit his face. He and Patrick had an unspoken pact that what happened during vacations was private, yet he often found himself joking and revealing details to Emily about his friend's encounters with women. Now that he was culpable, the sight of Patrick seemed threatening; not because it was likely he'd say anything to Emily but because he could.

"Hey, Patrick," he said, jogging up to him. "What brings you by?"

"You forgot I had your wallet," he said, pulling it out of his back pocket and waving it at him. "And I figured I would drop off these gifts I picked up in Santa Cruz for your girls."

"Oh, thanks," he said. "These look great. I'll let them know you stopped by."

"Don't be a jackass, Will. Gifts should be given in person. Where is everyone?"

Will called for Emily who was still in the kitchen. Camille was floating around the pool in a blue blow-up raft.

"Patrick's here, Em."

"How are you, Patrick?" she asked.

"Great." He leaned over to give her a hug. "How are you? Looking gorgeous as always."

"My sister just moved to town, and she's already driving me crazy. Other than that, things are good."

“When are you going to set me up with this sister?” Patrick asked, smiling.

“Never.”

“I brought some gifts for you and Camille.” He held out the gift bags with tufts of tissue paper poking out from the top.

“How sweet,” Emily said, taking the bags. “This is too much.”

“It’s my pleasure, honestly.”

Will walked him over to the pool.

“Camille,” Will said. “Are you hungry?”

She didn’t look up, choosing instead to adjust the strap of her bikini top. “I’ll eat in a little bit.”

“Well, you want to say hi to Patrick?”

She swished her hands around the pool, making her raft spin. “Not particularly.”

“Are you sure? He’s got a gift here for you.”

“No thanks,” she said.

“Come on Camille,” Patrick said. “Pass on gifts?”

“A Jehovah’s Witness came to the door the other day,” she said. “And they finally convinced me.”

Will turned to him. “She’s sixteen. We’re just glad she’s not robbing gas stations yet.”

Patrick laughed. “It’s understandable.” Will ran to help Emily carry out some dishes. He turned to see Patrick squat by the pool and talk to Camille. She stuck her arms in the water and paddled away to the deep end. Will shook his head. Patrick stood up and called out, “Is there a place for me?”

“Sure,” Emily said, setting a plate and silverware on the patio table for him. Will went back to the grill, flipping each piece of meat and puncturing them with a pitchfork to see if they were done. He tried not to think about the weekend or about Patrick, who knew what had gone on that weekend and would be sitting with his family at dinner. He decided to relax, to trust him. When the food was ready, he returned to the table and asked where Camille was.

“She’s right there.” Emily put down her plate and stood up. “Hi Jake. Glad you could make it.” Will and Patrick turned to see Camille with a tall kid in a baseball cap and a goofy smile.

“Jake, this is everyone. Everyone, Jake,” Camille said, pulling out the two empty chairs that sat between Will and Patrick.

Will stood up and shook his hand. “Nice to meet you, Jake.”

“You too, sir.” He said. Camille started to seat him next to Patrick.

“Come sit by me, Jake,” Will said. Jake plunked himself into the chair next to him, smiling nervously. Camille stood behind her chair, one hand on her hip. “Hurry and sit so we can start, sweetie.” She pulled out her chair like a kid in detention and took a seat by Patrick.

The two older men took turns ribbing Jake in between bites and sips throughout dinner. “You’ve taken your driver’s test, Jake?” Will asked.

“Yes sir. And I passed.”

“What do you drive, son?” Patrick said. “Something fast?” He opened a soda bottle and refilled Camille’s glass. She looked at him before sticking the chicken bone from her plate into the glass and sliding it away from her. Will shot her a stern look, and

she ignored him.

“A Jetta.”

“Oh really?” Will said, turning to Patrick. “Not a very masculine car, huh?” They both started to chuckle, holding up their hands as a way of saying ‘no offense.’

“Thanks for dinner Mom,” Camille dropped her fork and then stood up. “We have to go if we’re going to make our movie.”

“What?” Will said. “Jake just got here.” She looked at him, her face cold and blank beneath her suntan. She leaned over and kissed her mother on the cheek, then grabbed Jake’s hand, dragging him across the backyard before he could say good-bye.

“Not funny,” Emily said, picking up empty bottles and heading towards the kitchen.

Will walked Patrick out to the driveway after dinner and a couple rounds of boxing on TV.

“Nice end to a nice weekend,” Patrick said as he opened his car door.

“Hey,” Will said. “Let me pitch in for the hotel.”

“Don’t worry about the hotel. You had me over for dinner. We’re even.” He watched Patrick back out of the driveway and waved when he honked twice before driving off.

Will had trouble sleeping that night and all nights that followed. The weekend in Santa Cruz had triggered his insomnia, and he stayed up until five in the morning usually, thinking of what he had done. He tried to negotiate with his conscience, telling it that millions of married men hired prostitutes, beat their wives, or abandoned their children. He had just made one mistake. He always lost that argument though. He would lie awake

and listen for Camille to come in around midnight and to Emily's breathing beside him. When Emily was in deep sleep, he would wrap his arms around her waist and place his head in her hair, inhaling the scent of her mango shampoo and letting go if she started to stir.

"Hey, you know I love you," Emily said one morning, pouring him a cup of herbal tea. "But you look like shit." He hadn't gotten good sleep in weeks. His face was sallow and dark bags hung under his eyes.

"It's this fucking insomnia," he said, sipping the tea. "I'm so tired, but I just can't fall asleep."

"Maybe you need another vacation with Patrick," she said. "You look like you could use more sun."

"Nah," he said. "I'd rather lay out by the pool with you and Camille." He looked up at her. "By the way, is she talking to me yet?"

"Not yet."

"She must really like this Jake guy."

She took a seat next to him. "I think she likes how he makes her feel."

"I mean, we were just joking around with him," he said. "Isn't that what dads do, they give a hard time to the kid their daughter brings home?"

"We?" She rested her chin on her hand. "As in, you and Patrick?"

"Patrick's like another dad practically."

"According to you," she said. "Notice a little tension between the two of them?"

"Yeah," he said. "I've been meaning to talk to her about that. I know she's a teenager and hormonal, but she still has manners."

"You think this is hormones?"

“What else would it be?”

She lifted one of her knees and hugged it to her chest. “Whose hormones? Patrick or Camille’s?”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing,” she said, taking a sip from Will’s mug. “I mean, she hasn’t said anything.”

“That’s a little out of line, don’t you think?” Will shifted in his chair. “Just because he’s single and dates a lot doesn’t mean—”

“Forget it,” she said, irritated. “I’ll talk to Camille. You think she’s rude, I’ll tell her to be polite. Obviously, you can’t tell her.”

He rubbed his eyes with his palms. “God, I wish I could have one fucking conversation with her.”

She swept the table with the side of her hand, sending random crumbs into the air.

“What would you say to her, Will?”

He spent the next Saturday afternoon at Patrick’s place helping him set up a new entertainment center. He sat on the couch watching Patrick put it together. He and Emily had apologized to each other, but they rushed it. It seemed like it was a displeasure they just wanted to get out of the way quickly, like cleaning the toilets.

“Hey, what’s with you?” Patrick said. “You look like Frankenstein.”

“I’m a piece of shit.”

Patrick chucked a screwdriver onto the carpet and took a seat on the floor. “You are not a piece of shit.”

“I am. Even Emily said so.”

“She said that?”

“In so many words.” Will rubbed at his sagging eyes. “I’m going to tell her about Santa Cruz.”

Patrick got up and took a seat next to him on the couch. “You don’t want to do that.”

“If I’m going to be miserable, I want it to be because I was honest with her and not because I’m a fucking coward.”

“She’ll leave you, you know that.”

Will lay his head back and looked at the ceiling. “I know.” Tears stung his eyes and then overflowed onto his cheeks. Patrick took a throw pillow and slipped it behind Will’s neck. “Why don’t you take a nap?” Patrick said. “I’ll go get us some lunch. I’ll be back in a few.” Will nodded and squeezed Patrick’s shoulder, waiting for him to leave before sprawling out onto the couch.

He lay there with his eyes in wet slits. He wondered if Emily and even Camille already knew about his cheating. They carried around so much knowledge in their heads it seemed, masked by long hair and barrettes, hidden away from him. They looked at him sometimes with the expression that seemed to say, “You’re so fucking lucky.” He pictured them at home right now, expertly folding his clothes before placing them in his suitcase. They wouldn’t cry when they threw him out; they’d only shake their heads. Maybe Camille would kick the door shut.

His nose started to run and he searched the table by the couch for a tissue. He opened the drawer and looked inside, swirling his hand around a jumble of pens and other junk. He ran his fingers across a glossy surface and picked it up, holding it to the light. Camille, age sixteen in her St. Joseph’s shirt stared back at him. He took his wallet from

his back pocket and opened it. He saw Camille, age fifteen and teeth shining in braces stare back at him.

He drove home at twenty-five miles per hour, wanting time to think. His cell phone rang.

“It’s me. Mom’s at her women’s group thing and I need a ride to the mall.”

“I’ll be there in five minutes.” He honked twice in the driveway and Camille stepped out the front door, sticking her hands in her pockets upon seeing him. She looked at the ground and shuffled to the car, sliding into the passenger’s seat silently. They drove off.

“You want to listen to the radio?” he asked.

“I don’t care,” she said, looking out the window.

“Are you going to meet Jake?” Her face was turned away, but he could feel her rolling her eyes.

“Not your business,” she said. “But yeah. And before you freak out, we’re just getting ice cream. He would have driven me, but his car’s in the shop.”

He pretended to scratch his neck and then wiped some moisture from his eyes with his shirtsleeve. “Do you like him?”

“I’m not talking about this—”

“Because if you like him, then I like him,” he said. “And if he treats you well and makes you feel good then I like him even more.”

She opened the glove box for no reason and then shut it.

“Is he nice to you?” Will asked. She nodded. “And you like him?” She nodded again. “Because Camille, I love you more than you think or want to believe. So if someone hurts you or makes you feel bad, tell me. I’ll take care of it.”

“Jake’s not like that. He’s just a kid. I’m just a kid.”

He felt a cry coming up in his throat and disguised it as a cough. She looked at him and narrowed her eyes.

“Are you okay?” she said. “You look sick or something.”

“Just my allergies.” He fiddled with the knobs on the air conditioning. “You know, I’m heading over to Patrick’s place. I guess he has a new entertainment center. Maybe you want to come with me and watch a movie or something on the widescreen?”

She brought her forefinger to her mouth and began to chew on a tiny sliver of nail. He wondered if this was a new habit. “I’ll pass.”

“You don’t like Patrick?”

“What’s to like?” She said, moving on to her middle finger. “It’s just that he’s over all the time for family stuff. And he’s not family. Never has been. Plus you go on some Palm Springs vacation with him when you haven’t taken me and mom anywhere in years.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Whatever.”

“So you don’t like him because of me? Or is there another reason for not liking him?”

She rolled up the window. “Drop me off up here.”

He pulled up in front of the food court entrance and stopped. She got out and stared inside at him.

“You look like crap,” she said, looking down at the asphalt. “Maybe I’ll bring you back some ice cream.”

When he pulled into Patrick's driveway, he left his car running and walked inside without his usual warning knock. Patrick heard him come in and met him in the foyer.

"Where'd you go? I came back and you had disappeared."

Will pressed his forehead into his shirtsleeve. His eyes felt battered. When he spoke, his voice was hoarse yet composed. "What made you pick out Lisa and Casey?"

"What? Come on, let's eat."

"Was it because they looked familiar to you? Because they looked familiar to me."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Patrick said. "Listen to yourself. You're not making any sense." Will had never been angrier in his life. He held the kind of anger that didn't manifest itself through screaming or stomping. Instead, it sat on his chest and hung behind his eyes and in his temples, slowly increasing in pressure with every dismissive response that came out of Patrick's mouth.

"Did you fuck with my daughter?"

Patrick's face hardened, like he was preparing to give him a scolding. "You're going to come into my house and ask me that question?"

"Are you going to answer me?"

He took a seat in an armchair, his index finger held up to his temple. "It's a ridiculous, insulting question."

His voice was so calm, almost rehearsed. Will knew what would come next. Patrick would start itemizing the many favors he had done for him throughout the years because he had always had faith in him. After all, he had given him the job that paid for Emily's medical bills during her pregnancy and got them new cars and a house with a swimming pool. It had blinded Will for years and he had always believed that he owed

Patrick, the selfless benefactor, for everything. Internally, Will cleared his throat and stated plainly to himself, “You’re completely useless.”

“Did you?”

“Did she say that? Because if she did—”

Will blanked out. It was such an accusatory statement, as if to say Camille was just a nightmare ex-girlfriend who had resurfaced to bilk him for money. Like she was a woman Patrick had used at a golf resort. Like she was a woman Will had used in the hotel room next door to him. He stepped towards Patrick. He hadn’t hit anyone since high school and back then it was like a punch from a bad dream where his arm felt like lead and gelatin at the same time and barely scratched his opponent’s cheek. He tightened his fist. When he was a foot away from Patrick, he struck him in the side of the head and afterwards cradled his limp knuckles with his good hand while Patrick doubled over in his seat. He cried out some slurred profanities, wrapping his arms around his head.

“I found her picture in your drawer,” Will said, pulling the photo from his pocket and holding it an inch from Patrick’s face, still bent towards his lap. “Any excuse you give me will be bullshit.”

“It fell out of your wallet into my jacket pocket,” Patrick said, his eyes pinched tight and his head still reeling from the blow. “Remember? I was holding your wallet, it fell out, and I forgot to give it back to you.”

Will thought about the stack of photos in his wallet, knowing how difficult it was for him to pull them out of their plastic flap. He had to take them out carefully, his fingertips only touching the edges of the pictures before looking at each one. He didn’t feel that sting because his best friend was lying to him. In a way, he knew all along what kind of man Patrick was. He didn’t know why the image of Patrick in a suit in Camille’s

christening photo made him think otherwise. Will was a bastard just like him, shaped as a young man to admire Patrick's money and women and influence because it was what young men did.

"If I hear anything about you and Camille, I'll kill you myself," Will said. He wanted to hit him again but didn't know if he could make the drive home with two crippled hands. "Don't call, don't stop by. I don't even want to pass you on the street."

"It'll make things hard at work then, won't it?" Patrick was sitting up straight, his composure regained but the side of his face swollen and red. Will hadn't thought about work. He didn't think about whether he would go into the office and call him Mr. Hama and submit his reports or if he would be cleaning out his desk. He didn't want to think about Monday morning; he still had the weekend to get through.

"I'm going to talk to my daughter," he said before walking out the front door.

He got a call from Camille and headed back to the mall to pick her up. She was waiting outside on a metal bench with Jake, leaning her head on his shoulder and holding some shopping bags. Will pulled up and stopped. She and Jake got in, sitting together in the backseat.

"Thanks for the ride, Mr. Sakai," Jake said.

"No problem," Will said. "You two have any other stops to make?"

"I'm having dinner at Jake's," she said. "Drop us off at his house."

"I'd be glad to."

She raised an eyebrow at her father and then shrugged at Jake. They slid out of the car when they pulled into Jake's driveway. She handed her father a brown paper bag.

"Ice cream," she said. "Thanks for picking us up."

Will reached over and ran his hand over the back of her head. She managed a tiny smile before ducking her head away and muttering, "Embarrassing."

He drove home and was glad that Emily was still out, probably sipping wine with her girlfriends and feeling normal. He gave her a call.

"Hey Will," she said.

He was sitting on a kitchen stool with his spine slumped. "Are you having fun?"

He could hear her draw in her breath and imagined she was smiling. "Yeah."

"When should I expect you?"

"Maybe an hour? We waited forever at this restaurant to get a table, so we haven't eaten yet. I made chicken and pasta for you and Camille, it's in the fridge."

"She's eating at Jake's. I just picked them up from the mall."

"He's not so bad, huh?"

"Camille's a pretty good judge of character. I trust her instincts."

Will ate the entire unheated casserole dish of chicken and pasta, straight out of the pan. Afterwards he polished off the pint of mint chocolate chip Camille had brought back for him. He heard the buzz of the dryer and scooped out a load of whites into a basket. He stood in the laundry room and stuck his face into the warm clothes, trying to smell through the flowery fabric softener that masked the scent of Emily's T-shirts and Camille's tank tops. He stood there until the clothes cooled before going back to the kitchen. He was still sitting at the table when Camille walked in.

"Hey," he said. "How was dinner?"

She had her head stuck in the refrigerator. "Okay." She pulled out a soda and started heading upstairs.

"You want to talk?"

She had made it up two steps before pausing, but she didn't turn around. "About what?"

"Whatever," he said. "We don't talk much these days."

She turned around and walked back to the table. "Didn't we talk in the car like two hours ago?"

"You weren't really responsive," he said, pulling a chair out for her. She took a seat and tapped the top of her soda can before opening it. "Patrick's not going to be over here anymore."

She sipped her drink. "Why not?"

"I don't think he's good for the family."

"About time," she said, fiddling with the tab on her pop can and snapping it off.

He put his hand on top of hers. "If you need to tell me something, tell me now. Because I've messed up a lot of things with you, Camille. But maybe I can help fix this one."

She looked at him, the coldness still in her face but with its edges softened a bit. Something about her made her appear older, as if she had inherited all of Emily's strength when she realized that her father was too scared to protect her and that her possible pain might have been too much for him to handle. She was frozen, and it was his fault. It killed him that he didn't know if she'd ever ease his mind on Patrick and answer his questions. He predicted she would internalize it, whatever it was, just like Emily had buried her own trauma and like he had decided to let his infidelities rot inside him. He knew it wouldn't make much difference if he told Emily or not. Either way, he and his family would be broken.

"Camille? Do you have something to say?"

She jingled the soda tab in her free hand and tapped it on the tabletop. "I'm glad he's not going to be around anymore."

He picked up one of her hands and held it in his, touching each of her fingernails with his thumb. She had just painted them pink, thick daubs of slick polish over her bitten-down nails and the surrounding skin that was the color of grapefruit pulp.

"How long have you been biting your nails?"

She shrugged.

"What's bothering you?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Nail-biting," he said. "It's usually a sign of stress."

She reached over and ran her thumb along the dark half-moon under his right eye.

"So is lack of sleep," she said. "Have you slept at all this weekend?"

He shook his head. "Barely."

"So what's bothering you?" she asked.

"I asked you first," he said. "You're pretty good at dodging questions."

"I'm not dodging," she said. "You just look worse."

"How do you continue to care about me? After everything?"

"What do you mean 'everything'?" She tried to sound naïve, but the words came out as more of a statement than a question. She brought her thumbnail to her mouth. He hesitated but then leaned toward her for a hug. She obliged, but let her arms drape loosely over his shoulders, her fingers balled into fists as if she were unsure of where to put her hands. He looked at her and brushed aside the hair that was crowding her face.

"You remind me more your mother every day."

