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Nine

Emily C. Stuart
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Nine

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Honors Thesis
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Works Well With Others

Lucy Atwater liked sitting in the attic. No one else in the family ever really went there, which was the first reason why she liked it, even though she loved her family and all. The second reason she liked it was because it was comforting to drink in the oddly cozy, dusty smell of old things that once meant something to someone. And the third reason was that way up there, Lucy thought that she was as close to the sun as maybe she would ever get in her whole life, and she felt a little bit warmer.

It was the late afternoon, the best time to be up there, because the sun slanted in through the skinny windows, honeycombing the room, and inside the wooden walls of the attic, it always felt like time stopped or had never existed in the first place. Lucy knew that soon the birds would go to bed and soon the purple would come—but for now, the birds were awake and chirping to a golden sky.

Up in the attic, Lucy liked to unwrap the waiting Christmas ornaments. She wanted to let them know that she hadn't forgotten them. She wanted to make their eleven-month existence in ripped cardboard boxes and old newspapers a little better, because thinking about them living in that cramped darkness made her heart hurt. Her favorite ornament was one her brother, Edward, had made years ago—on a cardboard cutout angel, he'd drawn two stick figures surrounded by fire and an army of ninja turtles; her mom's handwriting above the drawing read "Edward and Lucy playing a game."

Inside the storage boxes in the attic was a whole world, tucked away, waiting to be rediscovered, waiting just to be touched again. Lucy always found old pictures,

usually scenes from family vacations where smiles and happiness were frozen in time, and they, too, sat lopsided and lonely until she could love them again. She found her mom's out of style jewelry, and she'd put on as much of it as she could and listen to the clink and rattle of bead against bead as they swayed with her body. She found ski goggles and yearbooks and thirty-two Berenstain Bear books and a framed black and white photograph of a man she didn't recognize eating cherries. She found little treasures like torn *Pat the Bunny* books and macaroni necklaces and "All About Me" first grade posters, which made her nostalgic even though she was only nine years old.

Lucy knew about the word "nostalgic"—(*nostalgia*, *nostalgically*, *nostalgist*)—because sometimes she read the dictionary. Nostalgia was "a sentimental longing or wistful affection for the past," which meant that as you got older, and the past that was following you got bigger and bigger, all life became was more and more things to miss.

Lucy knew that reading the dictionary made her nerdy; Trevor Arnolds had told her so last year when she was reading it during Silent Sustained Reading in Mr. Sherburn's third grade class. So now Lucy made sure only to read the dictionary in private, and especially in the attic, where she had recently found an old dictionary with her mother's name at the top of the first page—*Catherine Harrison, 1974*—written in careful, wobbly cursive. Lucy liked to take the dictionary to the corner of the attic and lean against the spotted wood and flip through its leaf-like pages. She paid special attention to the example sentences after each definition, because it was the only evidence of a real human person behind the small typed words.

Lucy was having fun with the word *octogenarian*—“oc-toe-jen-air-ee-an. Octogenarians, octogenary, octogenarianism,” she whispered to herself—when she heard yelling downstairs. Loud voices made Lucy’s heart beat all over her body, not just in the left side of her chest, but in her throat and her stomach too—but she couldn’t resist listening. She had to know. The muffled sounds became clearer as she climbed down the ladder leading up to the attic, tiptoed down the hallway, and parked herself at the top of the stairs.

“Jesus Christ, Edward. I don’t even know what to do with you anymore.” Lucy could imagine her mom’s pinkening cheeks, which only made her more beautiful, in a frightening kind of way.

“I forgot I had a test, okay?” Lucy was not used to Edward’s raised voice. He never used to be part of the fights, never used to cause them. She could imagine her mother’s thin, pursed lips, almost white, as she listened. “Plus,” Edward was saying, “I *was* feeling kind of sick. I could’ve thrown up. I was on my way to the nurse’s office.”

“Since when do you have to go through the parking lot to get to the nurse? You’re going to get a zero on that test now, do you get that?”

“How fascinating.”

“Don’t talk that way to me. God dammit, I just want you to care about *something*, to be engaged with *anything*—”

Lucy’s breathing became shallow and shaky. There was that familiar nervous feeling, like one hundred bumblebees buzzing from inside her body.

“Mom, chill out. Just let me explain—”

“Edward. You’re upsetting your mother.” Lucy’s dad must have come in from the other room. Lucy’s dad had been trying to mediate, his new thing. But he always gave up in the middle of it all, always too impatient to see things through. Edward used to joke that you could tell when Dad was the last to use the microwave, because there would be two seconds remaining on the timer, Dad being too impatient to wait until it was done.

“No, Dad, I’m just trying to tell her that I—”

“Oh, excuse me, James”—Lucy’s mom’s cheeks were probably red by now—“I suppose it doesn’t bother *you* that your son is ruining his chances in life?”

“Mom, listen to me—”

“Catherine, I’m just trying to help.”

“No, not you, you’ve found that peaceful spot inside you, so what the hell do you care?”

“Mom, I—”

“Catherine.” He was trying to hard to remain calm. “All I am saying is that it might do you some good to put things in perspective once in a while.”

“What’s a failing grade, right James, when we are all just little specks in the universe?”

“Mom!”

“Jesus fucking Christ.” Her dad had already lost it. “Don’t pretend to give a shit about what goes on in this house when you spend most your time outside it.”

“Well I *am* sorry that I work day and fucking night while you sit around here, pretending to look for a job—”

“Well, GREAT.” Edward’s voice was louder now. “So this is all about you guys now, as usual. I’m leaving.”

“Edward, we are NOT done here!”

“Fuck you guys.”

Oh Edward, Edward. Lucy couldn’t stand to think of him down there, in the middle of this, causing this, making everything worse than it already was. It must be because he was a teenager—he was already fifteen!—and teenagers did bad things. She thought about their pumpkin from last Halloween that someone had smashed. Its smiling face broken into jagged pieces, bright orange guts exposed to the whole world, seeping into the driveway. She rubbed her hands over each other in a washing motion—two times, four times—to clear herself of the bad thought.

“YOU NEED TO LEARN THAT YOU CAN’T JUST—”

Lucy decided to go to her room and shut the door, because maybe it would be better, after all, not to hear what was going on downstairs. On the inside of her door, Lucy felt one inch better than she had when she was on the outside of it. Her room was a whole world that she could control. And she kept it neat, perfectly neat. All of her dresses were arranged by color, her books in alphabetical order, her shoes by the date on which they were bought. She couldn’t fall asleep at night unless each toy was in its right place and every stuffed animal was leaning against another one for comfort.

Before Edward was a teenager, he used to come into her room and tell her to close her eyes, and then he’d move one thing out of place, and they’d see how long it took her to figure out what had changed. But Lucy saw Edward a little less now that

he had suddenly gotten cool, and skateboarded with his friends all the time. Once when she was playing outside, she saw the group of them smoking cigarettes behind a bush on the far side of the yard, and even though it made her nervous that that might mean that Edward was a bad person, she had to admit that he *did* look pretty cool doing it. After that, sometimes, when it was cold enough outside, she would stand on the front porch and pretend that her frosty breath was the smoke from a cigarette. She would make her mouth into an *o* and breathe out steadily until her breath, painfully translucent, disappeared too quickly into the darkness.

The yells downstairs were muffled now, but she couldn't escape them, even with the door shut. Usually when there was a lot of yelling and her breathing became shallow and shaky and it was just a little harder to exist, Lucy would clench her eyes shut and go to The White Room—the box in the right hand corner of her brain that was always waiting. In The White Room there was one sunny window with gauzy white drapes, and the room smelled like lemon, and all of the walls were bookshelves, with a gliding white ladder to reach the topmost books, and the room smelled like clean laundry too. Most importantly, there was a big four-poster bed with white velvet curtains. If she pulled them shut, then everything would go quiet.

She thought about closing her eyes and going to The White Room now, but the muffled yells pushed their way into her brain, and she couldn't push them back out. She just had to listen this time, now that Edward was involved.

Lucy's door faced the stairs. She opened it all the way.

"I said, *stay out of it*," she heard her mother snap.

Lucy began taking the books off her bookshelf and rearranging them in reverse alphabetical order. Maybe some distraction—(*distract, distractedly, distracting, distractible*)—would help calm her, even while she listened. Z, Y, X, she began—

“You know what, Catherine? Gladly.”

W, V—

“Clearly, James, our son got your ambition.”

U, T, S—

“Wow,” she thought she heard her dad say. There was a silence downstairs. Lucy felt sorry for her dad, but she also didn’t want him to come to her for comfort with his droopy mouth and those cheeks that looked like deflated balloons when he was sad. He had done that sometimes, come to her room after “discussing things” with her mom, come “just to hang out.” It made him feel better to be near his daughter, he’d say. Lucy wanted to help, but she never knew what she was supposed to say.

“Well I’m done talking about this shit,” she could hear Edward saying now, breaking the silence.

“You are *not* done—”

“YES I AM.” The loudest his voice had gotten yet, and then he was running to the stairs and thumping up them, two at a time—

“Edward!” Her mom shouted. But Edward kept going until he stopped short, right between the top of the stairs and Lucy’s open door.

“Edward!” He didn’t respond. He was looking at Lucy. He looked startled to see her, as if he’d forgotten he had a sister, but of course there she was and staring at him, wide-eyed, open-mouthed, her books out on the floor and making a little wall around her.

Downstairs, the front door closed with a sickening thud. Their mom did that sometimes, just left, snuck out, and you never knew how long it would be before she came back.

Edward looked as if he had something to say. He was the only one Lucy had told about The White Room.

“Hey Luce,” he said quietly.

“Hi.”

He kept standing there, and then he smiled at her, in the old way, before circling around her and shutting the door to his room.

Lucy wanted to run after him, but she stayed where she was. Oh, she loved him so much, she wanted to squeeze his still chubby cheeks and ride around on his back as she used to, with her legs and arms making circles around him like the spiral notebooks she used in school. Edward didn’t like hugs anymore—he’d just stand there limply, looking disgusted, whenever his parents tried—and the last time she asked for a piggy-back ride, he’d said, *What are you, six years old or something?*

She remembered when she *was* six, and she dressed up in every last piece of costume she had—the red cowboy boots, the sequined yellow dress, four skirts, the matted blond wig that made her feel like Rapunzel, and the pirate’s patch over her left eye. And then she stood outside his door, nervous but excited, waiting quietly in

thrilled anticipation, just so he could see how cool she looked. When at last he came out, he'd said, "Wow, Lucy, you look *just* like a rock star!" He had really meant it, too. And then he took her into his room, and he played some chords on the guitar while she made up her own lyrics to *What if God Was One of Us* and felt so happy, as if she'd swallowed a piece of the sun. Edward was even better at guitar now. But these days he almost always had friends over, and they disappeared into his room and locked the door, even though that wasn't allowed, and laughed so loudly you could hear it over the blasting music. Now he had a new girlfriend too. Amy. Amy had black hair and a nose ring, and whenever she came over, she and Edward went to the basement to watch movies in the pitch black.

Lucy didn't know what would happen to Edward now. She hated to think of him missing his test to be in the parking lot, maybe on his way to the nurse (because she wanted to believe him) but probably not. If he did fail, would he have to drop out of school? Did it mean he'd end up like Margaret Wheeler's older brother, who started getting tattoos and wasn't going to go to college and who Lucy knew for a fact had tried marijuana? She wished Edward wouldn't make things so hard for her parents. She wished they wouldn't make things so hard for him.

In school the next day, Lucy was so distracted that Mrs. Singer even had to say *Lucy* in a stern voice to command her attention back to the discussion on whales being mammals because they have babies or something, she couldn't remember. Lucy didn't usually get in trouble.

Other worries crowded Lucy's mind now that she was at school. She was staying after school that day, because it was her parent-teacher conference, and this year, in the fourth grade, it was the first time she was invited to join. All four of them together: Lucy, Mrs. Singer, and both of her parents.

Lucy was feeling very nervous. The bumblebees were back. She carefully ripped a piece of paper out of her notebook and began folding it perfectly in half. Did Mrs. Singer really like the mobile of the solar system she'd made last month? She folded the paper in half again, making sure its edges lined up exactly. Mrs. Singer *had* said that she'd put too many details into her write-up on Why the Pilgrims Came to the New World and Whether or Not They Really Landed On Plymouth Rock. She kept folding the paper so that it got smaller and smaller—but perfectly so, neatly so. She wasn't very good in computer class—she was the slowest of everyone at typing—and Mrs. Singer said she needed to speak more in class. Oh, what would happen if she weren't doing well? "I think it might be best for everyone," she could imagine Mrs. Singer saying in her voice that sounded like clouds, "if Lucy repeats the fourth grade." The paper was too thick to fold anymore. And then Lucy would have to keep repeating different grades, over and over, until she was a teenager and then she, too, would probably end up smashing pumpkins and skipping class and trying marijuana. What would her parents say? She unfolded the paper so that there were twenty-four even rectangles across the whole page. For some reason, it made her feel a little better.

But by the time her parents were being greeted warmly by Mrs. Singer, Lucy had sixteen blank sheets of once-folded paper in front of her, each with twenty-four

perfectly even rectangles, making three hundred and eighty-four total—and she was close to tears. She got up and sat right between her parents, across from Mrs. Singer, her skin too hot and her clothes too itchy.

“Lucy,” Mrs. Singer began, “is an absolute joy to have in class.” Lucy sucked in a breath of fresh air in surprise. “She is an attentive, careful student,” Mrs. Singer continued, “and she will be well prepared for the challenges of fifth-grade.” She pulled out a red folder with reports and past assignments, everything color-coded, everything neat. She began to go through each component very carefully.

“Lucy has a spectacular memory. She memorized all fifty states and capitals faster than anyone in the class. I began by asking students to spend five minutes free writing about what came to their minds when I said, ‘states and their capital cities.’ Next, each student received a blank map of the USA—”

Lucy noticed that her dad had slid slightly further down in his chair. Her mom kept popping Altoids and nodding brightly. By the time they’d gone through each assignment and had arrived at her report card, her dad was looking very intently at Mrs. Singer, which is what he did when you knew he wasn’t listening, but actually thinking about his golf game. Mrs. Singer lead them step-by-step through the report card with its thousand categories all pretty much saying the same thing.

Works well with others: *Exceeds Expectations*

Interacts nicely with peers: *Exceeds Expectations*

Demonstrates competency in group work: *Exceeds Expectations*

Lucy was as bored as her father seemed to be. *Penis*, she thought. *Crap, shit, ass*. She loved that no one in the entire world would ever, ever know your thoughts

unless you decided to tell them. *Shit-damn-vulva*. So sometimes when she was particularly bored, or upset, or when Edward called her a goody-two-shoes, Lucy would think bad thoughts because it was fun to be bad sometimes, and silently unpredictable. *Penis-penis-boob-breast-crap-hell-thereisnogod-shit-penis-damn*. She learned some of the words from Edward, who had given her a list of swears when she turned five, which Lucy kept in her jewelry box. The other words she learned from the puberty unit they did last month.

When Mrs. Singer finally reached “Exhibits fluency in typing,” the neat little check mark under a mere “*Satisfactory*” didn’t even bother Lucy, and neither did Mrs. Singer’s comments that she “might benefit from a little extra help in Science” and that, while she was “kind to and supportive of her peers, she might try to be a little more vocal.” But mostly, Lucy had *Exceeded Expectations*.

But in the car ride home, for whatever reason, Lucy wasn’t feeling so great about the conference. She felt bad for Mrs. Singer that her parents were bored, that she had been bored too! She felt bad for her parents that they had to sit there for an hour and eight minutes, being bored. And she didn’t even feel proud that she was doing well in school. She thought about all brain-space and sheets of paper she’d wasted spending all day worrying about having to stay back, and here she was wishing she had gotten more *Satisfactories*. She bet that Amy didn’t get good grades. That was probably what Edward liked about her. *Girlfriend*: “*a regular female companion with whom a person has a romantic or sexual relationship.*” Romantic, she thought. *Sexual*.

Lucy began smoothing out the creases in her jeans. They wouldn't stay smooth, but she kept on trying.

"Lucy," her mom said, "your father and I are just so proud of you. Our little star student."

"It's true, Luce," her dad added, "We never have to worry about you." It was a good thing, it was a great thing, Lucy told herself; she didn't want them to have to worry about her. But, oddly, she still felt almost as if she'd done something wrong. She felt a little heavier as she sunk into the gray backseat of the minivan. She was sure her parents would post her report card on the refrigerator. She hoped Edward would never see it. People who did well in school were losers, Edward said.

When they got home, her mom took the car and went straight back to the office to see a patient—*just trying to keep him alive*, her mom would say, and Lucy would imagine a scrawny man leaning over the edge of a cliff with his arms out, and her mom clinging tightly onto his T-shirt to keep him from falling. Her mom was a shrink at a big hospital and got people not to kill themselves all the time. Her dad used to be a professor at Boston College. When he left, one year and eleven months ago, he told Lucy it was because he was ready for a nice change of pace, but Lucy overheard her mom on the phone saying that it was really because her dad hadn't gotten tenure. *Tenure: "guaranteed permanent employment, especially as a teacher or professor, after a probationary period"...* *Probationary: "the process or period of testing or observing the character or abilities of a person in a certain role."* Lucy still thought about it sometimes, a lot of times, how her dad hadn't passed the test. Why didn't they like him?

When Lucy's mom left, her dad went to the garage to "jam." Ever since he didn't pass the test one year and eleven months ago, her dad had started acting different. At first he looked for jobs at other colleges and was always tense and getting angry all the time, and he kept threatening that the whole family might have to move if he found a job somewhere else. He only went to one interview, though, and he "wasn't the right fit," which meant that he hadn't passed the test again. After that he focused his attention on a book he'd already been spending three and a half years trying to write, a biography of Theodore Roosevelt, "The Cowboy Commander." Then her dad took up the guitar again and started having "the guys"—mostly the dads of Edward's friends—over to jam. Edward found the whole thing "mortifying" and "just sad." Her dad also started meditating, which he described as "getting in touch with his inner light," and which the dictionary said meant that he "thought deeply or focused the mind for a period of time, in silence or with the aid of chanting." She prayed that he didn't chant. It also meant that he tried to speak more slowly and tried to remember to look you deeply in the eye while you talked, and that he spoke about things like "mantras" and "mindful living." He tried to swear less too, but that part didn't seem to be working out for him.

Lucy went inside the empty house and began making her after-school snack—her favorite, a peanut butter and banana sandwich. She was still feeling like a loser as she neatly placed all the sandwich-making ingredients before her. She spent a long time carefully smoothing the peanut butter over one of the slices of bread, making sure none of it got on the crust, making sure the knife left no marks, making sure it was the perfect ratio of peanut butter to bread. She began to feel a

little bit better. Then she sliced the banana in even slices and placed them over the peanut butter in the shape of a smiley face.

Lucy had just sat down at the kitchen table and begun cutting the crusts off her sandwich when the front door banged open and Edward and three of his friends came crashing in, playing music on their iPods and texting and talking so quickly it was like a foreign language. This time they didn't go straight to his room, but came to the kitchen instead. Right where she was! They raided the snack drawer and took stuff out of the freezer that her mom was saving, but Lucy kept her mouth shut. They forgot to say hi. They didn't even look at her. She could have been just another chair at the kitchen table.

But she was glad to be right there among them, a part of it all, even a little bit. She sat happily as the boys crunched Doritos and slurped Coke. She remembered when she was younger, thinking to herself, why didn't she just marry Edward when they grew up? It just made perfect sense, and she didn't see why everyone didn't marry her brother. Now she knew better. And who knows, maybe Edward would marry Amy and all their children would be born with nose rings. Lucy thought about how if she had to get married, maybe instead she could marry one of his friends. There was Jake, unwrapping an ice cream sandwich, who reminded her of a monkey with his stick-out ears, and who, she'd overheard Edward say, had "felt up a girl" and had "kind of got to third base" right in the middle of a crowded movie theater. She wasn't really sure what that meant, but she was pretty sure she could figure it out. She was a little afraid of Jake. There was Bruce, whose mom had had four children with four different husbands, and whose voice hadn't changed like the

rest of the boys', and who only ever wore a "Skateboarding Is Not A Crime" T-shirt or his own handmade one that said "I Hate Girls" with a badly drawn picture of a girl with a big X through her face. "Dude," Edward had said more than once, "girls are cool now." But Bruce still wore the shirt. And then there was Chris, who was always playing the harmonica and who was a little quieter than the others, and who sometimes said "Hey Lucy!" especially if Edward said it first. Lucy figured that if they made her get married, she would pick Chris.

She turned back to her sandwich. Now that she'd finished cutting off the crusts, it was time to cut it in two, horizontally, like sails from a sailboat. Lucy marked the line down the sandwich first, to make sure it was even, and then slowly began to make the cut, back and forth, back and forth with the knife. And then, from among the boys' chatter came Bruce's high voice.

"Dude, your sister's *sawing* her sandwich!"

Everyone turned to look and Lucy froze, her knife in the middle of her half-cut sandwich. They all laughed. Even Chris. Even Edward.

In the middle of his loud laughter, Edward said, "She does weird kind of shit like that all the time, it's so funny. You should see the way she brushes her teeth. She's like, this tiny little freak."

Lucy could feel her cheeks tingling. She could feel the warm humiliation spread through her body slowly. Even when the laughter died, she felt stuck where she was, like a big motionless lump of clay in art class.

And then: "Yo, it's already four-thirty," Jake said. "Let's go." Still not moving, Lucy watched them grab their skateboards and a few more handfuls of whatever the

hell-shit-crap food they were eating, and head out into the driveway. The screen door slammed shut once, twice, three times.

First Base

Edward had been striking out every game for the past month. It seemed as if Lucy and her family were always climbing into the car to drive an hour to some town to watch Edward strike out. “Bellingham?” Lucy’s dad had said before the last game, “What kind of god forsaken town is that?” Now whenever Edward came up to bat, Lucy could hear the other parents sigh. In the car on the way to the games, Lucy’s parents always acted fake-normal and fake-relaxed so Edward wouldn’t know how nervous they were.

The year before Edward had been really good at baseball. Lucy and her parents used to get so excited whenever he hit a homerun, they’d yell his name over and over—“Ed-WARD, Ed-WARD!”—and even though he pretended he was embarrassed by it, you could tell it made him feel good. Edward had lots of baseball trophies. Last year, after he had gotten in trouble for saying “hell” in music class and claiming that he’d only said “helk,” Lucy decided to take all the trophies from his room and put them in the bookcase over the TV where everyone would see them. Just to remind everyone of something nice. She moved the trophies while he was at detention after school. *I promise to never, ever, to say helk again*, she’d imagined him writing over and over. But when Edward came home, all he said was, “What the hell are all my trophies doing in the Family Room?” And when Lucy’s mom saw what she’d done, she’d said, “They just look better in Edward’s room, don’t you think, sweetie?” And then she’d made Edward help Lucy move them all back. “I don’t know why the hell I have to do this,” he’d grumbled as he sulkily moved the trophies, one by one, back to his room.

Edward had made it to the All Stars this year, and that was when he started striking out. Making it to the All Stars meant that the baseball season just kept going. It also meant that the team got a fancy new coach who had once played in the minor league, though Lucy couldn't imagine him in a uniform with that stomach so big it looked like he ate a beach ball. Coach Houston wasn't like the other coaches, who had been dads and would never have yelled so much or told the boys they were pathetic and playing like a bunch of girls. "It's that coach, James," Lucy heard her mom say once to her dad. "It's that coach who scares Edward so much that it psyches him out. I used to get stage fright, you know, it runs in the family." "That coach is an asshole," her dad had said. "But there isn't much we can do about that, is there?" So they didn't do anything about it.

Once, two years ago, right before Lucy's dad hadn't passed the test, Lucy's family had gone to Florida over her and Edwards' spring break. Ever since that trip, Lucy hoped they would go again—but this year there was no chance of them going, because instead they had to spend the whole week taking long car rides to watch Edward strike out. That's what Edward making the All Star team really meant to Lucy—not even the slightest chance that they would go to Florida again for vacation.

That week they spent in Sanibel was one of the happiest times Lucy could remember, like maybe three birthdays plus two Christmases plus that time she and Edward had gone sledding at night. Florida was a whole week where her mom didn't work quite as much, even though she still had to take a lot of phone calls from "nutcases," and her dad took them mini golfing instead of going out to play golf with his buddies. Florida was sitting on top of her dad's shoulders and wondering how

many miles they could see until the ocean and the sky touched. It was later calculating that from way up there, Lucy was seven feet eight inches off the ground, which made her one foot and three inches shorter than the tallest man who ever lived, whose name was Robert Wadlow and who needed a special desk in elementary school and who once toured with the circus. Florida was searching for the purplest seashells with her mom, because purple is the color of royalty and “Don’t we all feel a little like royalty when we’re on the beach?” her mom had said, and then again, “They make such a nice centerpiece for the table.” Only they didn’t put them just on the table but ended up filling the whole house with them, placing them on counters and in bathrooms and on bedside tables and even pillows, and later Edward helped Lucy put a seashell in every corner they could find because for some reason, corners made her feel lonely. Florida was sitting outside at night and looking at the little dust particles dancing under the lamp and having Edward tell her that didn’t she know they were actually fairies who granted wishes but only if you really, really believed in them. It was the whole family squeezed onto one couch watching reruns of *The Simpsons* after dinners out and until way past her bedtime, because it was vacation and because those were the kind of nights when even though nothing in particular was happening, no one wanted to get up and end it all.

But Lucy’s favorite part about Florida was those hot, hot nights lying in bed when the crickets and the peepers sang so loudly, as if they were living in her pillowcase and trying to keep her up so they could have company. Lucy didn’t mind the not sleeping on those nights. Below her room in that house they rented was the screen porch. Some nights her parents sat in the creaky wicker chairs and drank

their “Mommy and Daddy drinks” and laughed a lot. It was the happiest Lucy had ever seen them. Those nights, she would get out of bed and sit against the window and listen to the muffled rumbling of their voices and all that laughter, especially her mom’s laughter, like wind chimes tinkling through the heavy air. Together those voices and that laughter made the most comforting sound Lucy could imagine, and it would rise with the heat and float through her window and fill her entire body. And even though her pajamas stuck to her skin, the air felt somehow cooler then, and she would drift to sleep, right there against the window, while crickets and peepers and laughter made symphonies in the night.

Actually, Lucy can only remember one night this happened. But it happened most nights in Florida, probably. But it definitely didn’t happen when they were home. Sometimes after dinner her dad would say to her mom, “Oh, come on, Cate, why don’t you have a drink with me? It’s not gonna kill you.” But Lucy’s mom usually said no because she got headaches a lot; sometimes she spent whole Sundays in her room with the shades drawn. Lucy couldn’t remember her mom ever getting headaches when they were in Florida.

But they weren’t going there, and maybe they wouldn’t ever go back. Instead it was just long car rides and striking out and beach-ball-stomachs and yelling. To distract herself at the games, Lucy always brought popcorn and practiced throwing it into the air and catching it in her mouth, and she also picked daisies around the blanket and made daisy chains. She had one so long now, she thought maybe she could get it into the Guinness Book of World Records if she kept adding daisies to it at every game. But she always paid attention when Edward was at bat.

Even though she hated going to the games, Lucy tried to make sure her parents and Edward thought she liked going. If she was happy about it, maybe they would all be happier about it, too. Because all this striking out put Edward in a bad mood, which put everyone else in a bad mood, too. The long car rides home were often filled with a silence so tense that Lucy's arm hairs stood on end. Edward would gaze glumly out the window, with slumped shoulders and the corners of his mouth turned down in the shape of a rainbow. He never looked at anyone. Her parents used to try to talk to him, but he always snapped back. Once, Lucy had tried to fix things.

"Edward," she had ventured quietly in the middle of one of the dreaded car rides, "I thought you were awesome."

He hadn't even turned his head from the window. "Oh shut up, Lucy, that's obviously a lie." She swallowed and rubbed her hands over each other four times.

"Do not tell your sister to shut up," Lucy's mom had said from the front seat.

"I can do what I want."

"No, in fact you can't, and Edward—look, I know you're upset about striking out—"

"I don't want to talk about it!"

"Well I think we *should* talk about it—"

There was no way to escape the yelling. Lucy remembered clenching her fists and digging her fingernails into her hands so hard they left marks there—four dark pink smile marks in a row on each palm.

“Just leave me the fuck alone!” Her dad had stopped the car and made Edward say sorry to his mother. “Sorry, Mother,” he said, and everyone knew he didn’t mean it.

The highway had seemed endless. She remembered leaning over to check the speedometer. Seventy miles per hour, her dad was driving, could they maybe go a little faster? Fast cars made Lucy nervous, but she could handle it if it meant they could just escape that highway sooner. Lucy always hated the highway. Every time they drove on it, she wished desperately that they could be on the other side of it, where the stretching rows of headlights looked like fireflies, forever glowing and rushing too quickly in the opposite direction. When she was little, all she wanted was to be caught in the flight of the fireflies, not separated by weeds in this fire of taillights. If they could only, just once, just for a second, make it to the comforting glow of the white (she still half-believed) then maybe there wouldn’t be the fighting and there wouldn’t be the silence.

Every time they went to one of Edward’s games, Lucy still hoped things would turn out differently. Tonight she was just with her dad. Her mom had a patient in the hospital she had to visit. Work was really important to her mom because a lot of people depended on her, and also she’d heard her mom say to her dad a lot that her work “makes this family possible,” so Lucy figured it had to be a good thing. Or at least, there was no way around it.

Last night, as she approached her parents’ room to tell them goodnight, Lucy had overheard them talking about the game.

"I don't see why we can't both just skip one game," her dad was saying. "I don't see what's so bad about that, it might even help. Maybe he strikes out because we're there making him nervous, did you ever think of that? We do go to *every single* fucking—"

"Nice try," her mom had said. "You're going to go, and you'll bring Lucy—"

Lucy didn't want to hear anymore, and also it wasn't good to eavesdrop, so she turned away. She had told them goodnight once already, anyway. She just liked to do things in even numbers. "Good night," she whispered to no one, but just for good measure, before closing the door to her room.

She worried all the next morning about whether her dad would still be in a bad mood, whether he'd still not want to go to the game, whether Edward would strike out again. At three in the afternoon, Edward left for Chris Lambert's, whose parents were driving them to the game. He walked out the door without saying bye and with a bag of fruit and some peanut butter and some weird pink energy powder so they could follow Coach Houston's recipe for "A Strong Athlete's Protein Shake to Make You Even Stronger."

"It's a Father-Daughter date, Lucy!" Her dad said cheerfully after Edward left. "We're just going to chill!"

Lucy thought it would be fun to spend time alone with her dad, if he stopped trying to talk like Edward. Usually spending time with her dad meant he did yard work while she played outside. He was good at it though—he made the garden look like a million little rainbows, and Lucy would sit among the flowers and pretend she was just another color in the rainbow too. Today she sat among them and worked

on her daisy chain while her dad trimmed hedges with some really loud thing called The Weed Whacker Wonder! that he had rented at the hardware store.

“I tell ya, Lucy,” her dad called from behind a bush, “after music, the yard is my nirvana. Just you and your thoughts, your own little world.” Like The White Room, Lucy thought. But even if she had wanted to tell him, it was too late because The Weed Whacker Wonder! was on again, as loud as a dentist drill in your ear.

When it was time to go to the game, they packed the car with a blanket and a pack of cards (“don’t tell your mother!”) and lemonade and popcorn and even peanuts. Lucy brought her daisy chain, too, carefully laying it down in a shoebox in a perfect spiral.

Lucy’s dad let her sit in the front seat of the car, even though her mom said she had to wait until she was twelve because of the airbags.

“So Luce,” he began as they pulled out of the driveway, and then came the inevitable, “How’s school going?”

“Dad, it’s vacation.”

“That’s right. But what is it, two more months and you’re done? Are you excited for the fifth grade next year? You’ll be one of the cool kids.”

“Yeah, I guess I’m excited.” There was a silence. They never had much to say to each other. Lucy had no idea how to fix it. She wanted to say something to him, anything! But her mind went blank. She couldn’t control it, her mind. It was always blank when she needed it to be full and always full when she needed it to be blank. She rubbed her hands over each other twice.

They drove over a few bumps. She tried to smooth out the creases in her jeans. It was still silent. She rubbed her hands over each other again. Two times, four times. Still silence. Six times, eight times.

“How’s your book going, Dad?”

“Oh, it’s going. Slowly, but going.”

They were quiet again. And then—

“Do you ever wish you were a teacher again?” It just came out. She didn’t know why she said it! She didn’t want to remind him that he hadn’t passed the test. She glanced at him anxiously, hoping that maybe, somehow, he hadn’t heard.

He waited a second before responding. “You know, Lucy, I’m gonna tell you something. When they say every cloud has a silver lining, they’re not wrong.” Lucy wondered briefly who “they” were.

Then he kept talking and didn’t stop. “I mean, life happens, and it sucks sometimes. A lot of the time, even. Half the time you don’t even know what’s going on, you can’t believe you got where you are, you’re nothing like what you expected when you were nine, or twenty-one, or even thirty. But you gotta take it as it comes, you know what I mean?”

“Sure.”

“I mean, I lose my job, I don’t know what’s coming next, I don’t even know what I want, your mother starts to resent me, *I* start to resent me a little bit. Your brother starts getting in trouble all the time.” He paused and looked over at her, as if suddenly realizing whom he was talking to. “But what I’m saying is, there are other things. There’s music. And meditation. I have more time now, so there’s that. I’m

happy. I mean really, I am.” There was a pause. Outside, the darkening world seemed grayer, colorless.

“Don’t you think I seem happy?”

“Yeah, Dad,” she said. “You seem happy.” Sometimes you had to be okay with telling white lies.

They didn’t talk for some minutes.

“But yes,” he said, all of a sudden and more quietly and not looking at her. “I miss it sometimes.”

“But there’s music,” she said. “And meditation.” She was looking out at the road too.

“Yes,” he said. “There’s that.”

When they got to the game, it was the same crowd as always. The same groups of parents and siblings, the same checkered blankets, the same dogs, the same glaring white lights competing with the blackening sky. Lucy let a sigh escape. She was about to begin hunting for the best spot to watch the game when she noticed Ms. Riley waving to them. Ms. Riley was Andrew Riley’s mom. Edward was never very good friends with Andrew, but they’d been on the same baseball teams forever, so Lucy and her family knew Ms. Riley a little. She came to most games and sat alone on her blanket. Lucy didn’t think there was a Mr. Riley.

“Let’s go say hi to Ms. Riley,” her dad said, catching sight of her waving.

“Hi James! Hi Lucy!” Ms. Riley cheerfully greeted them as they approached.

“Where’s Catherine tonight?”

“Catherine couldn’t make it,” Lucy’s dad told her.

“Well in that case, why don’t you two join me for the game? Let us lonely birds stick together!” Lucy would have preferred to be a lonely bird alone with her dad, but they sat down anyway.

Ms. Riley was different than the other moms. She was a lot younger, for one. She always wore red lipstick and hoop earrings and sometimes high heels, even though high heels were only meant for Friday and Saturday nights. And Lucy had heard Edward say that Andrew Riley was allowed to stay home alone when his mom went out of town, and that he’d “done lots of stuff with girls” even though he didn’t have a girlfriend. Lucy didn’t think her mom liked Ms. Riley very much. “That Riley woman looks like a clown,” her mom once said. Lucy wasn’t sure she liked Ms. Riley either.

Lucy brought out her daisy chain and the lemonade. She poured three cups of lemonade, giving one to Ms. Riley too, just to be polite. She began searching for more daisies. The first inning was starting.

“Okay team, this is it.” They could hear Coach Houston’s familiar opening words. “Now get out there and beat the shit out of those boys.”

Lucy’s dad sighed. “Here we go,” he said, more to himself than to anyone. Ms. Riley laughed too loudly. The sound stayed in Lucy’s ears even when the laughing stopped.

Ms. Riley leaned a little closer to Lucy’s dad. “I think I have something that might help,” she said through a smile. Lucy might have been looking for daisies, but she had very good hearing, and she was very observant. She saw Ms. Riley pull out

from her purse some kind of metal bottle in the shape of a rectangle. Lucy had never seen a bottle like that before.

“Oh my god.” Now her dad was laughing too. “That is *exactly* what I need.” Lucy watched Ms. Riley, her too-red lipstick surrounding her too-white teeth, as she unscrewed the small cap off the top of the metal rectangle and poured some clear liquid into their two cups of lemonade. Lucy felt her insides tighten. They learned in health class that some kinds of alcohol look like water. They learned that people sometimes put alcohol in their drinks. *Spiked drinks*, that’s what it was called. They were having *spiked drinks*. It was hard to concentrate on the game, on the daisy chain, on the taste of her lemonade. Lucy’s dad and Ms. Riley were talking and laughing a lot. Lucy had to remind her dad to watch every time Edward went up to bat. And struck out.

She grabbed a handful of grass and ripped it out of the ground.

“He’s in a slump, that’s for sure,” Lucy’s dad was telling Ms. Riley. “But the worst part is the way he acts about it.”

“Teenage boys are a handful,” Ms. Riley was agreeing. “And I have two!”

“I can’t even imagine,” Lucy’s dad responded, with a headshake and laugh.

“James!” Ms. Riley suddenly said, as though just remembering something. She put a hand on his shoulder. “You’re a writer, aren’t you?” Lucy stared hard at the hand, its long, manicured fingers pressing into her dad’s T-shirt.

Flirting: to court triflingly; a playful activity involving verbal communication as well as body language. She had seen Edward and Amy do it. Laughing. Touching.

Flirting can involve non-verbal signs, such as flicking the hair, eye contact, brief touching.

Her dad looked surprised and a little embarrassed, but he also looked pleased. “Well, yes, I am. I’ve been writing a biography of Theodore Roosevelt.”

“Well isn’t that amazing! You’re a smart one, aren’t you?” she said, with a slanted smile that crept too far up one side of her face. She wasn’t very pretty, Lucy thought as she yanked more grass out of the ground. Especially with that asymmetrical smile. They’d learned about symmetry and asymmetry in art class. Lucy liked symmetry better.

“I was never one for school,” Ms. Riley was saying now. “But I’m thinking. My oldest son is applying for college next year. We’ll be helpless with those applications! We’ve started looking at some of them, and they’re just impossible. Maybe you can help us out and teach me some of your writerly skills.” She looked up at him with that stupid asymmetrical smile.

And verbal signs, such as chatting up, flattering comments—

“Well,” her dad said, “I don’t see why not. I’d be glad to help. I remember going through all those applications myself, back in the day. And these days, God knows I certainly have the time.”

“Oh, that’s just great news, James. You don’t know how much of a help it will be! We’re so grateful. Here, why don’t you take my number—”

—and exchange of telephone numbers in order to initiate more contact. Lucy rubbed her hands over each other twice. Wash it away, wash it away.

The game went on. Edward caught a fly ball in the outfield, and everyone cheered. It should have made Lucy happier than it did. Her dad and Ms. Riley kept drinking their lemonade, their *spiked drinks*, with the water-looking alcohol in it. They kept laughing. Mostly Ms. Riley—laughing and laughing—but also Lucy’s dad.

Lucy looked down and noticed that she had left a bald patch on the ground where she had been pulling the grass. She couldn’t stand to look at it. She hated herself then, for ripping the grass from its home, for killing it. She carefully laid the torn grass back down in the empty patch.

Lucy’s dad forgot to get her a hotdog like he’d promised. Occasionally he tried to include her in the conversation (“Did you hear that, Luce, Ms. Riley has a swimming pool!”) but Lucy didn’t feel like talking. She was working on her daisy chain. But she wasn’t very interested in the daisy chain anymore. She was killing not just the grass but the daisies too! And The Guinness Book of World Records—it was a stupid idea.

But still she kept going with the daisy chain. She couldn’t seem to stop herself. She poked her thumbnail through the narrow stem of each daisy: slit after slit—and then laughing and loudness—and another slit—and water-colored alcohol—and another slit. She stopped connecting the daisies, just more and more slits and she wished her thumbnail were sharper.

She just wanted to go home. But there was no escaping; for now they were stuck here on this grass under a black sky and bright lights that lit up the world when she would rather have been left in darkness, unseeing. This night was anything but a “father-daughter date.” Here her dad was, having a *spiked drink* with

this woman. With this hoop-earringed, red-lipsticked, skinny woman with her asymmetrical smile and her laugh that stayed too long in Lucy's ears.

Edward came up to bat again. She just wouldn't be able to bear it if he struck out once again. It was all too much. What if she agreed to God that she would give up her new roller blades to a homeless kid if Edward got a hit? She shut her eyes in part to make a deal with God (just in case) and in part because she couldn't bear to watch anymore. When she opened them, she saw Edward walking to first base.

"Dad!" But her dad was still talking to Ms. Riley.

"Good eye, good eye, Ed!" He called out after Lucy got his attention. The next batter struck out, making the last out of the inning. So Edward didn't get to second base.

Lucy was thrilled that the game was ending soon. She didn't even care much that Edward "walked." But at least maybe he'd be nicer.

"Well, Erica," James said at the end of the game as they started to collect their things, "this *has* been fun."

There was that lopsided, asymmetrical smile again. "Yes it has," she answered slowly. "And I'll get in touch with you soon about those college essays. Bye, James. Bye, Lucy." Lucy didn't say anything even though it was impolite.

Edward walked toward them, kicking dirt. Before they even had time to tell him good game, he said, "Let's go." They tried again to tell him it was a good game, but he didn't want to talk about it, he said. So they stopped talking. Another silent car ride on the highway. Just taillight-red, fire everywhere.

When they got back, Lucy's mom was home.

“Hi guys!” she greeted them.

“Edward got to first base!” Lucy told her.

“Edward! I’m so proud!”

“Mom, the pitcher *hit* me with the ball,” Edward said angrily. “*That’s* why I got to first base.”

Oh no. Lucy should never have closed her eyes.

“And I don’t want to talk about it!” He yelled as he walked out of the room.

Lucy didn’t feel like hanging around. Even though it wasn’t quite her bedtime yet, she went up to her room and began to get ready for bed.

She pulled on her penguin pajamas. One leg in. *Penis*, she thought. Another leg in. *Penis-penis-penis-shit-shit-shit-crap-damn-shit-red-lipsticked-hoop-eared-asymmetrical-asymmetrical-FUCK! Penis.*

All that bad thinking, it wore her out. She was so tired that she didn’t even feel like going downstairs to tell her parents goodnight.

“Good night,” she whispered to no one. And again, just for good measure—“good night”—before closing the door to her room.

The Plagiarist

Lucy stood on the smooth blue wood of the bathroom stool and stared at herself in the mirror as she brushed her teeth. First, twenty-five back and forth brushes on the bottom right side of the mouth. Lucy's mom was coming into school with her tomorrow morning. Lucy's mom wasn't usually as involved with her classroom activities as the other moms were—she had a job and she got anxious around the other mothers and “it just wasn't her thing, and you understand that, Lucy, don't you?” As she brushed her teeth that night, Lucy's stomach was filled with nervous bumblebees. She could remember every time her mom had come to help out at school. Back in first grade, they had a big Halloween party, and Lucy's mom was asked to provide a snack. She made orange cookies in the shape of pumpkins, but she accidentally put in double the amount of pumpkin filling. The cookies were the brightest orange Lucy had ever seen, like construction paper, and the insides were gooey like the guck at the bottom of a pond. Some of the kids had refused to eat them. Tim Wheeler's mom had made hot apple cider, and Susie Barns' parents made a cake in the shape of a witch. Lucy's mom had to bring a snack to school tomorrow, too. This time, she bought brownies from Stop N Shop. Lucy made icing from scratch to put on top of them.

Twenty-five brushes on the bottom left side of her mouth. That made fifty. In second grade, they all took a field trip to Great Meadows to see nature. Lucy's mom was a parent-helper. A week in advance, a long letter was sent home from school for her mom. *1. It's tick season: please ensure that your child is properly clothed in long pants, long socks, and a long-sleeved shirt. 2. It will get hot, especially in long clothing.*

*The children will get thirsty—please provide as many water bottles as possible. 3. Do not forget to include in your fanny pack Band-Aids, rubbing alcohol, an emergency whistle, tissues...*the list went on. The day before the field trip, Lucy's mom carried the list with her everywhere, constantly reviewing it, sure she had forgotten something, everything. The list grew crumpled and worn and smudged in her mom's hot, wringing hands. Lucy had been in the midst of wondering aloud whether it was "Great Meadows" or "Grape Meadows," when her mom had said, "Honey, not now, I'm really not feeling well, okay?"

Lucy's toothbrush moved faster and faster; the familiar metallic taste of blood reached her tongue. Her mom had gotten a migraine that night that put her in the emergency room at the hospital. According to the dictionary, a migraine was "a recurrent throbbing headache that typically affects one side of the head and is often accompanied by nausea and disturbed vision." Her mom said it was because she had lots of worries in her brain, and sometimes, when there were too many, it made her brain hurt. Lucy wasn't sure if her mom had nausea and disturbed vision the night before the field trip, but she didn't want to ask. She didn't know why her mom had to have too many worries hurting her brain the one time that she was going to spend the whole day with Lucy at school.

Lucy lost count of how many brushes she was on, which she hated. She began all over again. Sometimes it seemed as if Lucy's mom only had room for her own worries. It made Lucy hate her mom sometimes, which was one of the worst thoughts she could possibly have. She didn't want the thought there, because she *didn't* hate her mom, but it popped into her brain sometimes and she couldn't help

it, and then she had to rub her hands over each other ten times to make it go away. Maybe someone's brain could only hold a certain number of sadnesses, and her mom had too many to make much room for anyone else's. It wasn't like Lucy's mom didn't care; of course she cared—but Lucy didn't want to be the one to put any more worries and sadnesses where there were already so many, pressing and pressing against the pink, mushy walls of her brain.

Lucy often worried that Edward might actually hate their mom. Only last night when she was pressed up against his door and rubbing her hands over each other again and again (because she knew she shouldn't be eavesdropping) she heard him talking on the phone to his new girlfriend, and she'd heard him say, "My mom is such a bitch." Lucy knew that when Edward said "bitch," he didn't mean "a female dog, or wolf, or fox, or otter." And then she'd heard him say, "It's like a fucking prison here, or an insane asylum. I can't wait to get out." Which made Lucy feel as if her shoes were sinking a little deeper into the hallway carpet (even though she knew that was impossible), and then it made her angry and want to get out too, because what was the point of staying in such a *hell-crap-shit* kind of place when no one would ever just be happy. She had slowly slid down his wooden door until she was sitting on the floor and pressed up against it.

When Lucy was done brushing her teeth, she stayed on the stool and stared at the mirror for a long time, and her brown eyes and her brown hair and all those stupid freckles stared back until they lost all meaning. Then she put both her palms on both her cheeks and pulled back, erasing her baby fat. She held it like that for a few seconds—but it made her mouth look weird, like a platypus. She let her baby fat

come back. She frowned at her reflection. Then she looked like a two-year-old about to have a tantrum. Lucy was usually afraid of getting older, but in that moment—suddenly, desperately—it was all she wanted. She stared so hard at her reflection that she felt as if there were two people in the room, and she felt briefly comforted, like maybe she could go into this reverse world where right would be left and sad would be happy and reverse would be spelt e-s-r-e-v-e-r—but nothing happened. Obviously.

Lucy had been so much inside her own brain, sitting against Edward's door last night, that when he had gotten off the phone with Amy, Lucy hadn't even noticed. Then he had opened his door, and she toppled backwards into his room.

"Fuck, Lucy, what are you doing here?" Edward was grounded again, this time for getting a D+ in Health class. Now that he was around and his friends weren't, Lucy thought maybe he might hang out with her, which is why she'd gone to his room in the first place, which was when she'd heard his conversation, which was when she'd started eavesdropping.

"I just—I was just—hanging out." She had no idea what to say. "I was just chilling," she clarified, with a jolt of confidence.

"Right outside my room?" he looked genuinely confused. When she didn't answer, he looked annoyed. He looked—pissed off.

"God, you're always just—*around*. And sneaking up on people. Why the hell do you wanna be *here* all the time anyway? Don't you have any friends?"

Lucy *did* have friends. Kind of. She mostly hung out with them at school, like at recess or working on group projects. But whenever she had a friend over, or went to someone else's house, usually she wished she were somewhere else, like in the attic wiping dust off all the forgottens or trying to trap the smell of the old books in a Tupperware container she'd stolen from the kitchen. It was just easier to be by herself. She had play dates sometimes (she didn't *always* want to be alone, and also she didn't want to be a freak), but sleepovers made her feel homesick. But maybe Edward was right, even though he didn't have to be so mean about it.

But Lucy was a little afraid of Edward these days, and she didn't know how to respond to him. She could feel herself turning so red, her cheeks suddenly tomatoes.

"Why are you always SO SILENT!" Edward half-yelled, his voice getting louder as he reached the world "silent." It made her even more silent. Then he looked kind of sad, after saying it. His eyes softened, and he sighed. "Well do you wanna come in or something?" he asked, a little harshly, jerking his head toward his room.

She hesitated. "Okay." They went into his room. Lucy hadn't been in there in a while. Now, adding to his collection of Jimi Hendrix posters and one of a bridge covered in fog were even bigger posters of mostly naked women with lots of makeup and soft, flowy hair. Two were wearing only bikini bottoms. *Boobs-breasts-nakedness*, Lucy thought. *Sexed-up-teenagers*. It was a phrase she'd heard her mom use, even though she didn't really know what it meant. It was hard to stop staring at the posters, because she couldn't believe they were there all the time and that

Edward liked looking at them. But it was probably a normal thing, and she wanted to be cool about it. She quickly turned her attention to the floor instead.

Edward put on some music. "Listen to this, Luce."

She sat down on his bed while he clicked around on his iTunes.

The song started. *Buffalo soldier*, the voice sang. *Dreadlock rasta*. The singer had a funny accent that Lucy kind of liked. His voice sounded like the sun when it was at its hottest. "I like it!" she decided at once.

"Yeah, it's Bob Marley," Edward responded, still so absorbed in his iTunes, as if he, too, wanted to be just another gray horizontal line with a name and an artist and an album, where everything was that simple. "He's the chilliest. And such a stoner." Lucy wasn't exactly sure what "stoner" meant, but she nodded. "And he's so peaceful, you know?"

"Yeah, he's so peaceful," Lucy agreed. How stupid, to repeat what he'd said. But the voice *was* peaceful.

Edward sat back. "I'll have to introduce you to good music. Then you'll be cooler than everyone else. You'll know your shit."

"Yeah!" Lucy agreed, maybe a little too enthusiastically. "And then I'll ask for an iPod for my birthday, and I can put all the songs on it, right? And then I can carry it with me wherever, so I can listen whenever I want—"

"Yup, that's pretty much the idea," Edward interrupted.

There was a silence.

"I'll probably listen to it during school and stuff," Lucy added, to impress him.

Edward only nodded a slow nod. There was another silence that kept stretching. Lucy was looking at the big, square-bodied wooden lion that now resided in the far corner of Edward's room, that he'd had his whole entire life since he was a baby, and that was kind of a bench that you could sit on even though it hurt your butt, and that was also a box because its back opened up and you could put stuff in it. In another corner of his room was a life-size parrot that was green and red and blue, and he'd had that forever, too, and it hung off the ceiling from a string. Now, on either side of the parrot were two topless women, closing in on the poor parrot, suffocating him with naked boobs.

Lucy and Edward still sat silently. What was there to say? There had to be something. She couldn't stop looking at the boobs.

"Did you know that the word 'bikini' was actually named after an island where they exploded an atomic bomb once, a while ago, to test it out without hurting people?"

"Well, that's depressing," said Edward. "Thanks for sharing."

It was back to the silence. Edward shifted positions. So did Lucy.

And then suddenly, "You know, Lucy, we really gotta toughen you up for the real world." It was a phrase Edward had always used, as far back as Lucy could remember. "I mean, it's gonna come," he added decisively, "and you're not gonna be ready." The "real world" was always coming, though when Edward had exactly entered it, she didn't know. But one day she would be in it too, all of a sudden, out of nowhere. Lucy imagined it as some mysterious realm where the whole world was one highway where everyone was rushing and no one was nice.

When Lucy was little, Edward would toughen her up for the real world by telling her to put her hand up, like she was raising her hand in class, but not so high, and then he'd punch her palm with his pudgy fists over and over, and it never hurt, and she felt pretty strong. Was she supposed to put her hand out now or was she—

"Lucy." Edward interrupted her thoughts. "Did you know that I sneak out almost every weekend night?" When she didn't answer, he went on. "Sometimes I meet up with Jake and Chris, and we stand on the train tracks until right before the train comes. Or I go to Amy's house, because I can get in through the basement without her parents knowing."

Lucy hated Amy. For a second, she hated Edward too. But mostly it made her enormously, sinkingly sad to imagine his pale skin shrinking inside the middle-of-the-night-blackest-darkest-deadest sky.

"But don't tell Mom and Dad, you're always telling Mom and Dad," Edward added.

She wasn't always telling Mom and Dad! She thought she probably *should* tell them this time—but she just couldn't. She wanted to be cool with it. She had to pretend like it wasn't a big deal at all that her brother almost died every weekend night.

"I won't," she reassured him. "Really."

"I just think you should know these things because you gotta grow up sometime. And you wanna be cool, Lucy. You can't always be perfect and good. Even if that's what Mom and Dad want. *Especially* if that's what Mom and Dad want."

"Yeah," she said.

Another pause. But it wasn't so long this time—

"And there's some things you should probably see," Edward said, with new excitement, getting up from his now stuffed-animal-less bed. She followed him to the wooden lion in the corner of the room, glad he hadn't forgotten about it. Dandy-lion was its name, which she thought was the cleverest. Edward lifted Dandy-lion's back to reveal his hollowed-out body. Inside, at the bottom, were more pictures of naked girls. But that wasn't what Edward was showing her. He was pointing to a row of empty beer bottles and a metal bottle in the shape of a rectangle, like the one Ms. Riley had had at the baseball game.

"Yeah, I drink," Edward was saying. "This is my collection of beer bottles. One day you'll learn your beers, but I guess not yet. I got that hot babysitter you had to buy them for me." Edward looked at Lucy to see her reaction. "And that bottle there, that's a flask," he continued. "I took some of mom and dad's vodka, they keep it in the laundry room, in that cabinet right over the dryer. It's so funny, they think it's the best hiding place ever, but I've seen Dad go in there lots of nights pretending he's looking for clean socks." Edward hadn't said this many words together to Lucy in a long time. He sounded kind of eager. He kept looking into her face. She didn't look back at him. She felt that her mouth was a little bit open as she stared. She closed it. "I mean, obviously you shouldn't do any of this kind of stuff yet," Edward added. "It's for older kids. But I just think you should know."

"Thanks," Lucy said, nodding. She tapped her big toe inside of her shoes—twice, four times—*Budweiser, Rolling Rock, Blue Moon, Corona*, she read. And then

that *shit-crap-ass-penis-shit* metal rectangle bottle! The enormous sinking sadness was back again. She felt homesick even though she was at home.

"I mean, as your brother," Edward said now, straightening up a bit and catching her gaze, "I feel like I should tell you these things. So you're prepared. So you know."

"Yeah," Lucy said, a little too quietly. "Yeah," she repeated, louder.

"And one more thing," he said, with an unfamiliar gleam in his eye. Lucy wasn't sure she wanted to know. Dutifully, she followed him to his desk. He opened the bottom drawer and pulled out the tin of mints with the winking reindeer that they got in their stockings last year. Inside, there were no mints. Instead, there was a little plastic baggy with crumbled, dark green stuff. She furrowed her eyebrows.

"It's weed, Lucy. Like, marijuana, you know? Don't they make you do that D.A.R.E. course in fourth grade? Where they make you swear that you'll never do drugs and you'll never have a taste of alcohol until you're twenty-one?"

Lucy noticed that her mouth was open again. "That's not till fifth grade," she told Edward with fake confidence, "but I know what marijuana is. Margaret Wheelers' older brother—"

"It's *weed*, Lucy. Or *pot*. Don't say marijuana, you'll sound like a tool. And don't say *dope*, or *grass*, or anything weird like that. That's the kind of stuff parents say."

"Okay."

His eyes were on her face, studying it. Lucy started to feel a little shaky. But she wanted to be cool with it. She was glad he was showing her, trusting her, she

was glad to know. She wanted him to like her again. Her eyebrows were still furrowed, but she managed a closed-lipped smile. Edward put his hand on her head.

“I’m just looking out for you, Luce. You know that, right?”

“Right.” She was glad he was still looking out for her even though he was a teenager. But she hated secrets. And lying. Again she thought she probably *should* tell her parents, in case he was really in trouble—but she couldn’t, she just couldn’t. She had to be on his side.

“Don’t look so worried, Lucy,” Edward said next. “It’s not *that* big a deal.”

“Yeah, I know!” she said defensively.

“You’ll start doing it all someday, too. You pretty much have to, in this family.”

She kind of knew what he meant.

“I mean, you have it easy,” he said now, sitting on his desk. “You’re just what they want. Me—I’m the opposite of what they want. But either way,” Edward continued, not really looking at Lucy anymore, “let’s face it. Mom sucks. She’s always freaking out about something. And did you know she sleeps in the guest room sometimes? She tiptoes past my room and thinks I don’t know, but I see her.” Lucy imagined her mom tiptoeing around in the darkness, all sad and trying to be quiet but bumping into things because she couldn’t see. Again her shoes sank deeper into the floor. Then she imagined both her parents alone in separate beds, so cold because they were used to the body heat.

Edward continued. “You can kinda see why she does it, though. Dad’s always out of it. And he’s gotten all weird lately. It’s like, stop with all this religious bullshit.

First he starts caring about church all of a sudden, and now it's his 'inner-light' or whatever. And that music he plays. I can't stand it."

Years and years ago, they all used to go to church because, Lucy supposed, they all believed in God back then. Then they stopped going because Lucy's mom hated coffee hour, where she had to make small talk and avoid having to sign up to teach religious education to second graders. It was a year and eight months ago that her dad started going to church again, every week, and no one really knew why, since all he'd said was what was wrong with a man, already halfway through his life, trying to find God? And Lucy's mom had said she just wanted to know why someone would become suddenly so interested in trying to find God after ignoring him for all these years.

Lucy remembered when her dad had succeeded in getting everyone to go with him because it was "the only goddamned time the family was all together." But then Edward had spent the whole service quietly ripping pages out of the Bible at the end of the pew and making them into paper cranes. Lucy had put her knees up to block him from view, but her parents saw the flock of birds resting in his empty place when everyone got up to leave. After that, her dad didn't try to get the family to go with him anymore. He only lasted four months, which meant that he tried to find God for eighteen Sundays until he found meditation and "inner light" instead.

Edward sighed loudly, snapping Lucy's attention back to the present moment. "You know, Lucy, sometimes I wonder if you even know how to talk." He looked pissed off again.

"Anyway, I'm gonna work on some music now, so you should probably go."

“Oh. Okay.” She walked toward the door. “Bye.”

Edward was always “working on some music.” Lucy didn’t really know what that meant, but it annoyed her. She kicked the hallway carpet so it bunched up. She didn’t fix it even though it was asymmetrical.

Lucy had torn her real eyes away from her mirror-eyes and was now flossing in between her teeth because Dr. Cranwell had said that if she didn’t floss, she’d lose all her teeth by the time she was an old woman. She tasted blood again and moved it around her mouth with her tongue. Even though her mom could sometimes be embarrassing and had so many worries in her brain and was “always freaking out about something,” Lucy was glad that she was coming in to school tomorrow. Tomorrow was the Publishing Party. In Mrs. Singer’s class they’d each spent part of the past thirty-six days designing one issue of their own magazine that they’d invented all by themselves. Now that they were all done, everyone was invited to tomorrow’s Publishing Party, even brothers and sisters. Of course, Edward had school, so he couldn’t go, not that he would’ve anyway. And Lucy’s dad’s friend had lost the guitarist in his band, so Lucy’s dad was going to play at their daytime gig in Boston.

A few days ago, Lucy had walked into the kitchen when her mom was saying to her dad, “Really, James, you’re honestly going to do this to me?” But when her mom saw that she had come into the room, she smiled very widely. “Hi, sweetie! Your dad and I were just talking about how proud we are of you. I can’t wait to see

your magazine. I know it will be great!" Lucy didn't look at her mom. She counted the number of steps it took to get back to her room.

But her magazine *was* going to be great. It had to be. Because if it was great, and her mom liked it and all the other parents liked it too, and Mrs. Singer said it was the best magazine she'd ever seen—then her mom would look good in front of all the other parents. Then maybe she would worry a little less.

Lucy's magazine was called *Reading Life*. There were poems and a story and a word search and a biography of Dr. Seuss and drawings and even advertisements. It was almost, almost perfect. But there was one thing running circles in Lucy's mind. It was the opening sentence from her biography of Dr. Seuss. "Theodore Geisel, better known as the beloved Dr. Seuss, was born in Springfield, Massachusetts." Lucy had not written that sentence. She had looked up information about Dr. Seuss on the Internet to write a biography of him. At first she tried rewriting that sentence from online, but it was hard to think of a new way to say it. She thought and thought—but then she carefully typed out the words just as she had read them online. Lucy sort of knew that what she did was wrong—but really, the Internet said it *just* the way she would have, anyway. And who would notice? She needed the magazine to sound professional.

Lucy had almost forgotten about the whole thing until last week, when Mrs. Singer had caught Tony Flambert using another person's words in his description of how trains work. Mrs. Singer made Tony stand in front of the whole class. "Plagiarism," Mrs. Singer announced slowly and sternly, in a voice that echoed discordantly with Lucy's racing heartbeat, "is when you use someone else's words or

ideas without giving them credit. Plagiarism is one hundred percent unacceptable, and if you are caught plagiarizing, you will face severe consequences. This is the kind of thing that won't fly in the real world, and it won't fly in our classroom either." There was that real world again, never here but always coming. "Plagiarism," Mrs. Singer said finally and with extra emphasis, "is *cheating*." Tony Lambert's round head hung so low that all the class could see was the top of his head where his face should be, pointing out at them over his Transformers T-shirt. Lucy felt so uncomfortable, as if all the fuzzy hairs of his buzz cut were itching under her skin. *Plagiarism*. The word sounded so harsh. *Play-jer-ism, play-jer-ism*, she mouthed to herself. The word felt sharp in her mouth, like a handful of knives.

It was only once Tony had gotten in trouble that the plagiarism really began to weigh on Lucy, the guilt pressing down on her shoulders like a cape made of bricks. At first she tried rewriting the words, but she couldn't come up with anything better. She thought about talking to Mrs. Singer about it, but she was afraid of facing "severe consequences." Lucy wasn't used to getting punished. Once when she was five, she asked her parents for a timeout, because Edward had laughed at her for never having gotten one. Then he laughed at her for asking for one. Lucy also thought about telling her parents, but she was afraid of what they would say. Even though she had wished for more *satisfactories* on her report card, she didn't want them to have to deal with two kids who messed up in school all the time. She *had* told Edward about it, but all he'd said was, "Whatever, Luce, as long as you don't get caught, it doesn't matter." As long as she didn't get caught. It was too late, anyway, to do anything else about it.

“Dear God,” she whispered in bed that night—because even if you weren’t sure about God, you might as well pray to Him, just in case—“please don’t let me get caught, this one time, and I promise”—but it was probably useless anyway. Lucy had been beginning to suspect that if there was a God, he wasn’t a very good listener. *As long as I don’t get caught*, she tried to think, but she could imagine nothing but being caught. What if someone’s parents wrote the biography of Dr. Seuss that she’d found online and *knew* that she’d stolen the words? They would point at her and say, “This girl is a liar and a plagiarist!” Her mom would never recover from that. Her mom would never come into the classroom again. Then her mom would have two disappointing children. Her mom would be sure to get nausea and disturbed vision this time.

The plagiarism became the only thing Lucy could think about. Tonight, the loudly ticking clock on her wall sounded like a bomb. She lay down in her bed and waited for sleep, willing the blankness of the ceiling to blanken her worrying mind. Coils and coils of worries, like little snakes wrapping around her brain.

The worry-snakes wouldn’t leave as Lucy got ready for school the next morning. She took the almost, almost perfect magazine out from underneath her bed and put it into her backpack. It was too late, anyway. Way too late.

Lucy’s dad had already left for his gig, and Edward caught the bus to middle school half an hour ago. Lucy’s mom was still in her room. The house was quiet as Lucy poured milk over her Cheerios, which then stuck to her throat, and watched the yellowing clock above the kitchen table tick closer to 8:55. That was when they

were supposed to leave. At 8:52 Lucy's mom came hurrying downstairs, applying lipstick every which way and a little out of breath. She was wearing beige slacks and brown loafers and a buttoned-up blue cardigan. She usually wore designer jeans.

"Lucy, am I wearing the right thing? How do I look?"

"You look good, Mom." Lucy thought her mom looked cooler in the jeans, but then again, sometimes you had to be okay with telling white lies.

"Okay, have you finished breakfast?" Her mom said, unclipping and re-clipping and unclipping her hair. "Well it doesn't matter, we don't have time anyway, we can't be late, put the bowl in the sink, we'll wash it later, we can't be late." Lucy poured the seventeen soggy Cheerios she had left over down the disposal.

"You get in the car, Lucy, I'll meet you there, I just need to get my jacket, find my glasses—and where is my purse?"

"Maybe you left it in the—"

"I'll find it, honey, just get in the car." Her mom was already in the other room, swearing and searching for the purse. Lucy picked up her purple backpack and went outside to the car. A few minutes later her flustered mother met her there—"great, now we're really going to be late"—and they were about to leave when they realized they'd forgotten the brownies. Lucy ran to get them from the fridge where she'd remembered to put them last minute to harden the icing. She placed the brownies carefully in the backseat next to her. It was 9:01 when they pulled out of the driveway. Lucy realized that she'd forgotten her lunch box, but she didn't say anything.

Lucy's mom was driving a little faster than usual.

“Are you excited, Lucy?” she asked, very concentrated on the road and switching lanes to pass the car ahead of them. “Do you want to tell me more about your magazine?”

Lucy stared hard at the backpack at her feet. Inside it was the magazine, inside it were the stolen words. Her backpack seemed suddenly filled with fiery lies, burning through the purple fabric. “I guess we can just wait until you see it.” Her voice sounded far away.

Lucy’s mom seemed not to hear. She glanced at her watch. She pressed harder on the gas pedal. The car jerked forward uncomfortably. Her Blackberry buzzed from its place in the cup holder.

“Lucy, check that for me, will you? It’s probably one of my patients—is it Richard? If it’s Richard, tell him—”

“It’s someone named Susan Russell asking if she can come early.”

“Jesus, Susan’s always there two hours early anyway, just waiting. But I told her I was busy this morning, I told her! Text her back for me, Lucy, will you? Tell her I’m busy, but I’ll try to make it in as soon as I can.”

Lucy punched the small buttons on the keypad harder than needed. Her mom was supposed to be watching the road, but she turned back to check on Lucy, to check on the texting. The car swerved dangerously toward the guardrail. Lucy accidentally made some typos and didn’t bother to fix them. She put the phone back into the cup holder, and then her mind was right back on the stolen words. *As long as I don’t get caught*—but she was thinking about what the “severe consequences”

might be and what would happen if she just ripped the biography right out of the magazine. Maybe no one would notice.

“Goddammit,” her mom burst out, “who is this asshole driving the exact speed limit in the fast lane?” There was a brief pause and then—“Sorry Lucy, I shouldn’t have said that.”

Dr. Seuss, the great children’s author, was really named Theodore Geisel—but there was no point in thinking about how she would say it now. She just couldn’t believe she had done it so easily, and with hardly a second thought—took someone else’s words and pretended they were her own, just like that.

Lucy’s mom turned the rear view mirror toward her face and bared her teeth. “Lucy, do you see any lipstick on my teeth?” The car swerved again. It was *cheating*; plagiarism was *cheating*.

“No, I don’t see any.” Lucy did notice a little bit of lipstick on her mom’s sleeve, but she didn’t say anything. She noticed that the icing on the brownies had been slowly melting, had dripped off the sides and onto the plate and a little bit onto the seat of the car—

The Blackberry buzzed again, and this time it was a call. Lucy’s mom grabbed the phone. “Oh no, can’t answer that one right now,” she said to herself. “Nope, just can’t deal with that right now.” Then she looked at her watch again, and again the car jerked forward. She unbuttoned the top button of her cardigan. Then she re-buttoned it.

Lucy wondered if one day her mom’s brain might explode from being too small to hold everything that was going on inside of it. She felt so sad for her mom

then. Not for the first time her mom seemed especially small compared to the rest of the world. She rubbed her hands over each other four times. She imagined being found out for plagiarism right in the middle of the Publishing Party, and she imagined all the other parents towering over her mom. She imagined her mom, pale-faced and sinking inside these alien clothes that she never wore. Lucy couldn't take it any more. She had to say something. She had to.

"Okay, here we are!" Her mom's voice sounded higher than usual, and a little too cheerful. It was 9:15 when they pulled into school. They made it just in time. Busses were dispensing kids by the front doors, and in the parking lot Lucy recognized some of her classmates and their parents, everyone smiling, everyone happy. "Oh fuck," Lucy heard her mom whisper.

It was all too much. She couldn't hold it in any longer. It was now or never.

"Mom—"

Rachel Delancey's mom was waving merrily to Becky Schwartz's parents, helping each other carry a large cake with squiggles like a page of a book, and also lemonade and paper cups and pointy party-hats made from magazines.

"Jesus Christ." Lucy's mom's voice was no longer high pitched and cheerful. "Oh, this is all too much." She pulled out a pack of cigarettes from way under the seat and emptied her purse to find a lighter. "I'm sorry, Lucy, I'm sorry!" She puffed one, two, three times.

"Mom—"

But now Lucy's mom was gripping the steering wheel as if she were trying to strangle it.

“Oh Lucy, I shouldn’t be telling you this, but I can’t hold it in any longer!” she burst out—“I’m leaving your father.” Two heartbeats. More quietly: “He doesn’t know it yet. Promise not to say anything.”

The Parts and Functions of the Nervous System

Now that it was spring, the ice cream truck was out, and here it was now—she could hear it from the attic—going around the neighborhood again, probably for the second time, but it felt like the seven-hundredth. The song was supposed to be a happy one, but really it was sad. It was the worst when no kids were running after the truck. Lucy could close the window to muffle the sound, but it was one of those unnaturally hot May afternoons where the sticky air clings to your skin like a layer of Saran wrap. To escape the tune, she sat as far from the open window as possible, next to the ladder leading to the downstairs of this suddenly too-small house, where lately life had moved as if underwater—slow, muted, waiting for something to happen. With the ice cream truck's hollow tune pushing her out of the attic and the rest of the house pushing her into it, Lucy felt she could only exist in the small circle of space she was in: her feet on the top rung of the ladder and the rest of her still in the attic, where nothing could touch her but dusty smells and sticky air.

But the sound of the truck touched her now, inescapable, singing the same few notes over and over. Downstairs, she heard the phone's first ring. Sometimes Lucy ran after the truck just to make the driver feel better even though ice cream made her teeth hurt and gave her a brain freeze, which didn't really happen in your brain even though you felt it there, and which was actually called *sphenopalatine ganglioneuralgia*. The phone kept ringing. It was Sunday, but Lucy's mom was out having tea with some friends because, as she'd told Lucy's dad (even though no one had asked), she "deserved to have some fun sometimes, too." Lucy's dad was home, but he wasn't picking up the phone. Lucy ran after the truck because when other

people's feelings were hurt, it felt like the whole world was raining. She could've run after it today, but—well, should she run after it?—but the tune was fading now. It was too late. Downstairs, the phone stopped ringing. Even though it was gone, the tune was spinning slow circles inside her brain, hopeful for a way out that it would not find. It made her feel melancholy. Melancholy was Lucy's current favorite word, because it sounded like how it felt. In the dictionary, it came right after *melancholize* and right before *melancholy thistle*. Sometimes, when she felt worse than melancholy, Lucy thought of herself as a melancholy thistle, which was probably the saddest thing there was, even though they were purple and grew in England.

The phone started ringing again. This time she heard her dad's heavy footsteps, and maybe a grumble, or maybe she imagined it.

"Hello?"

If only, for just a few seconds, everything around her would stop, just freeze—

"Yes, officer, I do happen to know where my son is. He's in Boston with some friends, seeing Shakespeare in the Park for school."

This stupid circle of space couldn't protect her. Everything reached her here, everywhere, wherever she was. She couldn't help it; she climbed halfway down the ladder to hear more clearly.

"What?" Lucy's dad's suddenly piercing voice shattered inside her ear.

"On the Charles River? Jesus Christ." His voice was quieter already, defeated. The ice cream truck was gone for good now, but all at once Lucy wished for it. She

would rather brain freeze and melancholia and thistles and a stranger's hurt feelings—but she couldn't make herself move from where she was.

"What's the street number?" He did not sound urgent, just defeated, always defeated. She imagined those sagging, deflated-balloon cheeks, and the drooping lines around his mouth. "I'm on my way."

Should she go to him, ask what was happening? Instead Lucy started climbing up the ladder again. As usual, she counted the rungs as she climbed them—*one, two two, three three three, four four four four*—when she reached the top, the hot air felt like a comforting blanket. She settled among the storage boxes so that they made a kind of fort around her. Then she heard her dad's voice again, indistinct. She didn't move this time, but she strained her ears.

"Catherine, you have to...Edward...police, this time...what?...need to realize that you can't just get out of these things...NEVER here...AT ALL involved...God dammit...picking you up."

Lucy shivered even though it wasn't cold.

"Lucy?" she heard her Dad call now. She didn't move. "Lucy!" He came heavily up the stairs. "Lucy!"

Snapping out of her daze and not wanting her dad to find her there, Lucy pushed the storage boxes aside and hurried down the ladder.

"There you are. Listen, your brother's screwed up again. He's in trouble."

"What happened?"

"Everything's fine, but your mom and I are going into Boston to get him, okay?" Now he seemed suddenly urgent, as if he had to go, as if he couldn't be there a minute longer.

"Is Edward okay?"

"Edward's fine. Everything's fine."

"Okay, but what—"

"You can stay here alone this time, we trust you."

"Why can't you bring me with you? Just bring me with you—"

"Lucy, you aren't going to want to come along for this. Now I really have to go—I promise we'll figure it all out when your mom and I get back. I'll call you. Call the Folts if you need anything." He started going down the stairs two at a time. "Bye, Luce. Everything's okay."

The front door slammed shut. The bells that hung from the top of it jingled and then faded into a deafening silence.

An hour later, she sat at the small white desk in her room. Tomorrow, she had to bring to school a description of The Parts and Functions of the Nervous System, which the class was going to paste on their life-size drawing of a man with red lines for muscles and bright blue veins like branches and a squiggly brain and a curvy spine with a million little bones. Other people had already labeled and described every other system of the body (*esophagus, phalanges, pituitary, spleen*—she kept a running list of the words that were the most fun to say). Now all that was

left was Lucy and the nervous system. Everyone was counting on her. The white page on her desk looked up at her, waiting.

It had been three days since her mom had said the Thing. Three days since the Publishing Party, which Lucy had hated every second of, which she had *loathed*, which was a stronger word than hate. She had spent the whole time trying to push down the lump in her throat that was like a dormant volcano that she knew would erupt explosively as soon as she opened her mouth. So she didn't open it. So she nodded yes or no when other parents asked her questions about her magazine. So she didn't respond when their questions required more than a gesture. And they peered at her oddly, and she looked down, and they moved on. And her mom wandered around the room slowly, smiling and nodding at the other kids' magazines.

But Lucy didn't want to think about that day. She had been trying not to think about it.

The blank page before her was a result of days of desk sitting, of trying to fill her mind with nothing but The Parts and Functions of the Nervous System. This white page would be her fourth and final draft. As long as she didn't mess up again. She kept messing up. Partway through the first draft, her pen had run out of ink, and, try as she might, Lucy could not find another pen that replaced it perfectly—the ink was too black, or too blotty, or the way she wrote with it made her handwriting look more loopy—so she had started over.

According to Lucy's dad, everything was always okay, or fine, or would be figured out soon and not to worry. She wondered if it counted as lying, because

sometimes everything wasn't always okay or fine, and sometimes nothing would be figured out. It made her want to scream right into his ear because she wasn't a baby, and nothing could save her from being touched by everything—not lies, not circles of space at the tops of ladders, not blank pages or brains or spinal cords or axons.

Three quarters of the way through the second draft, Lucy had noticed that all her lines slanted upwards. There was a chance she would never be able to get it right. She had been trying to write it for days, and now it was already Sunday evening—it was nearing dinnertime, she realized. But she wasn't hungry. Why hadn't her parents called?

Lucy's mom had come to Lucy's magazine last. As her mom approached her desk, Lucy's legs felt wobbly, as if they were suddenly unsure that they could support the rest of her body. Her mom flipped through the pages of the magazine slowly. She had a smile plastered on her face like a doll. She would point and nod when she came to pages that she enjoyed the most, including the Dr. Seuss biography—which was plagiarism! But now Lucy didn't care. When Lucy's mom got to the end, she looked at Lucy with her big hazel eyes. Lucy had never noticed how far apart her eyes were, or how they sloped slightly downwards at the outer corners. "It's wonderful, Lucy," her mom had said. "Just wonderful." She put a hand briefly on Lucy's left cheek. The next thing Lucy knew, her mom was gone. All the other moms were still there.

The third draft of the Parts and Functions of the Nervous System she had almost completed—but on the second to last sentence Lucy had forgotten the other 'g' in ganglia. You just couldn't squeeze it in there, between the 'n' and the 'l'—she

had tried, but it looked droopy and skinny and squished. Looking at that 'g,' sudden tears had sprung into her eyes, even though Lucy didn't usually cry over things like letters.

What had Edward done? What would happen to him? For some reason, an image of Christmas Eve two years ago popped into her head. Edward had let Lucy sleep in his room that night. It had been hard to fall asleep in her anticipation of the next morning and her excitement about taking up a vertical line on his floor in her sleeping bag, which gathered her whole body in its warmth like a person-sized pocket. They said goodnight. As they lay in the darkness, every time Edward changed positions in his bed, Lucy would do the same, a little echo of his movements. Maybe it wasn't, but it felt like a game they were playing: he would move, she would move, time would pass, he would move again, she would move right afterwards. She was reminding him that she was there, that she was awake too, that they were in this Christmas Eve night—these cozy waiting hours of beating hearts and shifting blankets—together.

Then she thought about beer bottles. Beer bottles and marijuana and bikini-bottomed women with naked boobs. She rubbed her hands over each other twice.

Lucy *had* to do well on the nervous system project. She wasn't sure why, but it suddenly seemed like the most important thing. *The nervous system is made up of special cells called neurons which send signals to each other throughout the whole entire body*—but it was hard to concentrate. It was getting later (where were they, shouldn't they be back soon?) and time was running out.

Ever since her mom had said the Thing, there had been a constant fluttering inside Lucy, somewhere between her stomach and her heart.

The nervous system is really interesting because there are two different parts—the central nervous system and the peripheral nervous system.

In the gray minivan, on that morning at 9:16 when her mom first said it, Lucy had sat stunned. A silence happened that was probably only seconds, but it felt like an hour. Then her mom said, “Oh, honey”—and Lucy had grabbed her purple backpack and ran through the maze of the parking lot and into the school. In the entrance hallway, parents and kids and teachers were everywhere—talking, laughing, obnoxiously happy. Heaving deep breaths, Lucy stood in the middle of them all as they whirled around her. She *had* to go through with this, she realized then. Nothing ever just stopped for you, no matter how much you needed it to. So she stayed where she was until her mom came jogging through the door, her eyebrows curved in the sad way, and probably with tears in her eyes, but Lucy didn’t want to look at her face. She looked instead at the snowman-shaped birthmark next to her mom’s elbow. “Lucy, please,” her mom started again—but then Lucy said, “We can’t be late.” And they walked in silence to the classroom, Lucy three steps ahead, leading the way.

The central nervous system includes the brain, the spine, and—maybe Edward would go to jail. “Police, this time.” She heard her dad’s voice in her head. “Police, this time...Police, this time.”

—and the retina, which is a tissue on the inner eye. That night, after the Publishing Party, Lucy’s mom came and sat on Lucy’s bed. For a second, neither of

them said anything. Then her mom said, "Honey, I'm sorry about today." She looked at Lucy, as if maybe that would be enough. Lucy didn't say anything. Her mom continued, now looking at the corner of the bed above Lucy's head. "I should never have said anything to you about your father. And with all the problems we're having with Edward right now, it's just—it's not the right time, and I'm not going to say anything to him just yet." She paused and looked at Lucy again. "So—so I guess what I'm trying to say is that you should try to forget what I said in the car today. Okay, sweetie?" Lucy just looked at her. "Okay, sweetie?" Her mom repeated, leaning in a little closer and looking more anxious and like she might cry. Lucy wanted to just turn over, but it was hard to go to sleep when there was so much anger in the world, especially if she was a part of it. "Okay Mom," she said. Her Mom's eyes still looked sad, but her smile was grateful. "Good night, Lucy. I love you." And then she walked out of the room.

But since that night, her mom still seemed extra nervous, all-the-time-nervous. She had been out of the house a lot, staying late at work, which, right now, was okay with Lucy. When her mom *was* home, she always acted extra nice around Lucy. It was worse than yelling or sadness; it made Lucy want to paint a frown over her doll-smile. But Lucy and her mom hadn't really been alone together since then, which, right now, was also okay with Lucy. Every time they were about to be alone together, suddenly they weren't. Two days ago, Lucy had been in the kitchen when her mom came back from the supermarket. Her mom had come bustling through the door with four bags of groceries on both arms. She stopped short for a second

when she saw Lucy, and then—boom—there came that big smile with no laugh lines around her eyes. Her mom put the bags on the counter.

“Hi, sweetie! I got those Go-Gurts that you like. And I stopped by the bakery, too, so there’s a big chocolate chip cookie for you!” She and her smile stared at Lucy expectantly.

“Thanks.”

Her mom stood there for a second longer. “Well,” she said. “I really have a lot to do at the office, so I think I’ll head over there before dinner.” She was already on her way out the door—“Oh, the groceries.” She turned and looked at the bags on the counter. Her smile melted a little bit. “Why don’t you and your father put them away, okay?” and the door shut.

Then there’s the peripheral nervous system, which includes all the nerves throughout the rest of the body.

It was last night that Lucy’s mom had been at the office so late that Lucy was already asleep when she came back.

“Another night just you and me, Luce!” her dad had said when her mom left. Even though her mom had said that she wasn’t going to tell her dad yet, Lucy couldn’t help but look for clues, clues that her dad knew anything, that maybe her mom *had* told him, or maybe he could sense it—but she hadn’t found many clues. Her dad was the same, either kind of fakely cheerful or swearing at some little thing like the toaster only toasting one side.

When her mom left for work last night, Edward was upstairs, making music with his door closed as usual. Her dad seemed oddly lighthearted. “Pretty much the whole house to ourselves, what’ll we do, Luce?”

Before she could respond—“I just got ahold of that new Dylan documentary that came out last fall. You like Bob Dylan, right Luce?”

Her dad was always playing Bob Dylan. “Not really,” she answered. And then the whole world was raining. “But he’s okay sometimes,” she hastened to add. “I’ll watch with you.”

They watched, her dad on the couch, Lucy on a chair next to it. This time, when there wasn’t anything to say, at least they could both pretend to be absorbed in the documentary. Either that or her dad would talk excitedly over the narration about his own “Dylan experience.”

“You know, he was a bit before my time, but it didn’t matter. When someone’s that good, they’re timeless.”

“Like The Beatles?” Lucy knew about The Beatles because it was the one band that her dad and Edward both agreed were good.

“Like The Beatles,” her dad confirmed. “But Dylan—I’d say he has more soul, wouldn’t you?”

“I guess,” she said. She wasn’t really sure what he meant. They stopped talking for a while.

She listened to the nasally voice. It was like he was always whining. And no, she thought, the answer *wasn’t* blowing in the wind, because it just wasn’t that easy.

“Did you know this guy dropped out of college after only one year?” Her dad said next. “Man, if I could give up everything and devote myself to music...”

Lucy thought about how it had been one year and eleven months since her dad hadn’t passed the tenure test. She thought about the guitar case that rested next to their unused bikes in the garage, and about the old drum set in the far right corner.

Her dad kept talking. “Now I’m not saying you should do that, Lucy. But I mean, wow, can you imagine? You’re out in the middle of nowhere Minnesota, then you up and change your name, quit college, and move to New York City ‘cause you feel like it, and you figure, well, now’s as good a time as any. What a life.”

Her dad was in a good mood. He was happy right now. But the happier he got, the more melancholy Lucy felt. He didn’t know anything about anything, Lucy concluded then. It was the final clue. Everything had changed—but only she and her mom knew it.

Now Lucy wanted to sit next to him on the couch (why had she chosen this stupid chair?) but if she sat next to him the lump in her throat would come back. Then she wouldn’t be able to talk. He would wonder why. She stayed where she was.

But Lucy wanted to make her dad as happy as he could be, even if it meant that she would feel more melancholy. “Do you have a favorite song?” She said, faking interest even though she didn’t really care at all. “I bet you can’t choose!”

“That is a hard one,” he said. He furrowed his eyebrows and really thought about it. “That is a hard one. I’ve always loved ‘A Hard Rain’s a-Gonna Fall,’ but who doesn’t? That’s one of his earlier ones. ‘Gotta Serve Somebody,’ that’s a great one

from after he became a born-again Christian. Oh, and you can't forget 'Masters of War'—"

Lucy sank further into the chair's cushions. Every time the now-version of Bob Dylan came on the screen to talk about himself, and his face looked so ragged and creased, as if every sad thing that had ever happened to him had etched its own line onto his face, she couldn't help but wonder how long it would take for her parents' faces to look like that. Every time she saw that face, she would rub her hands over each other below the arm of the chair so her dad wouldn't notice.

Neurons have cell bodies, which are called soma.

Last night after the Dylan documentary, when Lucy was already in bed and her Mom still hadn't come home, she lay wide awake, lying evenly on her back and looking at the spots on her ceiling, wondering if they were bugs and turning the light on over and over, just to double- triple- quadruple-check. *And it's a hard, it's a hard, it's a hard, and it's a hard, it's a hard rain's a-gonna fall.* She couldn't get the lyrics out of her head. She was thinking about her dad. She thought about his sand-colored hair and how it never lay flat on his head and how maybe if she ever just tried to smooth it for him, it *would* lie flat. Why hadn't she ever done that before? She sat up in bed. She wanted to smooth his hair out right then. It seemed, suddenly, like the most important thing. She got out of bed and walked to her parents' room.

When she got there, the door was closed. She touched the door handle, then drew her hand back. He was probably asleep; he went to bed early. Just in case, she pressed her ear lightly against the door. There was no sound from the inside. She pressed her other ear lightly against the door, just in case. There was still no sound

from the inside. He was definitely asleep. She felt so separated from him then, as if they were standing on opposite shores of the Atlantic, and it was impossible to reach each other even though their toes were touching the same water. She stood there for a minute longer. She walked back to her room and was up for another hour.

*Neurons also have dendrites, which look like the roots of a tree and receive messages from other neurons, and also an axon, which—*she couldn't do it. She had to! But she couldn't. Everything had been moving slowly these past few days, but all of a sudden she was almost out of time for the Parts and Functions of the Nervous System.

Sometimes—usually—life happened so quickly that before you had time to say bye to one thing, you were already in the middle of the next. But then there were times, like now, when life seemed so long. Lucy knew that nine was young, because if you lived to be ninety, then nine was only one tenth of your life. Still, Lucy felt like she'd been around for a while. One tenth could feel like a long time. But it was the other nine tenths that made her feel tired.

Once she had heard her grandpa say that getting old meant that life got a little lighter. Lucy liked that so much that she went home and wrote it down so she wouldn't forget. But even if life did get lighter, right now she was stuck on the heavy side, and maybe she would be for another eighty-one years. It seemed like a long, long time. It seemed almost like forever.

—which is kind of the opposite of a dendrite, because it sends signals away from the neuron to other neurons. No! She noticed that she had switched the u and

the e in 'neuron' as soon as she'd done it. She always had trouble with that word. She would have to start over now, draft number five. Oh, but she couldn't do it, just couldn't bear to do one more draft, to write one more word about those *crap-shit-hell-ass-shit* nuerons!

Lucy felt too hot in her clothes. It was too hot. She had to change. *Then* she could work. *Then* she could focus. At her dresser, she opened one drawer. Unsatisfied, she opened the next. Then the next. Then the next. None of these stupid clothes would work. She hated them all. She began picking them up, one by one. This shirt was a blaring pink, too pink, like Pepto-Bismol. She looked at it with disgust, and, holding it with her thumb and forefinger, she dropped it on the floor. This skirt was too frilly, and too purple. She dropped it on top of the pink shirt. Purple and pink—could she come up with any different colors for a change? These leggings had too many flowers—pink and purple again! She walked two steps from the dresser and dropped them on a different part of the floor. She didn't know why she did this—her room was always neat, perfectly neat. But right now, it felt good. She kept going. This shirt had ugly snaps on the sleeves. This one, too many cutesy buttons. She dropped them on the floor.

When she was done, the floor was littered with small piles of babyish, dumb, pathetic clothes. They dotted the floor in uneven spots. The room was a mess, and now it made her feel worse. She didn't know why she'd done it. Lucy looped her way through the piles on the floor over and over, careful not to step on any of the clothes and meaning to pick them up, but somehow unable to do so. She just couldn't pick them up. She couldn't pick up the clothes, and they would be here any

minute and what would happen then? and neurons and synapses and dendrites waited angrily on her desk, and Edward, Edward! Tears sprang to her eyes. She looked up until gravity pushed them back down. They came right back. She blinked hard. She sat on her bed and began counting her breaths, which was one of her mom's "useful tools" for trying to calm yourself down. Then she tried to go to the White Room.

She closed her eyes. The white gauzy drapes, the four-poster bed with the white velvet curtains, bookshelves in all the walls—but what did the floor look like? It started with the floor. She couldn't remember the floor! Was it wood, was it wall-to-wall carpeting? Had she ever known? You had to know what the floor of a room looked like—if you didn't know what the floor was, how could you go in? And what about the walls? They were white, but were they painted white, wallpapered white? The image began fizzling from her mind, dots of gray speckling it slowly at first and then all at once, like the static that filled the TV when you pressed the wrong button. And then Lucy's whole mind was filled with black and gray static and that loud white noise sound, only this time nothing could be erased by a button on a remote control.

Lucy opened her eyes. She stood up from her bed and walked out of her room—she couldn't be here anymore—and made her way downstairs. She walked through the living room, the dining room, the front hallway—she couldn't be there, she couldn't be there, she couldn't be there. She found herself in the middle of the kitchen, frozen in place.

Silence oozed, loud, from in between the tiles on the floor and from the corners of the room where the walls touched. The calendar next to the refrigerator showed the wrong month. No one ever remembered to change it on time. A pool of water—colorless, temperature-less—sat dully by the side of the refrigerator. If they had a dog, he would have licked it up. The ends of the plant on the counter curled, browning. No one ever bought a new one.

An ant journeyed over the unnatural angles of the knife set, could it reach the blades? She thought about Edward, all alone out in the real world, on the banks of the Charles doing bad things. The phone machine blinked zero. A lone spoon lay in the sink. She thought about her mom's fake smile and no laugh lines, and then about all the worries and sadnesses bouncing around inside her head, crashing into each other and making everything hurt. Butter, left out on the kitchen table, softened slowly. She saw a moth flapping desperately, yearning to touch the slivers of light that escaped through the cracks in the blinds. She thought about her dad's messy, unsmoothed hair. Inside the orange bowl, fruit bruised.

The room seemed foreign. Night sat heavy on the kitchen, pressing everything down. They were all glued—Lucy and every object and creature in this kitchen—stuck firmly and forever into gravity. Lucy was suddenly afraid that the floor beneath her would crack, was cracking right now—starting slowly in one corner and then cracking faster and faster until it caved into the ground, and Lucy would go with it, deeper and deeper, all the way to the core of the earth, which was almost 10,000 degrees Fahrenheit and the size of the moon. A whole moon, right inside the earth—but there was no light coming from the ground.

Before the floor cracked, before she sank further, she had to move. She forced herself to walk out of the kitchen and into the next room, the laundry room. White, cold, smooth. A narrowing room—a shrinking box. Tightened lungs. Above the dryer, the cabinet. She put her hands on the dryer. She hoisted herself up and clambered on top of it, thoughtless. Her body seemed to be working independently of her mind, two separate entities. She opened the cabinet. Big, glass bottles with unfamiliar writing on them towered above her. Her hands rose to the one closest to her. The cool glass felt nice against her palms. *ABSOLUT VODKA*, she read. She watched as her hands unscrewed the sleek silver top, watched as they grasped the glass, lifted it, told her head to tilt back, and tipped the bottle into her waiting mouth. Sudden burning—a roaring fire inside her throat, the worst taste that had ever touched her tongue, an assault on her senses. But it cleared her mind, cleaned it. Her body was putting on a show for her mind, which was now—finally, freely—filled only with physical sensation.

It was consuming, painful; she had to do more. Her hands grasped the next glass bottle waiting above her. *BACARDI GOLD*. Her throat gulped it down. Burning, crumpling, disgusting. She had to try the next.

She looked on, an amazed spectator, as her body moved faster and faster through the bottles—a splash of each and then recoiling and then on to the next.

When she had tasted every bottle, she took four shaking breaths. What had she done? She gathered a portion of her sleeve and stuffed it inside her mouth. She stayed on top of the dryer as her sleeve dampened and her mouth relaxed.

Then she slid smoothly off the dryer and stood up. Her head was too light for her body. Finally, a kind of floating. She felt warmer. She felt uncertain and watching and wonderful! But then she felt suddenly dizzy, the way you do when you go round and round on the playground and then fall down. But this wasn't fun. She wanted to escape these sensations now, but she was trapped inside them. More dizziness, more lightheadedness, no more warmth. She felt scared. And she felt so tired. She carefully made the long journey down to the floor and closed her eyes, her cheek pressed against the cold, white tile—safe.

When Lucy woke, it was to the sound of the bells jingling too loudly as the front door slammed shut. It took her a moment to realize where she was, what she had done, what was happening now. She was groggy, she still felt a little dizzy, she had never been more tired. She couldn't lift her head from the floor. She tried to stay awake, listening, praying that nobody would find her there.

Edward yelling. "Do we have to keep talking about this?"

She had to close her eyes so the room would stop moving. She started to drift off again—

"...let this go so easily," her mom was saying. "Put vodka...*Frappuccino*? And a joint...the hell did you get a joint?"

Lucy tried lifting her head to stay awake. They couldn't find her here; she needed to move. But it hurt to keep her head up. She put it back down.

"...don't even know you anymore, Edward."

The voices grew nearer; they were coming to the kitchen.

“Oh, come on, Catherine...melodramatic.” Her dad’s voice.

But she couldn’t focus. She drifted in and out of sleep.

“Great...mister fucking good guy...never actually the good guy, are you, James?”

Her mom’s yelling made her hurt all over and now Lucy’s head was pounding out of rhythm with her heart’s forceful beating.

“...think you can just get away with this half-assed affair you’re having with the Riley woman?...help every pretty mother learn how to fucking write?”

“Okay. I get it now. That’s what this is—”

“If you think just because you’re not sleeping with her, it doesn’t count—”

Lucy heard light footsteps. Edward’s, slipping away. The stairs were right by the laundry room! But the room still spun, and Lucy couldn’t get up. She closed her eyes tightly.

When she opened her eyes, Edward was standing at the doorway.

“Holy shit,” he whispered, looking from Lucy on the floor to the bottles on top of the dryer.

She stared at him, helpless. Her head was still pounding, but her heart slowed a little. “Holy shit,” he repeated.

“I don’t know—” she started, but she didn’t know. She didn’t know what to say. “I feel so—” She tried to get up then, but the dizziness pushed her down. She let out a low groan.

“Shh, shh. It’s okay, Luce. Come upstairs.” He bent down. She felt his arms slide between her back and the floor, and then he scooped her up.

“LIKED YOU BETTER WHEN YOU WERE STRESSED OUT AND DRIVEN.” The fighting in the kitchen continued, would never stop, probably. She hated them, her parents. She rested her head on Edward’s shoulder.

Then she felt the coolness of her sheets and then the warmth of her blanket being fluffed over her. She wanted to say something to him, but instead she let her cheek fall against the softness of her pillow. Then Edward was moving about her room. She wasn’t sure what he was doing, but the sound of his bustle comforted her. She drifted in and out of sleep as he moved around her.

She was jolted awake by her dad’s yell—“Deal with this in the morning!” He was coming heavily up the stairs.

She looked around her room. Edward was gone. The piles on the floor were gone, too. Her room was neat—perfectly neat—as usual. Edward had cleaned up her room. Edward had cleaned up her room. It was like a lullaby, and she repeated it to herself as she let go of consciousness. Edward had cleaned up her room.

Then the glaring light in the hallway switched abruptly on, and then her dad was standing in her doorway. She heard her mom coming up the stairs now too, and then, for a moment, both of her parents stood silhouetted against the light of the hallway. Lucy watched through cracked eyelids. Then her mom approached her bed, and she quickly shut them again. Her mom leaned down and lightly kissed her hair. Then she stood up and walked out, brushing past Lucy’s dad without a word. Still Lucy pretended to be asleep. Her dad stood there longer, not moving. Why was he

here? He stood there for twenty-two more seconds. Then he walked a few steps closer to her bed. Couldn't he just go away?

James stands where he is, watching his sleeping daughter. He watches the stars on her blanket as they rise and fall with the rhythm of her breath. For a second he envies them, these blanket stars that lie against his daughter, that fall asleep next to her each night. He watches her face. Her cheeks are so smooth. He's not sure that he has ever noticed this before. Watching her breathe, James is suddenly calmed. Even the air feels softer against his skin. He wants to tell her this. He thinks about waking her up—just to tell her. To tell her goodnight. To tell her that life happens and will keep happening, but that for her, everything will be better, he knows. But then—she seems to know that already, his daughter. His quiet, gentle, wonderfully wise young daughter who, amazingly, has everything pulled together before she's even reached the double digits. Nine years old and she knows it all already. And anyway, she is peacefully, beautifully asleep. There is no reason to wake her. James smiles to himself, to the room, to the closed eyelids of his daughter. He tiptoes out, leaving the door a crack open because the room seems so dark, and he thinks there should always be a little bit of light, even if she's sleeping.