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## Messy Love: Collection of Short Stories

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# **Messy Love**

**A Collection of Short Stories**

**Mindy Favreau  
Honors Thesis  
Fall 2006-January 2007  
Debra Spark**

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*Sophie*

**Start Again**

It was a warm April, but the air conditioning inside Bed, Bath and Beyond blasted as if it were July, and Sophie shivered in her short sleeves, wishing she hadn't left her jacket in the car as her mother had suggested. As soon as the automatic doors had sucked them into the subarctic temperatures, Sophie's mother and sister were off, heads bent over a page-long list that included towels, desk organizers, and bed raisers. Lucy liked to brag that she had taken her first steps at eight months old and lost her first tooth at age three. Fifteen years later she applied early decision to college and was now picking out her extra-long twin sheets before most people had even gotten acceptance letters.

As Lucy and her mother discussed thread count and compared lavender with lilac, Sophie slid into the massage chair and gasped when the knobs rotating under the leather vibrated on her spine.

"Stop making sex noises, please" Lucy said, and the boy stocking the pillow shams turned to gawk. Red-faced, Sophie left the massage chair and leaned her elbows on the cart.

"Which do you like better?" Lucy asked, holding out two sets of purple sheets.

"They look like the same color to me," Sophie said. Her sister snorted.

"They *are* the same color—I meant, which one feels better?"

Sophie ran her fingers under each plastic covering. "This one feels like T-shirt material."

"But is that better or worse than the other one?" Lucy asked.

Sophie shrugged. “I dunno—you’re sleeping in them, not me.” Her sister continued to look at her, waiting for an answer, so Sophie said, “I like the T-shirt ones.”

“Don’t you think they’ll get too hot?” Sophie’s mother asked.

“Yeah, you’re right,” Lucy said, tossing the other sheets into the cart. “O.K., what’s next?”

“Can we go yet?” Sophie asked, trailing behind them, pushing the cart. “I thought you said we could go to Reebok so I could get new sneakers.”

“We’re not here for you, Sophie,” Lucy said before their mother could answer. “Mom told you that we had to shop for my dorm, so don’t rush me.”

“If we don’t have time today, we’ll go to Olympia tomorrow and get you some sneakers there,” her mother said before stopping in the middle of the aisle. “Oh, look, Lucy—string lights. You could hang those over your window, you know?”

“I don’t like the colors, though. Aren’t there any purple ones? Then they’d match.”

Sophie rocked forward with the cart, slouching down on her elbows. “But I don’t like their sneakers. I always find ones I like at Reebok. Doesn’t Lucy have all summer to buy dorm stuff?”

“We’ll go to Reebok, O.K.?” her mother said. “They’re cheaper anyways.” She was tugging on a lamp with three adjustable arms. “Now how about this, Luce? You could point it wherever you needed it.”

Four hours later they returned home with purple everything, except for Sophie’s sneakers, which were blue and gray and looked like boy sneakers, sniffed Lucy. They had also each picked out a new spring outfit—Lucy got a knee-length flowery skirt and

sequined top, and Sophie a pair of jeans and a T-shirt with a grumpy-faced orange crab on it that said “Audrey’s Crab Shanty, Bay Island, Maryland.” Despite her mother’s urgings, Sophie did not try on a skirt.

As they stumbled through the doorway and dumped their bags onto the living room floor, Sophie waited for her father to poke his head out of the family room and say, as he always did, “Women...they be shoppin’,” sounding nothing like the comedian he had stolen the line from. The rustle of plastic as Sophie’s mother and sister emptied out their purchases didn’t attract him either, so Sophie ventured into the family room, but he wasn’t there.

“Where’s Dad?” she called to her mother.

“Oh, probably helping Uncle Marc with something,” her mother answered, barely audible over the plastic rustling.

Her father returned home right as her mother put dinner on the table. He sat down silently and her mother put a plate in front of him, caught up in talking to Lucy about what her friend Andrea had said to her that day. When they all sat down, Sophie’s father looked at them all and told them that a girl at his school had killed herself.

Her name was Rebecca Dubois, and Sophie’s father was a history teacher at the high school where she had been a freshman, and when he told them they all sat silent, ignoring the chicken already speared onto their forks and dripping lemon marinade in tiny puddles onto their plates. One of the other teachers had heard about it and called him, and though it was Saturday he went down to the high school to meet with the other teachers. Rebecca hadn’t been a student of his, but when he saw her picture on the school’s computer he recognized her and remembered that her locker was not far from his

classroom door. He had walked by her open locker once and seen one of Monet's paintings—he didn't know which one—taped to the inside.

As he told them all of this, Sophie's father, a soft-spoken and usually jovial man, had to wipe his eyes with his napkin. Sophie's mother made a sound, breathless and high, like the air slowly being let out of a balloon. Lucy said, "Jeez, how'd she do it?" Sophie said nothing. She put the rest of her chicken in her mouth and chewed furiously until, like bubblegum, it lost all its flavor.

Sophie did not know Rebecca Dubois. She did not know how tall she was, what kind of shampoo she used, if she preferred to be called Becky or maybe Becca. If Rebecca had called her on the phone the night before taking a handful of sleeping pills, had dialed Sophie's number, waited for the phone to ring twice, and, once Sophie's ear rested against the earpiece, said, "I can't keep going on like this," Sophie, naturally, would not have recognized the girl's voice.

She didn't know Rebecca Dubois, but on Monday when she stared up at Sophie from the obituaries page of the Hanley Daily Record, she looked like a girl whom Sophie might have befriended. Her hair was pushed back over one shoulder, and her smile was shy and tugged up higher at one end. Sophie imagined looking for that face in the cafeteria, scanning the clusters of tables until she saw the straight French braid (for Rebecca, Sophie decided, was the kind of girl who could French braid her own hair, not even looking in a mirror) and when their gazes met, their eyes would light up in the reciprocal joy of recognition.

Sophie's mother came home, kicked off her black pumps, and found Sophie standing in the kitchen, bent over the newspaper, eating a cold Pop Tart. "Seriously,

Sophie,” she said, pointing to the backpack dumped on the kitchen floor. “And you’d better finish that Pop Tart before Daddy gets home and sees you eating before dinner.”

Sophie stuffed the last bit into her mouth and wiped her hands on her jeans, but her eyes didn’t leave the newspaper. “You don’t have to call him Daddy anymore, Mom—I’m not five.”

Her mother didn’t answer as she poured herself a glass of ice water and then leaned over the paper.

“It’s that girl, Rebecca,” Sophie said. Her mother nodded. A drop of water fell from the bottom of her cup and blotted out the *W* in William Rudloe, who had died three days before.

“Looking at her, you’d never know,” her mother said. “Her poor parents. I can’t even imagine.”

Sophie nodded, her tongue working at a piece of strawberry filling stuck in her molar. Her mother suddenly kissed her hair and then turned away just as fast.

“It must have been such a hard day at that school,” she said as she moved into the living room, picking up her discarded shoes. “Pick up your backpack before *your father*”—she enunciated the words—“gets home. I bet he’s had a very rough day.”

At their old house the television had been visible from the kitchen table, but in their new house it was all the way at the other end and so her father, occasionally and against her mother’s wishes, ate in the living room, his plate balanced on his crossed leg. That night the entire family ate in the living room, plates balanced on their crossed legs, as they watched the news.

“Damn camera crews were at the school all day, getting in people’s faces,” her father said. On the screen two girls with stricken faces were saying something, and Sophie had to stop chewing so she could hear them.

“She was kind of quiet, but she was nice to everyone,” a girl with a blond ponytail said, swiping at her nose with the back of her hand. “You didn’t even have to know her and she’d smile at you.”

The other girl was tugging anxiously on her necklace, and when she spoke she turned her head away from the camera so all it got was her profile. “I – I just don’t understand.”

“You’d think they’d be a little more sensitive, considering how she died,” her mother said, and it took a minute for Sophie to realize she was talking about the reporters.

“At least they’re not asking people why they think she did it,” Lucy replied, her mouth full of spaghetti. She dropped a piece on the carpet and said, “Oh, shit” before running to get a wet cloth.

“Do they know why she did it?” her mother asked, turning to her father. He sighed and looked down at his plate.

“Her parents haven’t said much, except that the sleeping pills were her mother’s.” He shook his head slowly, the way he did late at night when he woke up in front of the TV and had to get the kinks out of his neck. “You’d think that her parents, her friends, a teacher—someone—would have noticed something. It’s just – not right.”

Her mother nodded in agreement as she mopped up the sauce on her plate with a piece of bread. “It’s just irresponsible—negligent. Her parents must feel so guilty.”

“Maybe she didn’t want to tell anyone,” Sophie said. She was twirling her fork, forcing the last of her spaghetti around the tines, the splayed noodles coming together on her plate like the eye of a hurricane. “Maybe she was afraid that they wouldn’t understand, or they wouldn’t listen. Or that they’d think she was crazy.”

“Um, she *was* crazy,” Lucy said, rubbing the cloth in vigorous motions over the carpet. “It’s always the quiet ones.”

“Lucy,” her mother said. Sophie said nothing but stuffed the hurricane of pasta into her mouth.

“Real cute, Soph,” Lucy said, watching her try to chew it all. The news was over now, and the laugh track of a sitcom punctuated the air. Sophie’s mother collected all their plates and carried them into the kitchen.

“You two better practice tonight,” she called over the sound of water rushing into the sink. “The concert’s next week.”

“What’d she say?” Lucy asked, and Sophie held her hands up, one above the other, palms facing her chest, and wiggled her fingers. “Oh,” her sister answered. They were both in their high school’s band, and next week was the annual Bandorama, when their band and the bands of Spruce Hill and Kingston put on a joint concert.

“I should practice my solo,” Lucy said, grabbing her lacrosse bag from the bottom of the stairs and starting up to her room.

“It’s not a solo—it’s a duet,” Sophie argued. “Sarah’s playing the same thing on the flute.”

“Yes, but I’m the only clarinet,” Lucy said. “If I squeak, everyone will know it’s me.” Lucy got to sit in the front and play lilting, arching melodies, while Sophie with her

French horn, squeezed in the back so close to the bass drum she felt it vibrate in her ear, played only repeating quarter notes and measures of rest.

Sophie started to follow her sister up the stairs but then looked back and saw her father still sitting in the recliner, staring at his hands. She walked over and pressed her hand to his arm. He blinked, looked up, and smiled, but his smile was thin and tremulous, as if he were looking up at her from underwater. He patted her hand and wished her luck on her horn practicing.

Before she went to bed that night, Sophie snuck downstairs and cut out Rebecca's obituary. She studied the photograph at the top. Sophie knew that even as she aged, Rebecca would stay eternally fourteen years old, her flesh and hair nothing but black newspaper ink, her face etched into aluminum sheets and pressed flat onto paper. Rebecca was only an optical illusion, a chiaroscuro, the shadows along her nose and around her cheekbones creating the appearance of a third dimension that no longer existed. Sophie tucked the obituary into the drawer of her nightstand, folded up underneath her mango-scented lotion and her retainer case.

That night Sophie did not think about her parents, her friends, or her three-page essay on *The Great Gatsby*, but of Rebecca. Had she ever been in love? Had she ever sat next to a boy in a dim movie theater, wondering how to politely remove her hand from his clammy palm and wipe it on her jeans? Had she ever lied to her parents to go to a party, and returned home with the bass still thumping in her bones and the giggles from the beer still rising up from her throat? Had she already thought about where she'd have her wedding, or what she would name her children? In the last fleeting seconds of her life,

when it was already too late, had she realized what she had missed and wished, more than anything, for the chance to start again?

In their old house, the one they'd lived in until she was twelve, Sophie awoke one night to the sound of her parents' tense, muffled voices. She sat up and looked out the window—it was still dark, still night. Her door, open a crack, seeped light from the hallway. They were talking, forcefully, and Sophie heard frenzied shuffling sounds, as if they were wrestling. A high-pitched wheezing, inhuman, made Sophie's heart jump.

She got out of bed slowly and moved to the doorway, peering through the crack. Her father was on his knees in the hallway, his hands out in front of him like when she would run at him and he would scoop her up. She couldn't see her mother, but she heard her voice. "Careful, Michael." Sophie pushed open the door further and stuck her head out.

The strange smell, bitter and musky, hit her nose first, while her eyes adjusted to the bright light. Then she saw their dog, Teddy, reeling in the hallway, bits of saliva flinging from his chops, his teeth jutting out from his lips. Her mother stood back, hands at her throat, and when Sophie opened her door she turned her eyes to her, fearful.

"Sophie, go back in your room and close your door," she said in a voice Sophie hadn't heard before. "Go back to sleep."

Sophie wanted to call to Teddy, to make him stop, but her mother's voice pushed her back into her bedroom, and she shut the door, pulling at her nightgown.

Teddy had epilepsy, her parents told her, which Sophie thought was a funny word but it wasn't funny at all. It meant that Teddy was sick, and when he got sick her parents shut Lucy and Sophie into their rooms, so Teddy wouldn't hurt them. "But Teddy loves us," Lucy argued. When Sophie woke up in the night and smelled that smell, a mix of urine and saliva and terror, she knew Teddy wasn't Teddy anymore, but a demon dog like the one Lucy told her about from the book of scary stories. She tried not to think about Teddy, his strange white eyes and bared white teeth, and go back to sleep, and in the morning the smell was out of the carpet and Teddy was chewing on his pig's ear like nothing ever happened.

Teddy would never get better, her parents told them, and one day they took him outside on the front lawn and threw the ball for him, and when he caught it and lay down to chew on it, Lucy did her thing where she walked past him, hands behind her back, whistling like she wasn't even paying attention to him. Then she'd pounce on him but he was always too fast for her and jumped up right before her fingers touched the ball. Her mother held the video camera, laughing and crying at the same time. Then their father said, "Say goodbye," and Lucy started to cry, so Sophie cried too, and they patted his head and kissed his nose before he got into the back of their father's car and they drove away. Lucy stayed home from school and they all sat on the couch watching *Beauty and the Beast* and their mother made them homemade chocolate chip cookies and didn't tell Sophie, not once, that she'd eaten enough.

\* \* \*

A week after Rebecca killed herself, Timothy McVeigh parked a rented Ryder truck with a bomb inside it in front of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building and killed 168 people. Sophie had not experienced war the way her parents had, through protests and drafts and news of friends lying dead in the marshes of Vietnam. The Oklahoma City Bombing became her equivalent, and she grieved with the weeping families who appeared on television, bonding herself to them as her parents must have done during Vietnam. To her Rebecca obituary she added images of the ravaged building, pale-faced mourners piling flowers before the wreckage, and one photo of a firefighter cradling a child, her yellow socks muddied with blood. The child, the caption said, did not survive.

Sophie kept the articles pressed inside a manila folder. She could not allow these people to be churned up into mulch and transformed into recycled paper.

Her blue lunch bag in hand, Sophie navigated the tables of the cafeteria—"the Commons," as everyone called it, for reasons she didn't know—to her usual table just under the windows of the library. Jenny was already there with two girls Sophie didn't know very well: Audrey, a small, athletic blond who liked to tell dirty jokes, and Jessica, whose round eyes and cherubic face reminded Sophie of a Cabbage Patch doll. Sophie and Jenny had been best friends since they were seven, when their mothers met at aerobics class, and even though Sophie still called Jenny her best friend, they didn't spend much time together. In seventh grade Jenny went to the movies with Max, the guy who snapped all the girls' bra straps, and she had told Sophie about it in the bathroom before social studies, hiding her grin behind her hand and telling her how in the dark of

the movie theater she had put her hand on his—she couldn't even say it! A million questions had come into Sophie's mind—she hadn't even been kissed yet—but she acted like she already knew the answers, and ever since then, their friendship was different.

The girls were talking about Brady, the sophomore they all had a crush on and who used to walk past their biology class every morning to get to his chemistry class. They had nicknamed him Glucose so that they could talk about him in class and not get caught, and now they used it everywhere.

“So I saw Glucose and his buddies playing basketball in the gym yesterday,” Jenny was saying. “And no shirts. That was a good day.”

“There was no one in the gym when I went to the locker room,” Audrey pouted. “I must have been too late.” She offered up her cheese stick, but no one wanted it.

“I heard him tell Katie that he was coming to our game on Saturday,” Jessica said, scraping her spoon along the rim of her yogurt cup. “I wonder who he's coming to see.”

Sophie concentrated on her bologna sandwich, peeling off the crust like a layer of sunburnt skin. Last summer she had cleaned out her closet, as her mother had ordered, and discovered a stack of old report cards, covered with Ss for satisfactory and comments of “good student,” and realized she had been average all her life. She felt betrayed by her parents and her teachers—why had they not informed her of her condition sooner? It was as if average were a disease that, once detected, could be reversed if only treated in time.

“We had by far the most depressing social studies class today,” Jessica was saying. “We had to read articles about that bombing in Oklahoma City and watch this news report about it, and then talk about it. It was so sad.”

“Good thing things like that don’t ever happen in Maine,” Jenny said. “Makes up for the fact that there’s nothing to do around here, unless hanging around Main Street like the townies counts.”

“Don’t forget Rollerworld,” Audrey said, and they all laughed. “Remember when that used to be the cool thing to do on Friday nights? Things used to be so simple back then.” She leaned her chin on her hand and gazed across the Commons in mock reverie.

“And we didn’t have to think about all the crazy people there are in the world, blowing up buildings,” Jenny said. “There are a lot of crazies out there.”

“Yeah, speaking of crazy,” Audrey said. “My friend Kirstin was telling me about that girl at Spruce Hill, the one who killed herself. *Wow*.” She put her finger up to her temple and made a spinning motion.

“Was she really?” Jenny asked, leaning forward as if prepared for a big secret.

“Well, Kirstin didn’t really know her,” Audrey said, “but she heard her one time talking to herself in the lunch line. Talk about wacko.”

“I don’t think she was crazy,” Sophie said, staring down at the apple in her hands.

“Um, she killed herself,” Audrey said, her voice a little too loud. “That’s crazy enough for me.” She laughed and sat back in her chair.

Sophie just shook her head. Jenny shrugged. Jessica said, “It was probably because of some guy. If girls are crazy, it’s usually a guy’s fault.”

“What if she got pregnant and when he found out, he dumped her?” Jenny said, her eyes gleaming.

“Or maybe she was one of those girls who couldn’t stand to get a B, and when she did, she couldn’t take it,” Audrey said. Then she looked at her watch. “I gotta run to my locker before class.”

“Me too,” Jenny said. They all stood up and collected their trash. As they separated to go to their lockers, she called out, “See you guys at practice.”

“Hey, Jenny,” Sophie said before she walked away. “My concert’s on Friday—I can get you a ticket, if you want.”

“Oh, sorry, I can’t go,” Jenny said. “We’ve got a big team dinner that night. You know, bonding before our game. Sorry!” And she dashed off toward her locker, walking down the hall like it was a runway.

It was tacos, this time, they ate in the living room, struggling to bite them without letting the juices run down their fingers. On the television a fire fighter was talking about the rescue operations being made in Oklahoma City, the dead and the injured still being pulled from the skeleton of the building. His voice was flat, calm, but his eyes were strained, his mouth twitching at the corners. Sophie wondered if it was he who had carried out the child with the yellow socks.

Hundreds of people were hurt, he said, and they were still finding bodies trapped in the rubble. They showed scenes following the blast. Rescue workers cradled children, their heads or limbs wrapped in bloody gauze, in their arms, while paramedics lifted stretchers into ambulances. Most of those rescued had been taken to St. Anthony’s Hospital, the reporter said.

Sophie and her family ate wordlessly, the only sound that of taco shells crunching and her father's occasional sigh, a forceful expulsion of air. Sophie watched the families gathered outside the wreckage, crying for someone lost, as if she expected to recognize them, or at least recognize something in their faces. She imagined Rebecca's parents' there, weeping among the others, holding their daughter's photo in their fingers as proof that they, too, had suffered. Would they be allowed to mourn there, for someone who had chosen to die?

The commercials came on and Sophie's father got out of his chair, still sighing the way he did when he tried to fix his truck and her mother asked him how it was going. "What this country is coming to," he grumbled, taking his empty plate into the kitchen. "Does anyone else want more tacos?"

Lucy shook her head, and Sophie did too. "You can have the rest, Michael," their mother called to him.

Her father came back into the living room. "No one's completely happy with our government, but it's a democracy. That's why we vote, we lobby, we speak out. Blowing up government buildings is not the way to rally anyone to your side."

"I guess it gets you more attention that marches on D.C.," her mother answered, taking the last bite of her taco. "Yours weren't as spicy as mine, were they? I think I used too much seasoning."

"Mine was fine," Lucy said, swigging down her milk. "So, this Timothy McVeigh guy was mad because the government killed all those people in the Waco siege, and he decides to kill innocent people himself? I don't see how that's supposed to be an argument against unnecessary violence."

“Exactly,” her father said. He was all worked up now, mashing his taco between his molars. “There are just some very evil people in this world. Very heartless and very evil. And you know what else,” he continued, gesturing with the soggy end of taco between his fingers, “all my kids could care about was getting to go home early the day it happened. No one even knew what Waco was.”

Sophie didn't want to say that she wasn't sure what Waco was either.

“They were a little young when Waco happened,” her mother conceded.

“They were old enough to understand, Christine,” her father replied.

Sophie tried to sleep that night, but instead she took out Rebecca's obituary and read the two- by fourteen-inch column of words again. What it said was that Rebecca had been born in the same hospital as she, though four months, a week and three days before her, that she liked to sing, she liked animals, she had a younger brother named Keith. It didn't say what she had disliked, what she had hated enough to kill herself. Did her parents fight, or were kids at school mean to her? Did her brother get all the attention? Maybe she tried hard every day to do everything she was supposed to do—finish all her homework, answer the teacher's questions in class, pick up all her stuff around the house—but she always forgot one thing, or messed up another thing, and she just knew she'd never get it all right. Or maybe she looked in the mirror that morning and realized that what she saw was all there was, and all she'd ever see.

Sophie wrote her own obituary in her head, as if she had just contracted bone marrow cancer and had put up a valiant fight. People would know that she played the French horn and had taken gymnastics lessons as a child. They would learn her favorite hobbies, which were reading, watching movies, and spending time with her family and

friends. People reading it would do as her mother often did: sigh, putting a hand to her heart, and exclaim how young that person had died.

Rebecca's obituary didn't say how she died. People reading it would think about this tragic, enigmatic death, study her face and wonder what exactly had befallen her. Did she choke to death at the dinner table? Drop her hair dryer in the sink and die of electric shock? Fall out of a tree and break her neck trying to save the neighbor's cat? Anything was possible with Rebecca. It could be wild, exciting, heroic. But Sophie—even in death, Sophie would only be ordinary.

The school gymnasium had terrible acoustics. Every sound—the snap of instrument case latches, the scratch of chair legs, the squeak of metal music stands folding open—vibrated off the walls and echoed back to them in four seconds, now ten times louder. Some people, the ambitious and the pretentious, took out their music and started to practice. Soon Sophie could feel sound resonating in her bones, churning up her insides the way her sister stirred chocolate milk—ferociously, the spoon clanging against the side of the cup and the milk spilling over the edge.

Her French horn across her knees, Sophie sat and watched the students from Spruce Hill and Kingston shuffle into her high school's gym, momentarily disoriented by the noise and the fluorescent lighting. The three bands had only one group rehearsal before the concert, a rehearsal that Lucy said ended with the directors grabbing their hair and beating their batons on the stand in front of them. This was Lucy's fourth and last Bandorama group rehearsal; it was Sophie's first.

Sophie glanced down her row of chairs and waved at Ethan, the trumpet player usually in the seat beside her but now four seats down. They mixed all the students up, so that no two people from the same high school sat together, so that people could get to know each other, Mr. Landis, her band director, had said. But as Sophie watched the band members file into their seats, wordlessly and without looking at their neighbors, she suspected it was to keep people from talking during rehearsal. A boy with red hair and pants that were too short sat on Sophie's left, took out his music, and stared at it intently. Sophie balanced her French horn on one knee and tapped the valves.

The seat on her right remained empty until five minutes after rehearsal had started, when a girl with curly hair shuffled down the row, knocking into Sophie's stand and sending her music fluttering to the floor. "Oh, sorry!" she apologized too loudly, and Sophie saw Mr. Landis, his arm still making the pattern of a four-beat count, look up and frown.

Sophie collected her music as the girl flopped into her seat, breathless and ruddy-cheeked. She took out her French horn and rummaged through her bag for her music before she turned to Sophie and whispered, "I forgot my music—can I look on with you?" Sophie was counting in her head, so she just turned her stand toward the girl in reply.

During the rehearsal break the girl told Sophie that she was Caroline, from Spruce Hill.

"My dad works there," Sophie added, raising her voice a little to be heard over the racket. "He's a teacher. I'm Mr. Allen's daughter."

“Oh, the history teacher,” the girl said. “He’s the one that always celebrates Abraham Lincoln’s birthday, right?”

Sophie nodded. Every year she helped her mother bake Lincoln a birthday cake that her father brought into his classroom. She started oiling her valves.

“That’s cool you’re dad’s a teacher—I mean, because he’s not *your* teacher,” Caroline said. “Are you friends with anyone at Spruce Hill?”

Sophie started to shake her head, but found herself saying, “Yes, well, I knew one girl. Kind of.”

“Who?”

“Rebecca. Rebecca Dubois.”

Caroline sucked air through her teeth. “You knew her?”

“Well, I knew of her,” Sophie lied. “My father...he mentioned her once.”

“I had class with her,” Caroline said. “We’d gone to school together ever since kindergarten. We weren’t ever really friends, though, but I did go to her birthday party once. My mom made me.”

Sophie concentrated on squeezing the oil in drops onto her valves, as if she didn’t really care about Rebecca at all. “Was she nice?”

“Yeah, she was nice,” Caroline said. “She was kind of shy, and she didn’t really hang out with the cool kids, you know? All the teachers liked her, though, even though she didn’t talk in class. People thought she was a suck-up, but I think she was just smart. I saw the teacher give back her paper once, and she got an A-plus. No one gets A-plusses.”

Sophie was nodding, holding in her breath. She was pressing on the valves of her horn, absently, and they made a hollow *glunk* sound, like tiny frogs. “Do you – do you know why she, you know?”

Caroline shook her head. “She must have been depressed or something. I mean, she was nice and all, but she never really looked that *happy*, you know? Except that one time, in concert choir, when the director made her sing a solo.” A group of Spruce Hill students walked past and called out Caroline’s name. She turned and yelled back. Sophie sat in her folding chair, her back pressed against the dented metal, her hands curved around the brass of her horn, leaving warm fingerprints.

Caroline turned back around. “Those guys are crazy.” She started shuffling her music, putting the next piece on top.

“What happened?” Sophie asked, nearly a whisper.

“What?”

Sophie said, “When the director asked Rebecca to sing the solo.”

“Oh, that,” Caroline said. “Right. Well, Rebecca didn’t really want to, but Ms. Chapman said that she *had* to, so everyone could hear how it was supposed to sound. She made Rebecca stand at the front of the room and everything, and she wouldn’t even look up at us. At first we couldn’t even hear her she was singing so quiet, but Ms. Chapman kept yelling, ‘Louder!’ and finally she just opened her mouth real wide and starting belting it out. We all just stood there, totally amazed, because most of us hadn’t even heard her *talk* before. She sounded just like Mariah Carey. And when she was done, we all started clapping, and she just looked up at us all with the biggest smile on her face.”

Someone called Caroline's name again, and she turned her back and said nothing else to Sophie. Sophie sat still for a long time, her scalp tingling as though her hair were lifting from it, what she imagined she would have felt hearing Rebecca sing. What Sophie didn't know—what she learned years later from one of her father's former students while ordering an extra-hot nonfat vanilla latte—was that Rebecca Dubois had fled the stage when it came time to sing the solo in the concert, her voice and her courage having failed her. Cradling her to-go cup, Sophie heard this and felt cheated—deflated.

But right then, sitting in rehearsal, Sophie saw Rebecca not as a flat, yellowing newspaper cutout but as Caroline had seen her—mouth open wide, eyes raised, the self she should have been pouring forth. And when Sophie tilted her horn and brought the mouthpiece to her lips, Rebecca's voice breathed through her and lifted her farther than Sophie could ever go.



*Lucy*

## **Rising and Falling**

I tugged at my shirt. It was hot pink and cropped above my navel, made of some kind of stretchy material that crept up along my ribs as I walked. The early October air across my bare stomach made me self-conscious, and I kept my hands at the shirt's hem, holding it in place.

"Stop walking like that," Ashley hissed at me, swatting at my hands. "You look ridiculous."

"That's because you made me wear a shirt sized for an eight-year-old."

"We're going to a concert, not Chuck E. Cheese," she said. "That flowered blouse thing you had was just not going to cut it. You want to make Andrew drool, don't you?" Ashley was from Chicago, and she said Andrew like she said her own name, the A nasal and exaggerated.

"I don't know if you can call it a concert." We were walking down Water Street, following a line of people to a house everyone called The Pit. Some upperclassmen stoners calling themselves Red Death would be playing. Ashley was walking fast, tottering in her heels, her blown-out blonde hair hiding her profile. I walked behind her, watching the slinky material of her tank top slide across her back. She looked back at me and sighed, her breath crystallizing in the air, her tone scolding, like a mother's. "Lucy—don't dawdle."

At the house, the bass shook the windowpanes. Ashley pressed her way inside, grabbing my hand and pulling me along with her. I pushed my way through the crowd of

sweaty bodies, my eyes watering against the cigarette smoke. People swarmed in the living room, propped themselves against the sagging furniture, pressed each other up against the dingy walls. The floor beneath me trembled; in the basement the band was playing something hard and fast with indecipherable lyrics.

“C’mon,” Ashley yelled, pulling me down the stairs. Cardboard boxes, stacked precariously, hulked against one wall of the basement. The band was pressed against another wall, looking ghastly in the street light that shone in through the small window above them. The middle of the floor had been cleared and people crowded in front of the band. Just as our feet hit the cement floor, the drummer started to riff and people jostled forward. Ashley’s blond hair disappeared into the throng.

I wove through the bodies and flattened myself up against the back wall, trying to avoid getting my feet stepped on—I was wearing Ashley’s shoes, too. In the dark and the smoke, my pink shirt and pale stomach shone like beacons, a lighthouse cutting through the fog. Someone thrust a plastic cup into my hands. I looked up; it was a boy I didn’t recognize, wearing an oversized black T-shirt, his dark hair hanging in his eyes.

“What is it?” I yelled. The guy stared at me blankly—a stupid question. I sipped the drink and blanched at the rubbing alcohol taste. The guy laughed, and then pushed his way back toward the band.

I stood at the edge of the crowd, drinking out of the cup in my hands too fast, blinking against the smoke. I didn’t know anyone who lived in the house or was in the band—acquaintance wasn’t required to attend the party—or any college party, for that matter. Ashley had been invited by a friend of a friend and she’d begged me to go, which I did because she’d already made out with two guys since the beginning of the semester

and dubbed me her “bookworm roomie.” Now, standing against the wall, holding my stomach in so it didn’t bulge over the top of my jeans, tongue fuzzy with mystery punch, I tried to shimmy my hips to the music in a way that was sexy. I finished my drink, and my limbs and joints felt loose, as if the punch had lubricated them.

I hadn’t known Andrew long—barely a month. We’d met the first week of classes when I walked into his Constitutional law class by mistake. He glanced at my music theory textbook and asked, “Are you a freshman?” and then said, very politely, “I think you’re in the wrong class.” Red-faced, I’d rushed out, blushing again a few days later when I saw him in the dining hall. “Hey, you’re that freshman, right?” he said, then leaned closer to add, “I should switch into your class—mine is really boring.” He asked me to eat with him, so I did.

“So, are you a government major?” I asked him, eating my salad as gracefully as I could.

“Yep,” he said. “It’s always really interested me, you know? My dad was always really into politics, and when I was younger I watched ‘Meet the Press’ with him on Sundays all the time.”

“Oh yeah?” I said. I gave him a close-lipped smile, in case I had lettuce stuck between my teeth.

“This summer I had an awesome internship in D.C. with the Department of the Interior,” he said. As he told me about his experiences, he gestured excitedly with his hands.

“What about you?” he asked. “What’d you do this summer?”

I stared shyly into my salad. “I just had a stupid little summer job. There’s an art day camp in my town, so I worked there, helping the little kids make Popsicle stick houses and stuff. It was fun, I guess.”

“That sounds really fun,” Andrew said, grinning at me. He went to pick up his burger and I noticed that his nails looked like crescent moons. I ran my tongue over my teeth quickly and then dared to smile back at him.

Now I scanned the crowd looking for his dark head, his swimmer’s shoulders straight as a board. Only a few days ago I’d seen him after class and he’d mentioned the concert to me, saying he was friends with the band and asking if I’d be there. The boy who had given me the drink passed by again and I stuck my empty cup in his hands. He nodded at me approvingly and moved off. As I watched him go I remembered my mother’s warning about guarding my drinks—she had read some article in a magazine about boys drugging girls at parties. Wouldn’t Ashley make fun of me if I walked around with my hand protectively surrounding my plastic cup? “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do,” she had said before we left for the party, raising her eyebrows suggestively and slapping my ass.

The boy returned with a full cup and slouched against the wall next to me, making me reach for it. I smiled politely and shifted my weight, looking the other way like I expected someone else, someone better, to come talk to me.

“You a freshman?” the boy asked, leaning his shoulder toward me.

“Yeah,” I hollered.

“Cool,” he said, then more words swallowed up by the band.

“What?”

He leaned closer than I wanted him to and I smelled the beer on his breath. “You’re the hottest freshman here.” He smiled luridly, looking me up and down. I squirmed under the intensity of his gaze, one hand instinctively pulling at my shirt to hide my stomach. I tried the punch, and it didn’t taste as strong this time, so I gulped it down.

Suddenly Ashley came bounding over, her hair wilting around her head. “Omigod, Luce, this is so awesome!” She caught sight of the slouching boy and made a face. “Um, who’s he?”

“No one,” I said, letting her lead me into the crowd. I felt lighter than when I’d entered, my feet taking steps with surprising ease. “This punch is good.”

“How many of those have you had?” Ashley shouted into my ear.

I ignored her question, caught up by the swells of guitar. I finished my drink and threw the cup on the floor. Closing my eyes against the smoke and the crush of bodies, I raised my arms into the air and shook my head, letting my body do what it wanted. I felt myself fall into strangers, felt someone’s hand on the exposed small of my back, but I didn’t open my eyes, all my attention tuned to the music. The crowd lunged forward and I let myself be pushed forward, the hand that was touching me pulling away. People pressed closer, the smell of sweat and perfume invaded my nostrils, and I was shoved forward into the bony point of an elbow. The owner of the elbow turned—it was Andrew! But no, just another boy with Andrew’s eager gaze, his reckless hair.

I was feeling hot, suffocated, and Ashley was gone. I detached myself from the group and pulled myself up the stairs—I needed air.

The cold outside struck my face and I sucked it into my lungs. I walked across the lawn, watching my feet too carefully, my head feeling light. My lips and fingers were

tingling. I reached the sidewalk and sat down, misjudging the distance and almost falling backwards. I propped my elbows on my knees, relishing the feeling of the goose bumps rising on my bare arms and stomach. I closed my eyes against the cold.

“That is a very pink shirt.”

I opened my eyes and saw Andrew standing in front of me. I looked up, remembering to suck in my stomach. “Thanks,” I said. “It’s Ashley’s. That’s my roommate. She’s from Chicago.”

Andrew nodded and sat down next to me, putting his hands behind him on the sidewalk and leaning backward. “How come you’re not inside?”

“I needed some air,” I said. “The music was a little loud.”

He laughed, exposing two rows of square white teeth. “It’s supposed to be loud. It’s grunge.”

“I knew that,” I said, my voice sounding like a child’s. “I was just saying.”

“That’s O.K.—it’s not my style either,” he said. “I just promised a buddy of mine that I’d stop by, but I couldn’t even find him in there.”

“Yeah, I lost Ashley—that’s my roommate,” I said, giggling as soon as I realized I’d repeated myself.

Andrew elbowed me playfully, which made me laugh more. “Yeah, you mentioned that already.”

We sat in silence for a moment, my laughter dying away in the night air, and then fell into an awkward stillness. I wrapped my arms around myself, suppressing a shiver. I could smell Andrew’s cologne, or maybe his aftershave, something dark and earthy, like fir trees. It reminded me suddenly of Christmas, when we’d all tramp out into the woods

behind our house, Dad with his brown work gloves and a hand saw, Mom using her mittens and hat to mark her favorite trees, talking about them as if they were people— “This one just seems so *peppy*”—and Sophie and me helping to carry it back to the house, where we stuck our faces in the needles and inhaled, sighing with delight.

I was going to tell Andrew this when he said, “Hey, are you cold?” and reached out to rub my arm briskly. “My friends are having a party on campus. You want to check it out?”

I looked back toward the house, thinking about Ashley.

“The police are probably going to bust up this party soon anyways,” Andrew said—he had noticed my hesitation.

“Well, it’s just that.” Quickly he cut in.

“Oh, right, your roommate. You want to go inside and look for her?”

I imagined the knot of people in the basement, the smoky stairwell, the boy with the leering smile, and said, “No—she can handle herself. She’s probably off with some guy by now anyways.”

Andrew smiled and stood up. “Awesome.” He held out his hand and pulled me up, the sudden movement sloshing the blood in my head. He placed his hands on my shoulders to steady me. “You O.K.?”

I nodded, and we walked back in the direction of campus, the sound of the bass trailing us like the tail of a comet.

\* \* \*

His towel hung on the back of the door, folded so that the corners met and one end wasn't longer than the other. This is what I noticed as I lay in his bed, the dead sleeping weight of him pressed up against my ribs, rising and falling, rising and falling. I hadn't spent much time in college boys' dorm rooms, but the ones I had seen were haphazardly decorated, the sickly sweet smells of marijuana and sweat in the air. I never expected to find this neatly arranged towel, the bottle of Italian wine on the desk, the half-burned candles on the window sill.

I told him this when he woke up, opening his eyes slowly like a newborn, unsure and perhaps surprised to see me. He looked at the towel, hanging on the back of the door, and said he didn't know such things would be scrutinized.

"Well, I notice things," I mumbled, raising myself on one elbow. The room seemed to spin for a moment. I swished the saliva around in my mouth, trying to wash away the taste of last night's punch.

He lay with one arm under his head, languidly, lazily, closing his eyes again. It was early, but I was awake, afraid to move, aware of my body under the sheet. I hadn't had many real boyfriends in high school; Andrew had been the first to see me completely naked. Last night he'd unhooked my bra with one deft movement of his hand, sliding my jeans down my thighs, the skin on his thumb and the stubble on his face rough against my bare skin. I didn't tell him about my inexperience, hoping it didn't show, letting him lead. Last night I'd felt hidden in the dark, insecurities concealed, but now, in the light of morning, I kept the sheet tucked around me.

I looked at the books on his shelves, cocking my head to read the titles. Most were about legislative policy, foreign politics, but stuck between them was a paperback copy of *Mrs. Dalloway*.

“You’ve read *Mrs. Dalloway*?” I asked. He opened one eye and sat up on his elbows.

“Not yet,” he said. “My mom gave it to me, said I had to read it. I haven’t gotten to it yet.”

I nodded, laying back down. I turned to face him, moving closer. I was cold.

“Do you have any brothers or sisters?” I asked him.

He lay flat on his back, arm under his head again. He tilted his face so he was looking at me out of the corner of his eye. “One brother,” he said. “Older.”

“Are you close?” I leaned forward, the faint smell of beer still on his breath.

“Yeah, pretty close,” he said. “After I graduated high school I took a year off and we hiked the Appalachian Trail together.”

“The whole thing? Isn’t that a long way?”

He looked at me and snorted. “Yeah, it’s a long way.”

“Oh.” He must have seen the disappointment on my face, because he suddenly leaned forward and kissed me, his mouth wet.

He pulled away and excusing himself to the bathroom, climbed over me to get to the door. I stared at the back of his boxers and thought about how uncomfortable they must be to wear under pants, bunching up around the ass. I looked under the sheet at the lacy pink underwear that Ashley had made me buy because “your Hanes just ain’t cutting it.” I asked her how lace could be comfortable, and she stared at me. “They’re not

comfortable—they're *hot*," which sounded more like *hat* in her Chicago accent. "That's all that matters."

Andrew came back into the room and closed the door behind him. I moved to the inside as he came back to the bed, flopping down beside me on his stomach and closing his eyes. I stared at his face, felt a desire to run my fingers through his hair but ignored it. I wasn't sure what to do now. Ashley hadn't prepared me for this situation—only made me buy the panties and loaned me her navel-baring shirt.

Andrew's breathing grew regular, his mouth slightly open. I settled next to him slowly, not touching him, staring up at the ceiling. It was Sunday morning. Sunday mornings I was usually one of the cavemen—what everyone called us, me and the others who holed ourselves up in the library basement, building walls with books around ourselves like we were preparing for a siege. "It's dangerous down there," Ashley said. "With that poor air circulation, your brain probably doesn't get enough oxygen. That kills brain cells, you know." What I didn't like were the sexist labels I'd been saddled with: freshman, caveman, as if women and academia didn't mix.

It was Sunday morning and I wasn't in the library, but in a boy's bed—no, a man's bed, an actual 21-year-old, college man's bed. I was popular in high school but not with boys, not cute boys—they didn't like smart girls. But college was different. Standing in the dark corner of his friend's suite the night before, Andrew and I had talked about everything from Clinton's foreign policy to Sartre's existentialism. I couldn't recall everything I'd said, but I remembered feeling brilliant.

Andrew rolled over, opening his eyes and glancing at the clock on his desk. He groaned and ran a hand over his face, wiping the sleep from his eyes. He looked at me and smiled. “Hey.”

“Hey back,” I said.

He turned on his side and leaned closer. “I don’t mean to be rude or anything, but I have a ton of work to do today. I should probably get to it.”

“Oh, no, that’s O.K.,” I said. “I do too. I’ve got a research paper due in a week and a music theory assignment to finish. It’s cool.”

Andrew put his arm across me, and his palm was warm and moist on my arm. “You know, I don’t really want you to go. It’s not often I wake up to a hot girl in my bed.”

I smiled involuntarily and tried to hide it by turning into his shoulder. “I bet you say that to everyone that you wake up to.”

He gaped at me, feigning hurt. “It’s the truth!”

I laughed and punched him lightly in the ribs. “Yeah, right.”

“No, I’m serious,” he said, his grin sliding into a straight line. He suddenly lay back, looking up at the ceiling. “I don’t know. A lot of my buddies like to mess around a lot, but it’s just never been my thing. I had this girlfriend last year, a really serious girlfriend, and, well, she kind of broke my heart.”

He made a sound, like a snort and a laugh, and I squeezed his arm. He turned his eyes to me.

“Ever since then, I’ve just been a little...hesitant. You know?”

I nodded, wanting to know more about this ex-girlfriend, wishing I hadn't known about her at all. Andrew gathered my clothes off the floor and I put them back on, trying to seem indifferent to his eyes, but I still turned awkwardly so I wasn't directly facing him. I said something about having to walk home in the bright pink shirt, and he loaned me one of his to put over it. He walked me to the door, still in his boxers, and I lingered inside the doorway.

“So, maybe I'll see you tomorrow?” I said, trying to smooth out my hair.

Andrew was looking down the hall, his head sticking out the door but the rest of his body, his feet, firmly planted inside. “Yeah. We'll hang out. For sure.” He kissed me quickly, roughly, then said goodbye. I walked home, Andrew's T-shirt, too big, flapping out behind me.

Mom and Dad descended on the campus like tourists, one with a map, the other with a camera, and me posing in front of every building as if it were the White House. “Lucy, our college girl,” Mom said, squinting one eye to look into the camera's viewfinder. “Move over, Sophie—you're in the picture.” Sophie, obedient as a sheep, shifted toward Dad until it was just me in the frame with the library looming behind me, almost looking like the White House with its columns and whitewashed pediment. I put my hands to my knees like I was holding down a billowing skirt, Marilyn Monroe-esque surprise on my face, right before Mom snapped the picture.

“Lucy,” Mom said, frowning. “You're wasting film.”

“I’m wasting film? How many pictures of this campus do you need? I will be here for four years, you know.”

“She’s right, Christine,” Dad said, the wisps of hair that still clung to his scalp lifting up in the wind. He tapped his watch. “And that lecture starts in fifteen minutes.”

“I am *not* going to some boring history lecture,” Sophie said, her arms crossed over her chest, distorting the college seal on the sweatshirt that she had just bought in the campus bookstore. “And I’m hungry.”

Mom opened her mouth, probably to criticize Sophie for not eating more at lunch, but I answered quickly, “How about you guys”—I pointed to my parents—“go to the lecture, and Soph and I will go to The Den and get a snack?”

“Really?” Sophie said.

“What’s The Den?” Mom asked suspiciously, as if I were naming a nightclub.

“Oh, you know, Mom—I told you about it,” I said. “The hang-out place, where they have food, and couches, and pool tables? Remember?”

“Oh, right,” Mom said. “The hang-out place.”

“Now, I hope you’re not hanging out there too much,” Dad said, only half-joking. “Even though it’s your first semester, you still have to study hard, so you don’t get behind, because it’s a lot harder to bring up a low GPA than it is to maintain a good one.”

“We get a good-student discount on our car insurance every time you make the Dean’s List,” Mom added.

“Isn’t your lecture about to start?” I asked. Dad looked at his watch.

“Yeah, can we go?” Sophie asked.

“Well, I suppose you two need to catch up, talk about clothes or boys or whatever it is you want to talk about,” Mom said.

I pointed Mom and Dad in the direction of the lecture hall, and Sophie and I walked to The Den, where people played pool and sang at open mic night on Thursdays. We walked mostly in silence, Sophie staring straight ahead, her hair blowing in her face. Her hair was darker than it had been when I’d left, the lightening the summer sun had done starting to fade. Sophie was gangly like I had been at fourteen, but she walked around in a slouching way that made her look a bit like an orangutan. Most everyone said that I was prettier, but she had gotten our mother’s hair, thick like a horse’s tail, wavy around her shoulders, chestnut-colored in the summer and chocolate in the winter. No amount of mousse, no curling iron, could make my hair look like hers.

At The Den we ordered a plate of cheese fries, topped with sour cream and tiny pieces of bacon. In between bites Sophie told me that school was good but chemistry was hard, and she hated the songs Mr. Landis had them playing in band.

“Mom and Dad are on me all the time now,” she said. “Now that you’re gone, they notice every little thing, like whenever I leave a dirty glass in the sink or don’t put my clothes away. It sucks.” She was peeling the melted cheese off the wax paper.

“You want any more of these?” she asked, pointing to the fries. I shook my head, and she took the cheese she had peeled off the paper and stuck it on a naked fry before popping it into her mouth.

When Sophie and I were little, I used to order for her from the ice cream truck because she was too shy to do it herself, and when Joel Letourneau shot rubber bands at

her on the bus, I was the one who pushed him on his face and had to sit in the front for a week. I didn't mind doing that stuff. It was what big sisters did.

I leaned forward. "OK, you can't tell Mom and Dad," I said. Immediately she stopped pulling at the cheese, looked right at me. "But, there's this guy, and I kind of like him."

"You like a guy?"

"Yeah," I said, irritated by the way she gaped at me, limp cheese hanging from her fingers. "His name is Andrew. He's a junior, a government major. He's really smart, and really cute. He's on the swim team too."

"You always said boys were a waste of time."

"*High school* boys are a waste of time," I corrected. "But college guys are different. They're more—sophisticated, intellectual. Not at all like high school boys."

"Oh," Sophie said, twisting the cheese in her fingers. "So, does he call you a lot?"

"It's not like that," I said. "It's not like a high school relationship, where the guy has to call you every night and you sit on the phone and talk about nothing and just listen to him play video games. It's more of an adult relationship." Actually, he hadn't called me at all since last weekend, not even to ask for his shirt back, and I hadn't seen him in the dining hall.

"He should have come to lunch with us, so we could meet him," Sophie said.

"Oh, God, no," I said. I couldn't admit that I had thought about asking him, if he had called.

"Why can't Mom and Dad know?"

I knew her question was just out of curiosity, and she'd never tell them, not if I told her not to. "Because. They'd make such a big deal out of it. You know them. Mom would be begging for me to bring him home for Thanksgiving and Dad would tease me all the time. Anyways," I added, leaning back in the booth, "this is a casual thing. It's not like I'm going to marry the guy."

"You could," Sophie said. "Mom and Dad met in college."

"Oh, please," I said. "I'm not even thinking about that." It wasn't the complete truth, but it wasn't exactly a lie either. Everyone put her first name with his last name, just to see how it sounded.

"Well, do you have a picture of him?" she asked. "Can I see what he looks like?"

I smirked, ducking my head a bit more and lowering my voice. "I don't have his picture, but—I have his shirt."

"He gave you his shirt?"

I looked back at my little sister and grinned. I raised one eyebrow suggestively, the way Ashley had. "Well, I needed something to wear home in the morning."

Sophie stared at me and blinked. She leaned forward, almost putting her elbow in the pile of soggy fries left on the plate. "You mean, you spent the night in his room? Like, in his bed?"

I nodded, still grinning. Sophie stared at me some more, her mouth open. "So, are you guys a couple now?"

"Well, not really," I said, making my face more serious. "I mean, he's not like my boyfriend or anything. So far, it was just a one-night thing."

"But you—you had sex with him?"

“Yeah, I did,” I said, slightly shocked at the boldness of her question. “But you can’t tell Mom and Dad, because they’d freak.”

Sophie leaned back in the booth, the plate of cold fries and balls of cheese now forgotten. “So, you had sex with a guy you just met, and who isn’t your boyfriend?” She looked at me, her expression unreadable. “Doesn’t that kind of make you—a slut or something?”

I stared at her, unable to speak. Anger rose up in my stomach. I turned away from her and saw Mom and Dad walking toward us.

“We made it!” Mom announced, slightly out of breath. Their lecture was over and they’d decided to come find us, only asking two students—only two! Mom said proudly—how to get to The Den.

“You girls about done?” Dad asked. Sophie was looking down at the table, rolling a piece of cheese into a ball in her fingers. My face felt hot, and my palms were sweating.

“Yeah, we’re done,” I said. I tossed the wax paper and the few congealed fries left stuck to it into the trash and wiped my hands on my jeans. Sophie slid out of the booth, flicking the cheese ball off her thumb. She did not look at me.

Outside I showed Mom and Dad the building where I had my biology class, pointing out the greenhouse and telling them about the samples we gathered from the stream that ran nearby in the woods. Dad said he wanted to know when I was going to take my first history class—hadn’t I at least considered majoring in history, like my old man? Mom said I shouldn’t wait to start an exercise routine, because at eighteen your metabolism slows down and you can’t eat like a kid anymore, and an all-you-can-eat meal plan doesn’t mean you *have* to eat it all. Sophie said something sly under her breath

about me wanting to join the swim team that neither of our parents heard. The sun, a translucent orb behind gauzy clouds, said it was almost four o'clock. And walking toward us, looking at me, looking away, passing by, was Andrew, who said absolutely nothing.

“It’s happened already,” Mom said. “She’s not even listening to us anymore.”

*Christine*

**Out of Mind**

Christine could not bring herself to walk into the house so she stopped the car at the end of the curving driveway and sat there, letting it idle. It was winter and through the naked trees Christine caught glimpses of the roof and the upstairs windows, darkly outlined against the branches. The window that used to be her bedroom stared back at her, and her throat tightened, pulling closed like a drawstring. She remembered being seven years old and pulling the sheets off her bed, tying knots into them like she had seen in a cartoon, so she could throw them over the window ledge, climb down, and escape. She put an extra pair of underwear and Scruffy, her stuffed dog, into a pillowcase and tied it to the end of her plastic broom, imagining herself walking along the railroad tracks and waiting to jump onto a passing train. But her mother heard the bang of the window opening and caught her, and as punishment took away all her sheets and blankets and made her sleep on her bare mattress. She even took away Scruffy, so that Christine spent the whole night wondering if she'd ever get him back, or if her mother would throw him away, as she always threatened to do.

Christine saw the door to the porch swing open so she put the car in drive and pulled down the driveway. She hadn't been home in six months, had even stayed in Boston for Christmas, and all morning guilt had sat low in her stomach, embedding its slivers into her soft tissue and making a home there—taking root. She got out of the car and stood blowing out her warm breath, watching it turn to vapor and drift away. Her younger brother Marc was out on the porch, smoking a cigarette. She dragged her

suitcase out from the backseat and he came down the stairs to take it from her, looking shy. His eyes and cheeks were sunken, aging him beyond his eighteen years. She swatted the cigarette out of his hands. “Are you stupid? Mum’s dying of cancer.”

“Yeah. Ovarian cancer.” He shoved his hands in his pockets, looking like he might cry. “It’s not good, Chrissy,” he said—he was the only one who called her that. “Just looking at her is so hard.” He put his arms around her. Though a year younger than her, he was at least four inches taller, and he had to bend down awkwardly. Christine breathed in his nicotine smell. “I’m glad you’re here,” he said. “We really need you.”

*Of course you need me*, Christine wanted to say. They were men, her three brothers and her father, in the strictest sense of the word. They could not be trusted to correctly identify their own emotions, or know what to do with them if they did. She was their ambassador into grief, their empty vessel; she would hold all of their pain. She would do the crying for them.

They went inside, her suitcase thumping against the doorframe. Marc was the only brother she spoke to regularly because she’d been responsible for him when they were children. When their mother sat at the table and put her head in her hands, that was Christine’s sign to make the older boys go outside and occupy Marc so she could shut herself in her room. While their mother slept, Christine built Marc forts out of blankets and kitchen chairs, and let him win at Go Fish to keep him from crying. The older boys wouldn’t play with him unless forced to. He’d been a premature baby, taking all of their mother’s attention for the first years of his life, and for this their older brothers resented him and bonded tightly only with each other.

“It’s been a while, kid,” John said when she walked into the living room. He wrapped his arms around her in a brief hug. “You forget how to get home or something?”

Christine rolled her eyes. “Very funny.” James was on the phone, talking to his wife, but he hugged Christine next, tangling the phone cord in her hair.

“How’s Mum doing?” she asked.

“She’s comfortable for now,” John said. “The doctors say there’s nothing else they can do, except make her comfortable.”

Christine sat down on the old couch and it sagged under her weight. She ran a hand over the dusky floral pattern. “Why didn’t anyone call me sooner?”

“She didn’t even tell *us* until a few weeks ago,” James said as he hung up the phone. “And, I don’t know. We just kept thinking she’d get better.”

“Maybe if you had called home once in a while, Mum would have told you,” Marc said, pushing out his lower lip.

Christine said nothing, leaning back against the couch and closing her eyes. She hadn’t talked to her mother in two months. She was one of those mothers—impossible to please, always criticizing but indirectly, disguising it as trivia, an interesting fact buried under guilt and accusations: *You know, your brothers manage to keep their rooms clean, and Most girls would have too much self-respect to go out with their hair looking like that.* Christine remembered being twelve years old and hearing her mother flippantly declare that no one would want to marry her, not with that mole on her neck and the way Christine played with it when she wasn’t thinking, pushing it flat against her skin and letting it spring back. Little girls remember those kinds of things, being deemed unfit for marriage. Later in life, when Christine’s date mistook the mole for a piece of food, she

had it removed, and her mother made a disdainful face at the scar and said, “That will never heal right.”

“Mum should be awake, if you want to go see her now,” Marc said. Christine opened her eyes.

“Has she said anything about me coming?” she asked.

“Not really,” Marc said. “But she hasn’t been talking a lot.”

“Maybe she doesn’t want to see me.”

“Of course she does,” John said. “Why would you say that?”

Christine looked down at her hands. She had picked all the skin off her cuticles on the drive to Maine, balancing her wrists on the top of the steering wheel and pulling nervously at herself, so that now the tips of her fingers were red and crimped, as if she’d kept them in water too long. “Things were different for you guys when we were growing up. Mum and I never got along. You know that.”

“Do you want me to come with you?” Marc asked. Christine shook her head and pushed herself up from the couch.

“No, I’m fine.” She moved toward the stairs, feeling that old tug—that familiar clench of the muscles—she used to get as a child when she’d done something wrong, and she wanted to flee like she did then to the cemetery at the end of the road. She used to stand in front of the marble angels and mimic their grieving poses, hands pressed together, eyes looking to the sky. Or she would hide behind the gravestones as James and John stood at the fence and shouted her name, sent there by their mother to call her back. She crouched behind the weather-pocked stones and traced her finger over the engraved name, believing that, out of everyone’s sight, she ceased to exist. *Out of sight, out of mind.*

\* \* \*

The stairs still creaked as they did when Christine was a child, when her mother stomped down in the afternoon, eyes bloodshot and squinted with fatigue, to shout at them all for waking her up. As Christine climbed the stairs to her mother's room, she felt as if she were walking backward into the past, and with each step she regressed a year, so that once she reached the top she was ten years old again and afraid of her mother's flinty expression, the way she held her mouth when she was disappointed, clenching it shut as if something were inside trying to pry it open. Outside the door she fixed her hair, pulled her shirt down straight and held her stomach in so it wouldn't bulge—there was no hiding the picked cuticles.

Christine tapped her knuckles to the old pine door and it swung open, her father's face filling her vision. "Christine," he said, bending his lips in a smile. "Haven't seen your face in a while." He moved back from the doorway and motioned her in.

"Hi, Dad," she said. She put her arms around him awkwardly. "It's good to see you."

Her father nodded briskly and pulled away. "You had a good drive up here? Not a lot of traffic?"

"The traffic wasn't bad," she said. She tried not to look at her mother propped up in bed behind him, the guilt in her stomach snaking up her throat. "It's an easy drive."

"Can't be that easy," her mother said. Her voice was quieter but still had the same timbre, as resonating as a timpani drum. She followed Christine's movements with her eyes, unsmiling. "If it was, you would've come home more often."

Christine hesitated in the middle of the room. “I’ve been busy,” she said, which was mostly true. “I don’t get a lot of time off work, plus I have class every day, and homework.” She glanced at the morphine drip leading into her mother’s arm and looked away.

Her mother puckered her lips in dissatisfaction. For a moment no one said anything and no one moved. Her mother seemed transparent, her stark frame only an outline under the quilt tucked over her. Before Christine left, her mother had never had a gray hair, but now her brown hair was peppered with them, so that she finally looked close to her age, forty-seven years old. She seemed hollowed out, like a gourd or a pumpkin—her insides gutted and her sides scraped clean, waiting for someone else to put something new inside her and make her meaningful.

“You going to stand there like that all day?” her mother finally said. Christine moved forward and lowered herself onto the edge of the bed, her weight wrinkling the quilt, which Carole, her mother’s sister, had made for her.

“How are you feeling?” Christine asked.

“How am I feeling,” her mother repeated, more slowly. She fixed her eyes on Christine, and she saw that her flinty expression was still there, sharp behind the gauze of pain. “I’m dying, Christine. How do you think I’m feeling?”

Christine didn’t know what to say. She shifted her weight and looked around her parents’ bedroom. It looked the same: framed prints of vases full of flowers on the walls, the roughly-hewn furniture her father had bought cheap hulking in the corners, the handmade curtains to match the quilt. It was the smell that was different. The rosy scent of her mother’s perfume, the spice of the apple cinnamon potpourri, were replaced by a

musky odor of body heat and stale breath, and the cloying antiseptic smell of an air freshener. The carnations in the vase on the bedside table had wilted and now emitted an earthy smell, like old vegetables. Propped against the vase was a wooden cross with a brass Jesus tacked to the front, his anguished face pointed toward the bed.

“How’s everything going down in Bean Town these days?” her father asked, filling the silence. “Anything changed since the last time we talked to you?”

She thought of Michael, the guy in her economics class she’d started seeing. He was dark-haired and heavy-lidded, like her father, but unguarded and eager in a way that her father was not. When she told him about her mother, he’d offered to come to Maine with her: “You don’t want to be driving alone at a time like this.” But she said no, afraid she might cry in front of him—they hadn’t been seeing each other long enough for that. He kissed her when she said no, and his mouth was soft and slippery, like the flesh of a ripe cantaloupe.

“No, everything’s about the same,” she answered. “I’m still waitressing at that restaurant, the Italian place, a few nights a week. My classes are all going good—a lot of work, but good.” She paused, glancing at her mother. “I got all As last semester.”

“You hear that, Theresa?” her father said. “She got all As.”

“I’m dying—I’m not deaf,” her mother said. “It’s not like she’s going to Harvard or anything.”

Christine’s chest tightened. Her father waved a hand at her mother in dismissal. “She’s been a little grouchy today. Don’t you worry about it.”

“No, it’s O.K.,” Christine said. “She has a right to be grouchy.” She leaned toward her mother, reaching for her hand. “Mum, I’m sorry I didn’t call you, or write you back. I really am.”

Her mother looked at her, her eyes clouding. Christine tightened her fingers around her mother’s hand, which was bony and cold under her own. “Things were just really busy for a while—I meant to call you. If you had just told me—”

“What, left it on your answering machine?” her mother said. She yanked her hand away. “I didn’t want you to call out of pity. I wanted you to want to talk to me.”

Christine opened her mouth but had nothing to say so she looked down at the bedspread. Her mother blinked hard. “Just as I thought.” She looked at Christine. “I’m feeling tired now. Please leave.”

Christine left the room and stood in the hallway, shaking with anger and rejection. James came up the stairs, carrying her suitcase to her bedroom. He stopped when he saw her and frowned.

“Was she asleep?”

Christine shook her head. “No, she was awake. She’s a little angry with me.”

“Why?” he asked.

Christine paused for a moment. “Mum’s been, uh, trying to get in contact with me for the past few weeks. She’s left me a couple messages, sent me a letter.”

James set her suitcase down on the floor, moving slowly. “And you didn’t talk to her?”

Christine filled her lungs and let the air out slowly. She shook her head.

“Jesus Christ, Christine,” he hissed. He pulled her away from her mother’s door.  
“So Mum calls you to tell you she’s dying—”

“She never said anything about that—”

“—And you don’t even call her back? Or write her a letter? She’s your *mother*, Christine.”

“You have no idea what went on between the two of us,” Christine said.

“We know that you just up and left, just like *that*,” James said, snapping his fingers. “And now you don’t even come home anymore. Like you’re too good for us here.”

“You know that’s not true,” she said. “You moved out a long time ago, got a wife, and kids. How’s what I’m doing any different?”

James sighed and pushed a hand through his hair. His face looked cavernous in the dark of the hallway, his jaw a cliff, his cheek a plateau. “I know she was never the best mother, but you still should have called her.” He looked over his shoulder at their mother’s door, and then went back downstairs.

Christine slept in her old room her first night back in Hanley. The upstairs was still drafty in the wintertime, and the heat still banged like a clumsy monster through the pipes as it had when Christine was a child—a sound that had once lulled her to sleep but now kept jumping her awake. Save for what she had boxed up herself before leaving, the room was decorated as she’d left it: gymnastics ribbons hanging on the wall, old stuffed animals arranged on the corner shelf, a David Cassidy poster tacked over her bed. She

was surprised to find her mother had moved nothing, as if she expected Christine to return. This hint of her mother's sentimentality made it hard for her to sleep.

In the morning she pushed her mother's door open without knocking. She stopped in the doorway, staring at her mother's body, naked to the waist and hunched in pain. Carole stood beside the bed, wringing a washcloth in her fingers. Her mother snapped her head in Christine's direction and gasped, "Get out."

Christine sucked air into her lungs, unable to tear her eyes from her mother, her nightgown pulled down, her breasts quivering with every motion.

"Stay and help me," Aunt Carole said, ignoring her sister's words. "There's another washcloth by the basin."

"No," her mother said. Pain clouded her eyes, but her steely expression was unmistakable. She was looking at Christine but spoke to Carole. "Make her leave. She can't see me like this."

Christine backed out of the room and closed the door. She stood there for a few minutes, trying to listen—for what?—and gather the courage to march back inside and take care of her mother the way her mother had never taken care of her. Instead she moved slowly down the stairs to the kitchen. No one was there. Her father, she'd learned, had taken to walking in the woods behind the house in the morning, to clear his head. James and John were probably at work; Marc worked nights as a stock boy and was still sleeping. Christine sat down at the table. She had homework she could do but she knew she couldn't concentrate on it. She'd always been a little afraid of her mother, but the sight of her vulnerable, aged beyond her years, scared her even more. They'd never been close, but she'd always foolishly assumed there would be time. She'd been waiting until

she could return home with a college degree, a good job, a husband and children, so that no matter what her mother said, Christine would know that she had done something right.

Christine was still sitting at the table, staring at her hands, when Carole came down the stairs. Without speaking, she filled a pot with water and put it on the stove. She scooped powdered cocoa mix into the bottom of two mugs, poured the steaming water in, and set one before Christine.

“You have to understand,” she said. She sat across from Christine. “She’s the mother, and you’re her child. She’s supposed to take care of you, not the other way around.”

Christine stirred her cocoa, her spoon creating a tiny constellation on the surface. She pulled her lips inward and pressed them together. “It’s not supposed to go like this. She’s supposed to live until she’s ninety. She’s supposed to insult my wedding dress, tell me how to raise my children, criticize my cooking. She’s supposed to make me miserable for years.”

They were silent for a moment, sipping their cocoa. Then Carole said quietly, “You really upset her, you know, by not getting in touch with her.”

Christine didn’t look up. “The last time I was here, she made it quite clear that she wanted nothing to do with me. I was still angry with her. I didn’t want to talk to her.”

“You need to cut her a little slack,” Carole said. “She knows she doesn’t have much time left, and she’s starting to realize the things she’s done wrong. She’s not the same person she used to be. Having to face death—it really changes a person.” Carole patted Christine’s free hand. “You should give her a chance.”

Christine looked up, swallowing hard. She tried to smile. “She’s got to let me into her room first.”

“Yes, that’s true,” Carole said. She looked down into her mug then back up at Christine, her expression serious again. “Christine, she’s asked for something, and I want you to know about it.”

“What is it?”

Carole put down her mug. “She wants the last rites.”

“What?” Christine stared at her.

“The last rites,” Carole repeated. “Your mother is Catholic, you know.”

“*Was* Catholic,” Christine corrected. Her father was a Protestant, and when they married they decided not to follow either religion. Christine still remembered her grandmother, her mother’s mother, telling her she was going to Hell. “She doesn’t believe that stuff anymore.”

“She promised our mother.”

Christine sat back in her chair, cradling her mug, feeling its dull warmth through the glazed ceramic. It was still early, and the morning light slanted across the porch and into the kitchen, leaving parts of the room in shadow. Her mother never talked much about her religion, though Christine remembered exclaiming, “Jesus Christ!” during a fight with her mother and getting slapped for it. She had always assumed it was because she had talked back, not because she had used the Lord’s name in vain. There was so much about her mother that she had never learned.

Christine leaned forward in her chair. “What do we have to do? Do we need a priest, or something?”

“Father Gosselin,” Carole said. “I’ll call him.”

“She hasn’t been to church in a while, you know.”

Her aunt nodded and smiled, almost serenely. “It doesn’t matter. Catholics can always come home.”

Every Sunday when Christine was a child they went to the beach, all piling into the station wagon and holding two doughnuts wrapped in plastic. Their father hated to wait in line so he woke them up early and grumbled as they dawdled at the door, suddenly remembering plastic shovels left in the backyard or fighting over whose sunglasses were whose. Their mother liked to get the same picnic spot, just over the wooden bridge where the rocks jutted out and made an inlet where Christine and her brothers could play. From the picnic table she could smoke a cigarette and watch as they turned themselves into seaweed monsters and scared crabs from under the rocks, tossing them into buckets and waiting for them to pull each other’s legs off. Christine remembered those trips as being the only times her mother seemed truly happy, smiling as they rolled around in the surf and their father grabbed them from under the water and catapulted them into the waves.

For Christine, the beach was just one more place to be held captive. Because Marc was small for his age and stricken almost constantly with ear infections or colds, she was forced to stay on the shore with him. While her older brothers and her father played in the water, she had to find hermit crabs for Marc, holding out her palm and letting them crawl to the edge of her fingers, always catching them with her other hand just before they fell.

Stranded on the beach, she stared out past the inlet at a tiny island, nothing more than a cluster of trees, where she imagined she might build herself a shelter, catch fish with her bare hands, and never have to babysit anyone again. Every Sunday she judged the distance, squinting into the sun, until she was sure she could make the swim.

One Sunday, when she was eight years old, while her mother was busy reading and her father scolding James and John, she left Marc playing on the beach and ran down the sand, out of sight. Then she dove into the water, pumping her limbs as fast as she could, her island bobbing in front of her, looking farther away than it had from the beach. She heard a yell; she'd been spotted. She looked back toward the beach and saw her father running into the waves. She stopped swimming, her toes grazing the bottom—she wasn't even over her head yet. Her father reached her in no time and grabbed her arm, pulling her toward the shore, where her mother stood fuming, throwing her hands up in the air and kicking up sand as she paced the beach.

No one said anything to Christine on the car ride home, but when they got inside her mother sent the boys upstairs to wash up and sat Christine down in the kitchen. She called Christine selfish for running away, irresponsible for leaving Marc by himself, stupid for thinking she could swim out so far. She gestured wildly with her hands and then slamming them palm-down on the table to get Christine's attention. "Did you want to drown, huh? Did you want to kill yourself?"

Christine mumbled, "You wouldn't care if I drowned. You're a bad mother, and I hate you."

Her mother suddenly fell silent. She put her hands on her hips. "Well, I hate you, too. So go ahead and drown, for all I care."

“It’d be better than living with you!” Christine stood up and made a move to run out of the kitchen, but her mother caught her arm and pulled her to the sink.

“You really think so?” she said, pinning Christine’s arms behind her back with one hand and filling up the sink with the other. “Here, see what it’s like and then you tell me which is better.” Before Christine could close her mouth, her mother dunked her head into the cold water. Her hand pushed down on the back of Christine’s skull, holding it down for what was only a few seconds, but in those seconds Christine tasted the congealed bits of last night’s dinner still stuck in the drain and the full extent of her mother’s misery. When her mother pulled her head up, Christine yanked out of her grip and stood, gasping and dripping in the middle of the kitchen, too shocked to speak.

It took years for Christine to realize that it was never about her—that she wasn’t a failure, or a disappointment, or a bad child—but that her mother was profoundly unhappy. Christine used to believe that her mother had used up all her maternal energies early, and, by the time she had Christine, she had nothing left to give. Only as an adult did Christine realize that motherhood was like priesthood, and without the call—without the appeal from above—you were just going through the motions. Just holding bread and wine above your head, asking people to believe it was something bigger.

After two days at home Christine called Michael. She pictured him sitting anxiously by the phone, waiting for her to call; the sound of his voice when he answered made her heart swell.

“Hi. It’s Christine,” she said.

“I’ve been waiting to hear from you,” he said, sounding almost breathless, as if he had run for the phone. “How’s your mother doing?”

Christine felt a tightness in the back of her throat, and she swallowed before she spoke. “Not so good. She’s in a lot of pain. I don’t know how long—” She stopped, feeling her throat constrict again. “I’m sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry,” he said. “This must be so hard for you.”

“It’s harder than I thought it would be,” Christine said. She sunk down onto a kitchen chair, pulling the phone cord behind her. “And she’s not really that happy to see me. She won’t even talk to me.”

“How come?”

Christine imagined his face, his half-moon eyes full of concern. “There’s just – a lot of history behind us. A lot of bad history. You don’t really want to hear about it.”

“Yes, I do,” he said. “I really do, Christine. I’m here for you.”

Christine’s eyes burned with tears of gratitude and grief. “Are you sure?”

He said he was, so she told him. She’d been in Boston for three months when she decided to go home and visit. It was September, right before her first semester of college. She’d been calling her mother once in a while, even once from a pay phone at the top of the Prudential Center just to tell her about the amazing view, but her mother only criticized everything and complained about her own life. Christine showed up at home unannounced, and her father and Marc were happy to see her, but her mother was sullen. “She’s just not feeling well—stomach pains,” her father told her. Christine cooked them all dinner, her father and brother asking her questions about Boston, their mouths half-full with chicken and potatoes. Her mother was quiet the whole time, picking at her food.

After dinner her father and Marc went to watch the news, and Christine and her mother were left alone in the kitchen to clear the table.

“Sounds like everything’s just fabulous in Boston, isn’t it?” her mother said, an undercurrent of resentment in her tone. “I mean, that hole in the wall you live in sounds completely filthy, but if it doesn’t bother you, then who am I to say anything?”

Christine scraped congealed potatoes off the plates and into the trash. “It’s really not that bad. You should come visit, if you want.”

“Oh, no, I don’t think so,” her mother said. She grabbed the pots and dragged them into the sink, turning on the faucet.

“Why not? You can take some time off work.” Christine’s mother worked part-time as a secretary at a hair salon. “I’m sure they won’t mind.”

“Because my job’s not that important?”

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it.” Christine carried the plates to the sink and set them on the counter. She looked at her mother’s hands plunged into the soapy water and remembered the day she tried to swim away. “What’s the matter with you? Are you mad at me or something?”

“No,” her mother said. Her hands moved around the inside of a pot, scraping at the rice. “I’m just tired. Sick and tired of this.” She slammed her hands against the pot and submerged it, letting it pop back up and soak the edge of the sink.

Christine grabbed the pot’s handle. “Well, then, let me do the dishes. I don’t mind—”

“It’s not about dishes,” her mother protested, pulling the pot out of Christine’s reach. “You know Angela Robbins, down the street? Her and her husband are going to

Aruba—Aruba!—for a week next month. Her kid is finally out of the house and she’s got money to go on vacation.”

Her mother dropped the sponge into the sink and turned to Christine. “Where’s my money for vacation? I’ve still got Marc here to feed and pay for, because he spends all his money on his stupid car, taking girls out to the movies. I don’t have any money, because I’ve spent it all on you, you kids, trying to make you happy.”

“Mum—” Christine said. But her mother was back to washing the dishes, scrubbing at the plates in a frenzy.

“And you know what? You weren’t even happy! So all of that money spent on new bikes and dress-up clothes, all for nothing. And now I’m stuck here, in this house, doing dishes.”

“I told you to let me do the dishes,” Christine said, making a move for the sponge.

“It’s not about dishes, I said!” Her mother pushed Christine’s hand away with enough force that Christine staggered backward into the counter. Her mother kept scrubbing and talking, as if Christine weren’t there. “I guess only having one kid to support means money to go to Aruba.”

“What, so now you’re saying you wish you only had one kid?” Christine snorted.

Her mother didn’t say anything right away. She rinsed the last plate and put it in the dish drainer. Then she turned to Christine, her eyes cold, her voice steely calm. “No, I wish I had none. No kids.”

Christine gaped at her mother, unable to form a response. Her mother looked at her, and when she spoke, her voice was eerily quiet. “Do you know why I married your father? Because I was pregnant with James. And I was your age. I was just 19 years old. I

couldn't tell my parents I'd committed a mortal sin. So I married him. And now, here I am, twenty-five years later, in this same kitchen, doing dishes."

Christine felt her lungs turn to iron in her chest. She stared at her mother, taking one step away from her, then another, and another, until she turned and walked out of the house.

Michael was quiet on the other end of the phone line, but Christine could hear his breathing and knew he was still there. "So," she continued, clearing her throat, "when my mother called me a few weeks later, I was still too angry at her to speak to her. And when she wrote me that letter to apologize, I thought that was the end of it. But now I know she was trying to tell me she was dying." She wiped her eyes on the back of her palm.

"I'm so sorry," Michael said. "Listen, I know that you're still hurt, and that she doesn't deserve your forgiveness. But if she dies, and you don't get the chance to mend things with her, you'll regret it for the rest of your life."

"I know," Christine said. She suddenly saw her father standing in the doorway, looking at her expectantly. "I will talk to her. I promise. I'll call you soon." Christine said goodbye and hung up the phone.

She put her elbows on the kitchen table and rested her forehead against her palms. She heard her father's footsteps moving toward her, and she glanced up at him. He sat down across the table, looking weary.

"How much of that did you hear?" she asked him.

“Enough,” he said. “What she said about us getting married, she’s said before, when she’s feeling depressed, or angry. I know she doesn’t really mean it. And especially what she said about you kids—it’s not true.”

Christine said nothing, looking down at the table.

“Christine, I know you’re mad at her,” he said. “And I know you think that she doesn’t care about you.”

Christine opened her mouth, but her father waved away her answer.

“When your mother was in the hospital getting her treatments, do you know what she talked about? She told all the doctors and all the nurses about her genius daughter, going to school in Boston. The first college student in the family.”

Christine felt her chest tighten, her breath catch in her lungs. “She really said that?”

Her father nodded. She didn’t say anything for a moment. She stared at the tufts of her father’s graying hair, the gut straining under his flannel shirt. “But she told me – she said that–”

“You know she didn’t mean that,” her father said. “She was jealous, because you had something she didn’t. You were happy.”

Christine thought she felt her heart turn over, thumping against her ribs. “I’m sorry I haven’t been home for a while. I should have visited.”

Her father nodded and stood up, hovering over her awkwardly for a moment. He started to turn as if to leave, but then he leaned down and put his arms around her. She breathed in his scent, like soap and pine, sharp and consoling.

\* \* \*

Christine knocked on her mother's door, and when she heard nothing, she pushed it open slowly. Her mother's eyes were closed, but when she heard the squeak of the door's hinges she opened them. Christine walked halfway into the room and stopped.

"How are you feeling today?" she asked her, venturing a few steps forward.

Her mother pulled herself into a sitting position, wincing at the motion. "O.K., I suppose," she said. Her voice sounded strained, and when she breathed waspy sounds came from her throat, like the vibrations of a kazoo

Christine moved to the edge of the bed and eased down onto it, careful not to disturb her mother. "Is there anything I can do?"

"You're hiding something," her mother began, but she didn't say anything more right away, and the words hung in the air between them. Her mother coughed into her closed fist, and Christine waited, breathless. "You're seeing someone. Your father said he heard you on the phone with him."

Christine let out her breath, a smile creeping across her lips. "Well, actually, I am kind of seeing someone."

"And you didn't bring him with you? Who are you ashamed of, your family, or him?" her mother asked, arching her eyebrows at Christine.

"Neither," Christine said. "We just haven't been seeing each other very long."

"Not long enough for him to go to a funeral with you, you mean," her mother said wryly. "Tell me about him."

Christine had never told her mother much about the boys she had dated, afraid that her inevitable negativity would infect the relationship. She took a breath. “His name is Michael. I met him in my economics class last semester. He’s very sweet, and polite, and charming. And he does this thing where he waggles his hips like Elvis whenever I’m stressed out, to make me laugh.”

Her mother was nodding. “Well, he sounds very nice, in a simple kind of way.”

“I think you’d like him,” Christine said, even though she wasn’t sure that was true. “You’d like him a lot.”

They sat in silence for a moment. Christine listened to her mother’s labored breathing, watched her eyes close—not peacefully in rest but clenched hard, eyelids bunching, accentuating the wrinkles of middle age that had begun to form. Her thumb was moving like a metronome, constantly pushing the button for morphine. She would not live much longer.

Christine reached out and placed a hand on her mother’s shoulder. She opened her eyes, blinking for a moment to clear them. “Don’t worry—I’m still alive,” she said.

“Mum, I wanted to tell you,” Christine said, her breath catching in her throat. “That I’m sorry. I’m sorry you were never really happy.”

Her mother shook her head in a slow, pained motion. “It wasn’t your fault. It wasn’t anyone’s fault but my own.” She put her hand on top of Christine’s, and her skin was translucent as tissue paper, blue and veined as a baby bird. She fixed her gaze on Christine, and it was cool and steady.

“And I’m sorry, too,” she said. “I’m sorry I didn’t always love you.”

Christine looked at her mother. “I’m sorry I didn’t always love you, either,” she said.

Her mother smiled then, just a small tug of her upper lip. She leaned back and rested her head on the top of the pillow, closing her eyes. “I don’t blame you for leaving, you know,” she said. “I would have left too, if I could have. I just never had a way out.”

She sat forward and opened her eyes. “Now I finally do.” Her mouth was still smiling but her eyes had grown milky and vague, like the eyes of the angels in the cemetery—suddenly looking like someone Christine could have loved.

When her mother died three days later Christine consoled her brothers, and hugged her father, and cried with Carole and James’ wife, and all three of them laughed at their smudged mascara. She mailed the obituary her father had written to the Hanley Daily Record, along with a photo of her mother in her thirties, sitting at the beach, holding her sunhat on her head with one hand and holding a cigarette in the other, which Christine had cropped out. She ordered the flowers and made sure there were no lilies because her mother hated the smell, and she told the undertakers not to put any coral or salmon lipstick on her—light pink lipstick was for little girls playing dress-up, her mother always said.

She called Michael and told him, and in four hours he was standing in her driveway with a package of muffins and orange juice. She walked outside to greet him and he enveloped her in a hug, swaying her side-to-side. “I’m so sorry,” he said, releasing her. “How are you doing?”

Christine had been smiling before but as Michael looked down at her with his doleful eyes, his mouth pushed out in sympathy, she began to cry. He put his arms around her again, pressing the package of muffins into her back. She felt his mouth on her temple.

“Chrissy?” Marc was inside, yelling for her. Christine wiped at her eyes.

“He can’t see me like this,” she said. Michael frowned at her, but she insisted, “He can’t see me crying. I’m supposed to be the strong one. Come on.”

She grabbed Michael by the arm and pulled him across the yard. They crunched through the snow, crusty on the top from days of melting sun and nights of freezing cold. Michael trampled behind her. “Where are we going? I’m holding muffins and juice, you know.”

Christine led him to the cemetery at the end of the road without a word. The headstones were capped in snow, the older ones leaning at precarious angles, pushed over like cardboard. The sky was so pale it was almost white, and the setting sun made the clouds pink, like a child’s dream. Michael followed her to the middle of the cemetery where her favorite angel stood gazing mournfully down at whoever lay beneath her feet, her marble face freckled with age.

“This,” she said, opening up her arms to encompass the whole scene, “is where I like to hide.” She looked toward her house, wondering if her brothers would still come looking for her out here, without their mother to tell them to.

“It’s very quiet,” Michael said. He had set the muffins and juice on the base of the angel and was studying her inscription. “But what are we hiding from?”

Christine said nothing, her eyes still looking across the frozen grass to her house. She remembered reading somewhere about babies playing peek-a-boo and how they

thought that their mothers, hiding behind their hands, actually disappeared. *Out of sight, out of mind.* She heard the porch door slam shut and saw Marc on the stairs, walking curiously toward Michael's car. She grabbed Michael's arm and tugged him behind the angel with her, crouching down so her eyes were level with the angel's feet.

"Come here," she said. "Duck down."

Michael crouched obligingly beside her, glancing around. "O.K., but why are we hiding?"

Their faces were level, and she could feel his warm breath on her ear. She turned quickly and took his face in her hands. "It's O.K.," she said. "They'll never see us."



## *Sophie and Lucy*

### **Messy Love**

It was supposed to be relaxing—at least that’s what the girl said before sitting Sophie down in an oversized velour chair and shoving her feet into a big bowl of warm chocolate. “The drawing aspects of clay and the anti-oxidants of chocolate may help soothe soreness, edema, and headaches,” the girl recited lazily, rubbing her chocolate-covered hands over Sophie’s calves. Sophie read her nametag and called her Anna, but it was *Ahn-na*, the girl quickly corrected, opening her mouth in an exaggerated oval. “Like *Iv-ahna* Trump.” Or *ahn-unciate*, Sophie thought, listening to her affected speech about Ayurvedic treatments and finding one’s dosha. Sophie’s mother and sister nodded along, sipping their jasmine green tea, as if they knew what dosha meant. Weren’t they those Japanese women who painted their faces white and slept with men? Sophie curled her toes, squishing the chocolate between them.

“Please, don’t move,” Anna scolded, gripping Sophie’s ankles. “Not until I’ve finished your *cahlf massahge*.”

Sophie stared at the miniature rock waterfall in front of her. A foot sanctuary and teahouse—Sophie had never heard of such a thing, though Lucy had insisted they were all the rage on the West Coast. “Tea is relaxing, foot soaks are relaxing—who doesn’t need a little relaxing?” she’d said. Lucy had been a coffee drinker for as long as Sophie could remember, and her feet had always been too ticklish to let anyone even paint her toenails. Marriage had changed her, even before it happened—the guarantee of an eternal bond had calmed her sister so that she could now stop, relax, and bask in the assurance of

being loved. Sophie still had to go to coffee shops with a copy of *The New Yorker* and struggle to read and sip and pose attractively all at the same time. She'd never meet guys with her feet stuck in a vat of liquefied Hershey bars.

"Isn't this great?" her mother said, resting her head back against the beige couch she and Lucy were sharing. She had her feet stewing in a mixture of Maine seaweed and spirulina, which they discovered was just a pretty name for algae—"important in drawing out impurities, fortifying the skin, and promoting the breakdown of cellulite." Talking with her mother and sister while a stranger kneeled in front of them made Sophie feel intrusive and exploitative, like a tourist. Geishas, Sophie remembered. Geishas wore the white makeup and slept with men.

Anna finished massaging Sophie's calves and moved on to her mother. "What do you think they'll do with this chocolate now?" Sophie asked, looking down at her submerged feet, her legs cut off at the ankles. "I don't think I'm going to order dessert."

"Sophie," Lucy hissed. She motioned urgently with her eyes to Anna. "I think this is quite relaxing. God, what a hectic week—what a hectic month! I wouldn't mind just staying here until the wedding."

The wedding was in three days and Lucy had split herself into two people: blissfully-in-love-Lucy and dissatisfied-perfectionist-bride-Lucy. The former gushed about her fiancé, Eric, with reckless abandon, and the latter called up florists and shouted things like, "I don't care about your other clients—this is *my* wedding." Sophie had decided that, if the position existed, her sister—who flourished on attention and handled large crowds with ease—would make an excellent professional bride. Instead of being the

wedding planner, she could be the bride stand-in, walking down the aisle and cutting the cake while the real bride took a nap or put her feet in a bowl of chocolate seaweed.

Her mother raised her head. “Now, did you make sure to call Cindy at the inn back, because she had a question about which direction you wanted to walk—”

“Oh, Mom, let’s not talk about the wedding, please,” Lucy said. She poured herself another cup of tea from the pot beside the couch. “I just need a few more minutes of wedding-free relaxation.” She turned to Sophie. “Tell us about your job. How’s that going?”

“Oh, the same.” Sophie worked at a seafood processing company, not even a year old, thrown together slipshod in an old shoe factory and already floundering—no pun intended. Only the week before, a typographical error had resulted in the loss of thousands of dollars of product, spoiled in the cooler before it was shipped; during the argument that followed, the production manager had given his assistant a bloody nose. Both were promptly fired. Only a week ago, the company’s owner had discreetly asked Sophie to deliver an envelope to a young woman who worked as a waitress across the street. She opened it in front of Sophie—a \$25,000 check. The production guys told Sophie later that the waitress had caught him in his parked car, staring at her through the restaurant window and jacking off. Upon hearing this information, Sophie stopped wearing skirts to work.

“I’m designing some product labels right now, for when we go retail,” Sophie said. It was mostly a lie; she was only in charge of printing the labels, and they weren’t going to go retail for a while yet. She was hired as a marketing assistant but often found herself in the walk-in cooler, shivering in her blouse as she counted tubs of shucked

clams—or, worse still, in the production room tearing lobster claws apart at the joints and poking the uncooked meat, gelatinous and slick, from the shell so that it slid out in one whole piece. She had wiped lobster juices from her pumps so often that she started bringing a pair of sneakers to work and keeping them under her desk. When her family asked her about her job, she did not mention any of this.

“Are those skeezy guys leaving you alone?” her mother asked. “You’ve talked to your boss about them by now, I hope.”

“It’s fine—they’re fine,” Sophie said.

“What skeezy guys?” her sister asked.

“Oh, just some of the guys at work,” Sophie said. She thought she saw Anna glance at her, her hands pausing on her mother’s ankles. “They’re a little...rough around the edges.”

“You talked to your boss?” her mother repeated.

“Not exactly,” Sophie said. Her mother gave her a reproachful stare.

“They’re just being friendly,” Sophie continued. “Plus, they haven’t said anything to me for a while. I’ve got it under control.”

“You can’t be afraid to stand up for yourself,” her mother said. “You have to be assertive these days, especially a pretty young woman like you. You know,” her mother kept going, refilling Sophie’s teacup, “when that man at Lucy’s office kept bothering her, she told him flat-out to stop, or she’d push harassment charges on him. And it worked, didn’t it, Luce?”

Lucy nodded. “Mom’s right; don’t be afraid to put them in their place. God, that feels good.” Anna was massaging Lucy’s feet now, and Lucy leaned her head back,

letting out a contented sigh. Anna looked up at Sophie, her hands still moving under her sister's citrus honey soak.

"Your mother and sister are right," she said. "A woman's body is her temple, and you cannot allow any man to desecrate it with his words or with his eyes." Anna looked at her pointedly through her purple mascara-ed lashes.

Sophie grabbed her teacup so she could stare into it. "Yes, thank you," she mumbled. "A woman's temple, very...sacred. Yes. Why don't we talk about something else?"

"Oh!" Lucy said, starting up and almost spilling her tea. "You will not believe how adorable Bree, Eric's little niece, is in her flower girl dress. We were trying to show her last night how to throw the flower petals, but we didn't have any, so we ripped up some lettuce and put it in her Legos bucket. She was *so* cute!"

Sophie's mother was smiling. Sophie said, "I thought you didn't want to talk about the wedding."

Lucy waved her free hand in Sophie's direction. "Even if I don't *want* to talk about it, I just can't help it." She looked down at Anna for validation. "Sorry, Soph, but for another three days, you'll have to get used to it. You'll understand, when it's your turn."

"I'm sure I will." Sophie slouched in her chair, sloshing chocolate over the edge of the oversized bowl. She lifted one dripping foot out and held it toward her mother and Lucy. "Anyone want to lick it off?"

Lucy rolled her eyes. She turned toward their mother and whispered, as if they were confidantes. "I don't think Sophie's enjoying this, do you?" (7 minutes)

\* \* \*

Lucy's fiancé was cooking dinner when they came home, and their mother's eyes widened at the sight of someone else using her kitchen.

"Hi, all," Eric called over his shoulder. "I hope those foot soaks put you in the mood for stir fry."

"I'm in the mood for anything I don't have to cook myself," Sophie said. She didn't admit that she usually ate Stouffer's macaroni and cheese three nights a week.

Eric grabbed the pan handle and shook it expertly. He glanced into the pot on the back burner. "Luce, come give me a hand, why don't you?"

"You know I can't cook," she said, but she wandered over to the stove and picked up a wooden spoon.

"Here, stir this pasta," Eric said. "A little slower—like that." As she stood stirring, Lucy smiled up at him, and he leaned over and kissed her quickly on the head. Sophie looked away.

"Hello, ladies," her father said, coming into the kitchen. He stood beside Sophie at the island countertop. "How was your spa day?"

"It was interesting," Sophie said judiciously.

"Sophie didn't like it," Lucy said.

"I never said that."

Her father nudged her with his elbow. "Why not?" he asked. "I'm sure you needed a little relaxation, with all the hours you're putting in at work."

“I really don’t think you should spend any more time there than necessary, especially with those guys harassing you,” Sophie’s mother said. She was standing anxiously beside the stove, watching Eric cook, as if she might grab the pan and do it herself.

“No, Mom, I said it’s fine,” Sophie said. “No one’s harassing me.”

“Well, as long as everything is fine,” her father said. He walked into the living room and Sophie frowned at his pants.

“Any of them cute?” Lucy asked, balancing the wooden spoon across the top of the pot.

“The guys at work? No,” Sophie said. “Most of them are in their thirties or older. But they act like twenty-year-olds, if that makes a difference.”

“Any thirty-five-year-old interested in a twenty-three-year-old is only after one thing,” Sophie’s mother said. She leaned forward and narrowed her eyes. “Sex,” she added, as if they hadn’t known.

“Speaking of acting like twenty-somethings,” Sophie said, going to stand next to her mother, “is Dad wearing cargo pants?”

Her mother rolled her eyes. “They’re new, and I hate them.”

Lucy was laughing. “Yeah, and Mom thinks they’re...what did you say, Mom?”

“They’re too *gangster*,” her mother said, which made Lucy laugh harder. “But he says they’re practical. The extra pockets hold his keys and his cell phone.” She put her hands up in a motion of desperation.

“Does he wear them to school?” Lucy asked. “Because then he might be wearing the same pants as his students.”

“I guess we should only really worry when he starts wearing them down around his butt so his underwear shows,” Sophie said.

“As long as he doesn’t wear a cargo tux to the wedding,” Eric suddenly spoke up. “Or, what if he gets cargo pockets sewn onto his pants?” He grinned at his own joke, looking around at the three women. Sophie smiled politely.

Lucy patted his arm. “Just cook, dear.”

Lucy and Eric were at a standstill on I-95. They were driving to the airport to pick up Eric’s best man, who had flown to Ohio for his grandfather’s funeral and was just now returning to Maine, two days before the wedding. Up ahead of them flashed blue lights—some kind of accident—and they hadn’t moved more than fifty feet in half an hour. The radio was on, not very loud, and Lucy was driving, tapping her hands on the steering wheel.

“Could you stop that, please?” Eric said. He was resting his right elbow on the car door and leaning against his hand.

“Sorry,” Lucy said, putting her hands under her thighs. “Anxious habit, I guess.”

Eric didn’t say anything. It was August and the sun was glancing off the metal roofs of the cars in front of them, blinding. Eric was usually good-humored, but he was impatient in situations out of his control. That had been one of the things that had first attracted Lucy—his take-charge attitude, so impressive at restaurants, baseball games, or anywhere else he could swoop in and talk his way out of a forty-minute wait or seats behind a pole. But now she realized Eric lacked the capability to roll with the punches, as

her father might say—to take lemons and make lemonade, as her mother might say. Or to take the stick out of his ass, as her best friend Carrie might say.

“I told you we should have left earlier,” Eric said, his face turned away from her so he was talking to the seatbelt. He also tended to transfer blame to avoid taking personal responsibility for his actions, as Dr. Phil might say.

Lucy sighed. Why had she even come? Because they were a soon-to-be-married couple and they should want to do everything together. And because she had been hoping to swing by the bridal shop on the way to the airport and buy a tiara for Eric’s niece to wear, the only bribe that had convinced the four-year-old to be their flower girl. Now she’d have to go after they picked up Steve and listen to Eric complain: “Haven’t we spent enough on this wedding?”

The wedding was going to be at an inn by the ocean, overlooking the rocky coast. Eric was originally from Connecticut, but he and his parents had been vacationing at the Driftwood Inn since he was a child. They’d met there last summer, when she went to write a piece on the inn’s 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary for the Hanley Daily Record. He’d been the only person there under the age of fifty so Lucy interviewed him and found out he was visiting his vacationing parents and that he’d recently moved to the state’s capital to work in the Attorney General’s office. At the end of the interview he boldly gave her his phone number in case she needed any more information for the article. She called him when the story ran, and though she wondered if it compromised journalistic ethics, she asked him to dinner. At dinner, he was better than she remembered: smart, a bit goofy, confident. At one point he’d leaned across the table and told her, quite unabashedly, that he liked her.

Lucy, surprised and suddenly nervous, told him that she liked her salmon and offered him a bite off her fork.

These were the things Carrie had told her to list: his sweetness, his willingness to please, the slow thump of his runner's heartbeat, constant and comforting in the dark. When she started to worry about marrying him, she could pull out the list and remember why she had said yes after only eight months of dating. "You're twenty-eight years old," Carrie had said the last time Lucy ended up breathless on her couch, making her put her head between her knees. "We're not high school kids waiting to grow up. We're adults now. What is there to wait for?" Lucy hadn't written out the list for fear that Eric might find it, but she had it in her head, and she ran through it now in the car.

"I told you to stop doing that," Eric said. Lucy had been tapping her hands against the steering wheel again.

"Sorry," she said. The cars inched forward, and she let her foot off the brake, but her speedometer hadn't even hit ten miles an hour before brake lights started cascading down the line of cars. Lucy hit the brakes again, apologizing for the traffic. Eric only sighed and ran his hand through his hair. That was on Lucy's list, too: the way his hair stuck up on top of his head after he pushed it back and he never noticed.

Lucy had ended a four-year relationship when she met Eric and had vowed not to jump into another one right away. "Play the field," Carrie said. "Casual sex is way underrated." It only took a few awkward morning-afters and one blurry escapade in a bar bathroom for Lucy to realize that she was not cut out for playing the field. She didn't want Eric to be a rebound—a soft place for her to fall—so she took it slow, refusing to let him come inside so many times that on their fifth date, in the middle of a bar, he declared,

“You don’t want anything to do with my penis, do you?” It was too soon to tell him about her ex, how she had waited four years for him to offer her some kind of lasting commitment, but he had seemed more content bouncing from job to job and playing video games in her apartment. “Do you want to marry me or not?” she’d asked him, standing in front of the television. “Yeah, someday,” he said, but instead of getting up and kissing her, he craned his neck to see around her, and Lucy knew she would waste her life waiting for him.

“You know, honey,” Lucy said now. “This is one of our last times together as just boyfriend and girlfriend.” She smiled at him and reached over to put her hand on his knee. “You’ll have to call me Mrs. Colson soon.”

Eric turned to her, smiling back. “Or I could just call you the ol’ ball-and-chain.”

“Ooh, very original,” Lucy said, squeezing his knee to tickle him. “You better be careful, or I’ll have to leave you at the altar.”

His eyes widened. “Hey, now, that’s not funny. My cousin got left at the altar. It was horrible. He didn’t even get to keep the presents.”

Lucy leaned over and kissed Eric on the cheek, keeping one eye on the road. “You have nothing to worry about,” she told him. “Like it or not, you’re stuck with me.”

Traffic started to move again, steady now, and they finally passed the accident. They both peered out the windshield at the car overturned in the grass, another car with its hood bent like an accordion, wondering if someone had died.

\* \* \*

On a hot, dusty day when Lucy was nine years old, she got married on the playground to a blond, chunky boy named Andy Geffkin. The wedding was down in the sandy part of the playground, where the older boys played baseball and the older girls stood watching and giggling. Lucy had taken the pillowcase off her bed and fastened it with bobby pins to her hair, looking more nun-like than bride-like. As the fourth-graders gathered to watch, Carrie gave Lucy her old pencil, her new pencil, a blue scrunchie, and a New Kids on the Block cassette tape she'd borrowed from her sister. Andy stood with the other boys, kicking up dirt and wiping sweat from his forehead. Carrie tossed handfuls of dandelion heads she'd pulled up over the sand, and then Lucy, the blue scrunchie around her wrist and the New Kids on the Block tape poking out of her pocket and jabbing into her stomach, took halting steps down the aisle toward Andy. She made it halfway before a teacher intervened, telling them that they had plenty of years to enjoy being little girls before getting married. "Mr. Morris," Lucy had said, hands on her hips, elbows jutting out, "I *know* what I'm doing."

Sophie listened to Lucy and Carrie tell that story now as they sat in the bar with Lucy's friends, drinking Cosmopolitans and celebrating Lucy's last night as an unmarried woman.

"Even when we were little, all Lucy wanted to do is get married," Carrie was saying. She raised her glass. "I propose a toast to Lucy, for finally getting her wedding. And, thank God, for marrying someone hotter than Andy Geffkin."

They all laughed and clinked glasses, liquor spilling over the rims. Lucy was wearing a T-shirt that Carrie had had made that said in sparkly pink letters, *I'm the Bride!* and a matching pink tiara. Carrie was right. Her sister had always loved weddings and

always cried at ones she went to, especially if the groom got teary-eyed at any point during the ceremony. At weddings, Sophie usually complained about her pantyhose and made fun of the bride for thinking she was so original in choosing that passage from 1 Corinthians, about love being patient and kind, for her obscure cousin to read and blubber over.

“Sophie! Do a shot with your sister!” Carrie was dragging Lucy to the bar, pulling on her shirt so that it wrinkled and said *I’m he ride!* Sophie walked over and sat down on a barstool next to her sister.

“What are we drinking?” she asked.

“Tequila shots?” Lucy asked. Sophie shook her head.

“Oh, I know,” Carrie said. “Blow job shots. Because once you’re married, you’ll never have to give one again.”

Lucy giggled and slapped Carrie on the arm. “O.K., fine, blow job shots. You know what that is, right, Soph?”

“Oh, c’mon,” Carrie said, motioning for the bartender. “Just because she’s your baby sister doesn’t mean she’s a baby.” She slid the shot of Kahlua and Amaretto toward Sophie, the whipped cream jiggling. “Let’s see those skills.”

“I feel kind of dirty, doing this with my little sister,” Lucy said. But she put her hands behind her back, wrapped her mouth around the glass, and tilted her head back. Sophie did the same, the glass clinking against her teeth.

“Not bad,” Carrie said. “I see you take after your sister.” Lucy giggled again.

Sophie rolled her eyes. “Shouldn’t you be acting more mature, Mrs. Colson? We should be swirling wine around and eating chèvre or something.”

Lucy leaned toward Sophie, pointing a finger at her. “Hey, I’m not Mrs. Colson for another eighteen hours. And until then,” she waved her hand toward the bartender, “keep those drinks coming.”

“Not for me,” Sophie said. “I’m driving you home.”

Four drinks and three hours later, and Lucy and her friends were loudly sharing the details of their sexual pasts. Lucy had been flirting with a group of middle-aged men, coyly trying to get them to buy her drinks. “It’s the last time another guy can buy a drink for me!” she justified it to Sophie. To cool off, she’d tied her T-shirt into a knot at the bottom and the men kept eyeing her navel.

“Sorry, gentlemen, but no more drinks for her tonight,” Sophie said, holding her sister by the shoulders. The men groaned. “She’s getting married tomorrow, and she should probably be conscious enough to remember the guy’s name.”

“His name is Eric—EricJonathanColson,” Lucy said, slurring the syllables together. “Mrs. Eric Jonathan Colson.” She turned to look at Sophie, her eyelids drooping. “Do you think I should hyphenate it?”

“Only if hanging onto a shred of your identity is important to you,” Sophie said, leading her sister to the table.

“Oh, Sophie, so cynical,” Lucy said. “No, wait—let’s go outside for a second. I need some air.”

Out on the bar’s patio, Lucy guzzled the glass of water Sophie had given her. She wiped her mouth on her hand and then leaned back against the railing, looking hard at Sophie.

“Can you believe I’m getting married tomorrow?” she said. “I can’t. I mean, I can but I can’t, you know? All those months of planning, the time, the pretty dress—poof! It’ll all be over.”

“Yes, but then you’ll have the honeymoon, and then all the newlywed firsts: your first weekend together as a married couple, your first house, your first kid.” Sophie stood beside her sister and pressed her back to the railing. “And don’t forget your first sex as Mr. and Mrs. I hear married sex is the best.”

Lucy swatted her arm. “I can’t have my little sister talking to me about”—she lowered her voice and hid her mouth behind her hand—“S-E-X. Besides,” she continued, grinning and waggling her eyebrows, “the sex is already pretty good. I don’t think it can get better!” She dropped her jaw in mock astonishment.

“O.K., now, I can’t have any of *that*,” Sophie said, putting up her hands and stepping backward. “Too much information, thank you.”

Lucy giggled and slurped at the water, taking out a piece of ice and chewing on it. “I don’t know,” she said. “I mean, I love Eric so much, and I’m so excited to share my life with him, but sometimes, when I think about things, they just seem a little off. You know what I mean?”

Sophie looked at her and shook her head.

“I always thought I’d be married by now,” Lucy continued, cracking the ice cube with her teeth. “I wanted to have my first kid by the time I was twenty-eight. And I want to be married at least a year before we have kids. I don’t know,” she said again.

“So you have your first kid when you’re twenty-nine,” Sophie said. “What’s wrong with that?”

Lucy looked up at Sophie, her eyes serious. “Sometimes I just wonder, what if I had stayed with Nick? We could have been married for two years now. We could have had a kid.”

Sophie touched her sister’s arm. “Lucy, please, tell me you’re not regretting leaving that asshole. You were so unhappy with him.”

“Not in the beginning,” Lucy said, pouting a little.

“Yeah, but, you know he never would have committed to you,” Sophie said.

Lucy was shaking her head. “He wanted to. I saw him, you know, only a month before Eric proposed to me.”

Sophie said nothing. Lucy wasn’t looking at her but looking toward the parking lot, her hair blowing in her mouth.

“He tracked me down and told me that he’d been stupid to let me go, and that he was willing to marry me right then and there. He even had a ring.”

“Are you serious?” Sophie gasped.

Lucy nodded. “I told him that I was very happy without him, but, I don’t know. Seeing him, it just made me wonder. What if I didn’t make the right choice?” She let out a snort and shook her head. “I always imagined that when I walked down the aisle, I’d be walking towards him, you know?”

Sophie turned to stand in her sister’s line of sight, taking her by the shoulders. “Lucy, I know you’re kind of drunk right now, and that you probably don’t mean any of this. But Nick, he’s just the one who got away. Every girl has a Nick, and they’re hard to get over. But you don’t want to be with him. When I see you and Eric together, you look happy, Luce—really happy.”

Lucy was nodding, her eyes wet. She swiped at them with the back of her hand. “No, you’re right, Sophie. I do love him. And we’ll be happy together. Right?”

“Of course,” Sophie said. She wrapped her arms around her sister, and the glitter from her sister’s shirt rubbed off on Sophie’s.

Lucy awoke well before dawn and lay in bed, waiting for the sun to rise. Her mouth tasted faintly of alcohol, and her arms were speckled with pink glitter. She was nearly certain she remembered everything that had happened the night before, but she had a sinking feeling that she had said more than she meant to. Why had she been thinking about Nick, the night before her wedding? She ran through the list of things she loved about Eric again: his sweetness, his smile, the swirling thing he did with his tongue on her earlobe. She got up and took her wedding dress out of the closet. Running her hands over the satin fabric usually calmed her.

In the few hours before her wedding Lucy finally realized what it was she had been missing. With Nick, everything had felt irrational and unplanned: middle of the night drives to nowhere, spontaneous purchases they usually returned, loud fights with even louder make-up sex. Even the uncertainty of their future had held an allure for her. Every day she woke up resolving to prove to him why he should propose, why he should never leave her. She’d always hated the drama of it, hated the messy love, but wasn’t it the uncertainty, the fear of loss that propelled you forward? Lucy thought she could understand how the security of marriage could make people lazy and uninterested, so that they turned to television and watched other people’s drama for excitement.

But isn't security what she'd found in Eric—what she'd wanted? After she broke up with Nick, she'd wanted a stable, comfortable relationship with someone who she could count on to pay the bills on time, rinse his plates before putting them in the dishwasher, be a good father. She'd found grown-up love. It wasn't messy or complicated or exhilarating. She'd been on a rollercoaster with Nick—where the ups were thrilling and the downs miserable—but now she was in the go-kart, where the track was level and she knew how fast to take the turns.

The sun finally came up, and Lucy was glad to see a cloudless sky. In her head she'd already planned out how they'd fit everything into the small reception room if it rained. She was back in bed, watching the sun stream through the slits in the blinds.

“Hey, you awake?” Sophie poked her head into the bedroom. “You're not hung over, are you?”

Lucy sat up and shook her head. “No, thanks to you. I think Carrie would have let me drink into oblivion.”

“What are little sisters for?” Sophie smiled but her voice sounded hesitant. Lucy studied her expression.

“Sorry if I got a little out of control last night,” she said, smoothing the bedcovers over her legs. “My last night to be a crazy single girl, I guess.”

“That's what a bachelorette party is for,” Sophie said cautiously. She moved toward Lucy and sat down on the edge of the bed. She opened her mouth, but then closed it again and picked up a pillow. Lucy watched as she pulled at a loose thread, twisting it around her finger.

“When I drink like that, I just start talking and I don’t shut up,” Lucy said. “Just rambling on about nothing. I don’t even remember half of what I say, usually.”

Sophie nodded. The unsaid hung in the air between them. Sophie looked up at her, a mixture of unease and sympathy on her features. It was the look Sophie used to give her when they were children, and Lucy had done something and gotten caught. Then Sophie laughed. “Do you remember asking those guys which one of them wanted to take you home, and then saying, ‘Well, you can’t, ‘cause I’m taken!’?”

“Um, yes, unfortunately, I do,” Lucy said. “But bachelorette parties are like Las Vegas: what happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas. Am I right?” She looked expectantly at her sister.

Sophie nodded, and then reached out and put her hand on Lucy’s knee. She squeezed it lightly and held her hand there for a moment. “Sounds good to me.”

Lucy looked at her sister and smiled. “I’m getting married today.”

“Yes, you are,” Sophie said, smiling back. “Mom wanted me to tell you that Kathy’s here, ready to do your hair.”

“I guess I should get up then,” Lucy said, pulling back the covers. She was doing the right thing. When she saw Eric standing at the end of the aisle, she’d be sure of it.

It wasn’t the sex that women missed, when they were single again. No matter how good the sex was with the man who left you, it usually came third on the list after kissing and cuddling, the bookends of sex—the prelude and the epilogue, if you were lucky. Because sex could be had, after a few drinks and forced conversation; even good sex

lurked in bars, in restaurants, in grocery stores, waiting for you to gather the courage to pursue it. But that comfort of familiar muscle-to-bone contact, of pressing your cheek against his shoulder bones, could not be forced or faked or created out of nothing. After Matt broke up with her, Sophie read an article that said that during sex women's bodies released a hormone that created an emotional attachment to whomever they were with. So even when you felt like it was the sex you wanted back, it was just the warm body. Sophie didn't know if she could trust a women's magazine, but if it were true, she felt it was just another example of biology's cruelty.

Lucy's friend Meghan had woken up with laryngitis so Lucy asked Sophie to do the reading instead. "It's easy—just 1 Corinthians," she told her, and Sophie tried not to laugh. The passage was printed from a Web site and sat waiting on a music stand. When it was her turn, Sophie walked over to the stand and placed her hands on it. She wasn't good in the spotlight like Lucy and her palms were sweating. The breeze from the ocean blew her hair into her face, and she pulled it behind her ears and began.

"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs."

Sophie glanced out at the people gathered in folding chairs. A few women were dabbing at their eyes. "Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."

Sophie turned toward Lucy and Eric, who were gazing at each other, their hands clasped, as if the rest of the world had dropped away. "Love never fails." Lucy turned to her, her eyes shining, and Sophie's throat tightened. She walked back and took her

place as maid of honor, sniffing her bouquet to hide the tears she felt at the back of her eyes.

The ceremony concluded without a hitch, and then they took more pictures before walking into the reception hall. The deejay introduced every member of the bridal party as they walked in. Sophie came in arm-in-arm with the best man, Steve, who untangled his arm from Sophie's to wave to his girlfriend. Sophie clasped her hands in front of her and tried to smile, even though she had no one to wave to.

Dinner, the cake, toasts to the bride and groom. Sophie drank another glass of champagne and thought about Matt, who should have been her "and guest"—whom Sophie had included in her RSVP. He'd dumped her a month before, saying that they didn't have enough in common and that he needed to be with someone who had more goals in life. Sophie had taken offense to that. She had goals. She just didn't know what they were.

She watched her sister and her new husband dance, Eric spinning her so that her dress, the train pinned up, twirled around her ankles. Eric grabbed her by the waist and hugged her close; Lucy threw her head back and laughed, her eyes squinted shut. Even the night before her wedding, Lucy had still been thinking about her one-who-got-away. Sophie wondered if you ever really forgot about them, or if they still haunted you years—decades—later, tempting you with their what-ifs and that constant, irrational hope that one day you'd be enough for them.

Sophie's mother came and sat down beside her, and her cheeks were flushed from the champagne and dancing. "What are you doing, sitting all by yourself? Get out there and dance!"

“I don’t really feel like dancing,” Sophie said.

“Go and dance with your father,” her mother urged.

“I’m not going to dance with my father,” Sophie said, but he was standing there waiting, with his hand outstretched, so she did.