

How to Be Happy: A Novel

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A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Washington

2013

Committee:

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Program authorized to Offer Degree:

English- Creative Writing

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1.

Where the heart is, they say, but how to even answer that question. My heart never has been in my pocket, nothing in my heart ever been in my pocket or even close to fitting there. Everything is huge in there, like a zip file or Miss Frizzle's Magic School Bus shrunk down for a field trip. Not all dear, but what can anyone do about that. A person can live longer without their brain than their heart. All the tall brown buildings and the old sugar factory by the river, over the shoulder of a stranger across the subway car; John's forehead wrinkle making him look like a President on a coin and Lincoln Elementary's long, low red face; neon pink braces; baby blue T-shirts; Leslie's soccer cleats tracking mud into the car and my mom's profile while driving, somber, concentrating, private; the little hearts on the manuscript of that story. That's all in there. The mouth to the stomach and the eyes to heart and me here wishing I could make myself throw up.

Yes, I'll have another drink. Thank you.

Why do I think about my heart so much?

No one here says thank you.

Goddamn this napkin.

Home is an immaculately vacuumed couch worn threadbare on the armrests and seat cushions with perfectly centered doilies, a driveway holding a well-polished Ford Taurus approximately 5 years old, the glow of late summer twilight on the complexly curvilinear cylinder of an empty bottle-green plastic Mountain Dew that has fallen from the recycling into the deepening dusk of the grass-green lawn, the inscrutable look in your mother's eyes as she stands at the kitchen sink washing up and looking out across the pitch and tarred street at one of

the migrant workers from the dairy farm down the road as he naps under a tree with his hat over his dark face, the attempt to explain any of that and the feeling in your heart like a fish flopping just once on the baneful river bank, your bright hook in its lip.

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For three months after graduation, Reagan looked for a job. Sometimes she set a quota number of applications for the day, ten or twenty, and stopped looking for a job after that. Sometimes she set out to exhaust a certain source, such as the "food / bev / hosp" section of craigslist postings of the last three days. Sometimes she pre-loaded her targeted jobs in a neat row of opened tabs and then set an alarm to wake up the next morning and made coffee and applied to jobs while drinking the coffee and then ate breakfast while continuing to apply for the jobs and at some point stared at her bookshelf for an indeterminate amount of time until snapping out of it and finishing applying for jobs, deciding not to apply for a few of them after all, taking a shower and sighing, it now being the early afternoon, the day feeling already as gone as the shower water sliding down the drain and away. Sometimes a friend forwarded her a job and she had to drop everything to pursue it. The cover letters were forms which she adapted and saved each copy of in a folder called "cover letters," picking the most applicable and recent one and amending it. Sometimes she wrote cover letters for jobs that seemed like they should not require cover letters, positions as parking assistants and weekend ice cream cruise attendants. Some cover letters had no one to address. Some job ads were so vague as to not include even a company to plug into the cover letters. Sometimes she forgot to change a name in a cover letter and would know it within seconds of sending it and feel an incredible sinking in her chest, of

embarrassment and waste. Some job ads were scams and resulted in emails proposing to send a large check from overseas. Some job applications required in-depth reporting of past employment and answering questions about her own personal definitions of "teamwork" and "quality service." Sometimes she felt like she could do jobs she was only mostly qualified for and imagined being charming in the interview and receiving an offer for a position with a salary, a cubicle. Sometimes after hearing nothing for weeks on end she applied for part-time, no experience needed positions. In the cover letters for these she was sometimes surprised to believe she was "excited for the opportunity" and "especially enjoyed sandwich counter work" and sometimes so overwhelmed with cynicism during the writing of these facts that she deleted all of the application work she had done up to that point and left the room. Sometimes she gave herself motivational talks and told herself she couldn't wait to spend a nice long morning in front of the computer applying for jobs and drinking coffee. Sometimes she slept in or took a day off and made pancakes and repeated to herself in her head the phrase "day off." Sometimes she stared from her bed to the computer across the room for up to sixty minutes. She set her alarm and committed to a conventional workday schedule, sighed with happiness, Thank God It's Friday, did housework, went out drinking; she slept-in and embraced the fact that she didn't have to keep a conventional workday schedule by eating ice cream and watching Internet TV at 2:30 a.m.; she sometimes actually forgot "what she did" when asked at parties.

After two months of this the lease on her apartment was up and she was almost broke. She had an aunt in Ohio who was taking a three month trip for "career development" and could use a house-sitter: part of an obvious mid-life crisis, Reagan's mother said as she offered to pick her up and take her to stay with the aunt until she "got afloat," a phrase that made Reagan think of dead bodies in rivers. The aunt was a nurse and lived in a small two bedroom in a small town

made up entirely of a few flat expanses and ranch houses and one postcard-looking downtown strip with a movie theater, a Bible bookstore/coffee shop, and a Goodwill. "This is just temporary," Reagan told her boyfriend. "We should not break up yet." They had dated for the last year of college. At their graduation party in his Greenpoint apartment they'd sat with their legs dangling from the fire escape and decided to stick it out in the city and look for jobs there and laughed together about commuting. Twenty-year-olds from the neighborhood's bars flowed under them in laughter and loud heels and Reagan had an image of them, her boyfriend and herself, kissing goodbye in the early morning, holding travel mugs, wearing black professionalwear, and felt warm and buoyant. The aunt's house had floral couches, floral kitchen curtains, and a floral shower curtain, but a plaid bedspread. Through the living room's picture window she had a view of the house across the street. Her boyfriend became a copy editor. After the three months of looking, now in Ohio, Reagan got a freelance job researching Indiana history for a never-heard-of writer, which lasted four months. Now the job has ended, she has enough money saved up to visit her boyfriend in New York, and it is time to start over again.

When she was looking for a job, she had her student loans deferred. In the middle of the Indiana assignment, the deferment ran out, and the loan bills started coming back. The student loan bills come in white envelopes with black lettering that urge signing up for automatic online payments, the same envelopes as other loan-related notices, and arrive in pairs. Credit card bills have small logos and some color. Credit card offers have elaborate, multi-colored envelopes. Food stamp related mail comes in white envelopes with serifed, small font, bold in name but not actuality, that looks slightly cheaper and more governmental than student loan mail. Personal mail comes in pastel envelopes with her grandmother's handwriting.

On her first day without work she sleeps in. She makes herself pancakes, stares out into the small, flat lawn of patchy grass, the chain link fence harsh and sheer at the same time, like a hospital curtain or plastic packaging, and beyond it the neighbor's yard, similar, but with brick-lined plant beds full of weeds, and on all of it the sunlight is pretty.

She spends a long time in front of the bathroom mirror, then leaves her aunt's house, past the rectangles of ranch houses and peaked farmhouses with wooden siding and under the deep gray and dappled shade of the stick thin new maples to the coffee shop, the only one. She walks to an intersection. A suburban with three pit bulls in its covered bed comes to an abrupt stop and one dog lets out a small, cramped yelp as their bodies thud together. There is a small pause. Reagan crosses into a school group of teenaged girls in a pastel rainbow of athletic shorts and hoodies who talk animatedly and show literally bounce in their step. At the coffee shop there is a line and she examines the shoes of those waiting. When she orders, she clears her throat and realizes that it is 4 pm and these are the first words she's spoken this day, a request and some gratitude for a latte. She checks job boards. She opens tabs of job openings. She looks at her résumé. She looks at people who walk past the window, going somewhere, and then she walks past the window, going back to her aunt's house.

During the time that she was employed from home instead of the coffee shop she often went to the library when she didn't need to. Other than that the days were mostly the same, the pep talks, the sometimes waking up, the silence, but not the question of what to do.

The days keep coming the same. Reagan spends quiet hours looking for jobs through fair summer days full of light like an empty window. One day she gets a call from an unknown number and her heart leaps in her chest as she answers in her most professional voice. A man introduces himself, says he has seen her résumé, and offers her an unpaid internship. After she

hangs up Reagan rubs her forehead for a full five minutes. One day Reagan attempts to answer how many people there are who are her age in her aunt's small town. She walks past the post office and the cracking noise of the flags in the wind. She walks past a city bus parked on the corner. At one of the gas stations a man of middle age in coveralls exits the garage and walks around to the convenience store. At the gas station across the street from that one a teenaged girl pokes at her phone while the gas runs. Reagan walks past houses with reasonable yards. She walks past a restaurant with a large sign on the corner and a parking lot in front of the awning-shaded front entrance. She walks across a small bridge over a small creek where a few ducks are floating strangely with their heads in the water. Of everyone she passes during an hour stroll past downtown window displays of devotionals and DVDs and inside the white-aisled Kroger and the carpeted public library three others seem like they might be within the same five year age range, but it's hard to tell because they are carrying or leading or pushing in strollers small children.

She calls her boyfriend. The voicemail picks up: "Hello, you've reached John. Leave a message." Reagan hangs up and puts a kettle on the stove to make tea. She stares at the kettle. Her phone rings.

"Hi," she says.

"What'd you need?" John asks.

"I don't remember," she says. "How's your day?"

"Okay," he says. "I'm just working on some stuff I brought home."

"How is it going?"

"It's going okay," he says.

“You know, your voicemail says, 'You've reached John.' But it should say, 'You have failed to reach John,’” she says. There is a small pause.

The kettle whistles. She asks if he can hang on and he says he needs to get back to work.

Reagan hangs up the phone and looks at it. At first the screen is lit up, and then it isn't anymore. Then it is evening, then it is morning, then it is day.

Reagan dreams that she and her family live in a large hotel and there is a fire which they must escape, as well as men with guns, and she sneaks through tunnels and lies about her allegiances to trick the men with guns and runs forever down a burning staircase, jumping over the railings from one level to the next, so fast she hardly touches the ground. The next night she dreams that she and an ex-boyfriend are lying side by side in a white hotel bed at night while outside the window red flashes approach. She understands that the world is about to end and the ex-boyfriend tells her he is glad that they are together but the part of her that is outside the dream is not glad to be there with the ex-boyfriend and does not agree with anything about the situation. Why are they not doing something to stop the end of the world? Why are they not at least having sex? But she doesn't want to have sex with the ex-boyfriend because she doesn't love him anymore. She wakes up and walks into the kitchen for a glass of water where her reflection in the dark window above the sink startles her and she has an image of herself as she might look in a movie, in front of the pale yellow laminate countertops in her underwear, the linoleum slightly tacky under her hot bare feet, and all the ploshing and hushed slurping of the stainless sink as she fills her water glass. The night she dreams that she and her childhood best friend are swinging together and singing, for some reason, something specific and rehearsed, he sings a line and when, in the dream, she tries to join in, she wakes up with her throat straining silently around a note that, awake, she doesn't remember.

She fakes progress by moving things around the breakfast nook table she is using as a desk, "putting things in order." The right back corner from her laptop is designated as a place from which things will exit. A book which should be placed back into the stack along the wall of her guest room can be moved from the left side of the desk to the right side of the desk and, even though the book has still not been returned to the bookshelf, she counts this as getting something done, "organizing." Dishes which were once scattered about the room, plates on the floor, tea cups by the bed, cereal bowls on the table and the like, are collected into one pile which will, in another step, be taken to the kitchen sink, and, later on, in a third step, washed. It's useful then to skip the fourth step of returning the dishes from the drying rack to the cupboard by simply using the dishes on the drying rack. It has been three hours since she woke up and ate breakfast. She takes a bowl from the drying rack, warms soup in it, puts it in the pile beside the desk with the tea cup and cereal bowl from breakfast. If she cooks something for dinner, then she will take the dishes downstairs and wash them while whatever it is bakes or boils, but if she doesn't cook for a few days, there will be a lot of dishes on the table, towering behind her computer like someone working across from her. She notices that she hasn't cooked for a while when the drying rack is empty.

She is writing a cover letter and eating a microwaved burrito when her phone rings. She hopes that it will be her boyfriend, but it is her dad.

"Well I'll be she's picked up the phone," he says. "Hey there, sweetheart, how are ya." He asks what she is up to, tells her about the weather, tells her about a distant relative who is moving. "Your Aunt Mayda. Well you probably don't remember her. Or maybe you do. You remember that time we went to, well we were at your Uncle Gary's, do you remember him? Well anyways." He says, "Do you still write anymore? Remember that time you had that story

in the paper about the horse? What was it called? Boy everybody really got a kick out of that. I still have it clipped out around here somewhere. It used to be up on the Internet and I could find it when I googled you but it must have come down or something. Well anyways I think you oughta do something like that again." He says, "How is your mother. Remember even though she's down there and I'm up here and you're over there doesn't mean we don't love you. I love you more than I'll get out kiddo."

When she hangs up the phone she sees on her email inbox a parenthetical one signaling the arrival of something new. It is a promotional offer from her phone company. She emails her boyfriend a long description of the dream she had the night before. "It was easier to fall back asleep when I had you next to me," she says. "And I didn't have dreams waking me up."

There was something she wanted to say.

Reagan applies for jobs in New York with her boyfriend's address on the résumé. She tells her boyfriend about them in an attempt to excite him about the possibility of her return.

"Do you think you'll get any of them?" he asks.

"I guess you never know," she says. She is sitting in the bathroom cutting her toenails onto a fluffy pink bathmat which matches the toilet seat cover while they talk.

"Someone asked me today when we would start seeing other people," he says.

Reagan stares at the toenail clippers.

"Who would ask that? Why would someone ask something like that? How awkward."

There is a small pause.

"I don't think we should do that," she says.

"We can't keep dating long distance, though," he says. "I mean forever."

"I'll be there in a week. Can we talk about it then?" she asks. They make small talk, then hang up and Reagan stares at the toenail clippers. She doesn't want to clip her toenails anymore, but it seems weird to leave her foot with only half the nails trimmed, so she finishes clipping her toenails with her face warm and heaviness on top of her heart, in a swell of bewilderment as to how such a sacred thing could be brought up as she cuts her toenails in a pink bathroom which has, since the conversation turned, become incrementally and unbearably ridiculous.

Reagan sets her alarm and continues her job search the next morning. She prays for a job. She tells herself that she will go crazy if she does not get a job that day and so it must follow that she will definitely get a job. In the afternoon she wonders if her boyfriend is interested in seeing someone else and scrutinizes his Internet activity until the space between her sinking stomach and skipping heart has her out of breath and she has to put her head down on her arms the way her teachers told the class to do when they needed to step out of the room and after she has swallowed a few times she walks to the Kroger and buys a bottle of 2004 Hawkstone Merlot promising bountiful fruit, refined spices, chocolate, and a long noble finish. She selects, also, ice cream. In the checkout line the cashier is tall, young, and clear-skinned, in mandatory white button-up, and smiles at her with straight teeth.

"You must be going to a dinner party," he says.

Reagan is mildly attracted to the Kroger check-out cashier and smiles at him. He is not wearing a wedding ring and probably not in high school. On the way back to her aunt's she picks out houses that do not seem too bad to live in, a modular that the addition of a porch could add dimension to, a decrepit-looking A frame that some fresh paint might make look sort of geometric and cool. She thinks of the town, the two grocery stores, the Wal-Mart, the packaging factory, the three screen cinemplex. She checks her phone.

In her aunt's backyard the grass is patchy and brown and buzzing with gnats. Reagan sits in a folding lawn chair with interwoven striped vinyl webbing reminiscent of plaid. The chair is a color she would call grass green but does not at all match the grass. She drinks from the bottle, staring at the backyard neighbor's sliding glass door and swatting away bugs. The sky approaches pink; at night it will fill with stars. It is impossible to believe that anything she does will make a difference.

Her boyfriend calls the night before she leaves for New York. "I can't wait to see you," he says. She packs outfits, thinks of where she will be wearing them, what she will be doing, considers for a moment which shirt would be the best to have during a serious discussion about her relationship. Reagan watches airplanes taxi before a backdrop of cornfields through the large windows of the small airport terminal, nervous and expectant, always early to the airport, patient during boarding, all of it worthwhile when, at take off, the wheels leaving the runway feel as if so much more is taking flight.

Her boyfriend's face when at rest holds a somewhat worried expression. There are benches open but he is standing, there by the baggage carousel, looking expectantly in the wrong direction. Then he sees her and the face changes completely, smiles. She smiles back and drags her suitcase in his direction.

"It's you," he says, embracing her. Behind them the suitcase falls.

Over his shoulder Reagan can see a drag queen in high heels with a small, unleashed dog walk past a large sweaty man who eyes them both with malice as the small dog trots over to the large man's duffel and starts to sniff. The drag queen snaps. The man makes a face. Her boyfriend pulls out of the hug and looks into her eyes and she looks away from the small dog.

"I don't know how we will make this work," he says. "But I think we will."

Reagan hears this and thinks it should make her feel good, but she feels anxious. She swallows and bites her lip and rights the bag and squeezes his hand. On the train she is quiet. They make some small talk about Ohio but she has already told him everything. He begins to talk about the people they both know and a party going on that night. Reagan worries about the clothes she is wearing. She says she would love to go to the party. When they enter the boyfriend's apartment they walk into the bedroom and face each other. Her boyfriend is handsome. How is it, she wonders, that while everyone else in the world calls up just one, mostly inconsequential feeling, that her boyfriend calls up such a maze of them? She wishes she had said more earlier. She wants ease, a difficult river she has swum a thousand times, something like the beginning.

After sex they repeat to each other various constructions of the sentences "I missed you." There is a small pause. She borrows a towel and takes a shower. When she comes back her boyfriend is dressed and using his computer. Reagan uses her computer. They sit side by side.

"You have a new computer," she says.

"Oh, yeah," he says. "I got it last week."

"Does it do that thing with the start bar?" she asks.

"No," he says. "Thank God."

One girl Reagan knows is supposed to be at the party. When they enter she sees just people she doesn't know. Everyone is beautiful. Her boyfriend exchanges hugs with a group of people he knows.

"This is my girlfriend, Reagan," he says. "She just flew in today."

"Oh yeah? Where did you fly in from?" The person asking is a tall man in a new-looking plaid shirt.

"Ohio," she says. "I'm house-sitting there for a little while."

"I want to retire in Ohio," he says. "It's so pretty out there. I like all the barns and stuff."

"What are you talking about?" someone asks him.

"Really," he says. "God's country." He smiles at Reagan.

Reagan nods. There is a small pause.

Reagan's boyfriend tells her that the plaid shirted guy writes for a website. She hasn't heard of the website.

"What do you write for them?" she asks.

"Bullshit," the guy standing next to him says.

They all laugh.

"We gotta put these in the fridge," her boyfriend says. He holds up the 6-pack of Yuengling. Reagan's boyfriend grabs her elbow and she follows him through the crowd to the kitchen. When he opens the door the refrigerator light illuminates rows of PBR cans and condiments.

Back in the room outside the kitchen the bullshit guy is laughing at the right times, but looking around the room.

Leaning against the refrigerator a couple of guys are talking about a writer selling his notebooks and used socks on eBay. Reagan starts to ask her boyfriend about the bullshit guy, but he jumps into the conversation about the writer. He maintains eye contact and introduces himself while reaching around behind him for a bottle opener. A girl with a side ponytail places one in his hand. He turns and smiles at her. Reagan looks at the girl, who is sitting on the counter watching the guys and drinking from a flask.

"Hi," she says.

"Hi," Reagan says. She is standing in front of the refrigerator door. Someone tries to get into the fridge and she moves toward the girl, then back in front of the fridge. Another person tries to get into the fridge and she moves next to the girl, putting the girl between her and her boyfriend.

"Is that your boyfriend?" the girl asks Reagan, tipping the flask toward John.

"Yeah," Reagan says. "He brought me here."

There is a small pause.

"Do you live here?" Reagan asks.

"Me?" the girl asks. "No, I live on Bedford."

Reagan drinks and looks around the kitchen. A fat kid is pressing coffee. The counter is littered with squeezed lemons and bottle caps. There are photo booth pictures on the refrigerator. Outside the kitchen another girl is grinning over her shoulder at the side pony-tailed girl while talking to a guy in dark-rimmed glasses. Reagan's boyfriend looks engrossed. The side-pony-tailed girl also looks at Reagan's boyfriend.

"So what do you do?" Reagan asks.

The girl smiles and drinks from her flask.

"I'm a graphic designer," she says.

"Oh really? Where?" Reagan asks.

"I freelance," she says.

"Me too," Reagan says.

The fat kid with the coffee squeezes by. The side-pony-tailed girl looks at the girl through the doorway and laughs again. Reagan moves behind her boyfriend.

"I think he'll kill himself in like five years," one of the guys says.

Reagan touches her boyfriend's back. He can't turn to fit her into the conversation's circle. Someone tries to get into the fridge. Reagan moves out of the kitchen. The laughing girl stops talking to the guy with glasses and moves toward side-pony-tailed girl.

Reagan looks around for the girl she knows. She moves into a front living room where the lights are off and people are dancing. She walks out of the front room into the hallway. Someone walks in carrying a case of beer. Reagan looks at the people. They look at her and walk past. Reagan walks back into the room off the kitchen.

"Walking the circle?" the guy with the plaid shirt asks.

"I guess so," Reagan says. "I was looking for someone."

Her beer is empty. The side-pony-tailed girl is still by the fridge.

The girl next to the blogger smiles.

"How did you and John meet?" she asks Reagan.

"In creative writing class," Reagan says.

"You're a writer, too?" the blogger asks.

"Sometimes," she says.

The girl smiles up at the blogger. He tightens his arm around her. There is a small pause. Reagan tries to drink from her empty bottle.

"Sorry," Reagan says. She lifts the bottle. "It's time for a beer again."

"What?" the blogger asks. Reagan points her empty bottle toward the fridge. There is a small pause.

"I'm going to get another beer," she says.

When she approaches the refrigerator she realizes that the side-pony-tailed girl, the side-pony-tailed girl's friend, one of the refrigerator guys, and her boyfriend are all gone. New people

are filling the kitchen. Reagan waits behind someone to grab a beer. She tries to ask the guy to hand one to her but he doesn't hear her. He shuts the refrigerator door and leans in the doorway. Reagan opens the refrigerator door and takes out a beer. From the room outside the kitchen there is a large crash followed by laughter. Reagan tries to see through the doorway. She can't move through because of the guy still leaning in it. She turns around.

"What do you think that was?" she asks the first person who makes eye contact. This person is a skinny guy with long hair.

"A panda," the girl standing next to him says. The skinny guy and everyone around them laughs.

"That would be terrible," Reagan says.

"Do a shot!" the girl yells. The skinny guy passes Reagan a shot of clear liquor. She coughs and chases the shot with beer.

The girl laughs.

"Her face!" she yells. She bends over laughing.

"Was that vodka?" Reagan asks.

"Five o'clock!" someone says. There is more laughter.

"What's your name?" the guy asks.

"Reagan," Reagan says.

"Cool, like *The Exorcist*," he says.

"Yeah, but spelled differently," she says.

"How do you spell it?" he asks.

"Like the president," she says.

"Oh, really?" he says. He sounds like he has just heard that the local bagel shop was shut down for health code violations. "Is that common?"

"I don't know," Reagan says.

"Where did you grow up?" he asks.

"Indiana," she says. There is a small pause. "What's your name?" she asks.

"Oh, sorry," he says. "Riley."

"Hi," Reagan says. There is a small pause. Reagan looks around the kitchen. She wants to find her boyfriend.

"Sorry," she says. "I lost track of someone. I'm going to go look for them."

"Okay," the skinny guy says. "See you."

Reagan looks in the room of people dancing. She turns around. She doesn't see anyone she recognizes from before.

"You look bewildered," someone says. She turns around. It is the guy with glasses. The side-pony-tailed girl isn't around.

She smiles. The guy with the glasses does not smile back. Reagan moves back into the kitchen, then realizes she has no reason to be in the kitchen. She waves at the skinny guy, mimes searching by placing her hand over her eyes like a model of Lewis or Clark from the natural history museum. She walks into the bathroom, chugs the rest of her beer, and examines her eye make-up. She runs a finger under each eyelid to remove mascara flakes. She frowns at herself.

In the hallway the skinny guy is waiting for the bathroom.

"Oh hey," he says. Reagan pauses in the doorway. They smile at each other. There is a small pause. Reagan moves out of the way. She looks down the hallway into the room of dancing people, then sinks onto the carpet which is red and brown and cloud-shaped. The skinny

guy leaves the bathroom. Reagan is blocking the door to a degree which does not block anyone from exiting but also draws attention. The skinny guy looks confused.

"Reagan," he says.

She laughs.

"Want to dance?" he asks.

"No," Reagan says.

"Want to go outside?" he asks.

"Okay," she says. She stands up and looks at him. Each face confronts the other.

"Okay," he says. "This way."

Through the room outside the kitchen is a door with a few steps and a small fenced backyard full of bamboo and Christmas lights, surprisingly nice, where people are crowded together with cigarettes but it is quieter than inside.

"I didn't know this was here," Reagan says.

"It's nice, huh?" the skinny guy asks. "Do you smoke?"

"No," Reagan says.

The guy with glasses leaves the house and stops next to the skinny guy.

"Hey, Riley," he says. He looks at Reagan.

"This is Reagan," Riley says.

"Thomas," he says.

"Thomas is a poet," Riley says. "And a mover."

"Like you write moving poetry?" Reagan asks.

They laugh.

"No, that's funny," Thomas says. There is a small pause. "I move furniture sometimes as a job."

"Your poetry is not moving?" Reagan asks.

"I don't know, maybe," Thomas says. He looks at his feet.

"It's sort of moving," Riley says. He tries to make eye contact with Thomas.

There is a small pause.

"What are you guys doing?" Thomas asks.

"We just stepped out to get some air," Riley says. "What have you got going on?"

"Nothing," he says. He looks around. "Avoiding someone, sort of."

Thomas drinks from his bottle.

"I need another drink," he says.

"Me too," Reagan says.

"I'll get you one," he says.

"Oh. You don't have to," Reagan says. "I wasn't trying to suggest,"

Thomas looks at the ground and mutters and enters the house. Around them people keep smoking and laughing and the smoke keeps moving in slow motion and everything keeps being gorgeous.

"So Indiana," Riley says.

"That's where I'm from," Reagan says.

"What's it like?"

"You know, it's small and Midwestern," she says. "But different sort of."

"What do you have there, pork?"

"Corn," she says. "Actually, I know a lot about Indiana."

"Really?" Riley asks.

"Yes," Reagan says. "It is a fascinating place."

Two guys run through the door and past them. One of them is holding a watermelon and the other is holding a beer. The guy with the beer hands it to Reagan and tackles the guy with the watermelon. Watermelon goes everywhere. One of the guys takes off his shirt. A girl in heels yells at the guys and they jump the fence into the front yard. Reagan drinks the beer.

"First off: how Indiana got its name," Reagan says. "People in Indiana are called Hoosiers. You've heard that, right?"

Riley smiles, nods.

"So that was because the first people living in Indiana were these little French gnomes. I mean, that's who discovered Indiana. There were Natives there before. Anyways, the French guys were discovered by the English guys and when they knocked on the French guys's doors the little French guys would say 'Who's there?' and the English thought they were saying Hoosier." Reagan takes a drink. "So that's that."

"Is that true?" Riley asks.

"Totally," Reagan says. "When you were a kid did you ever watch that show David the Gnome?" There is a small pause. "It was on Nickelodeon. The main character is this doctor gnome with a red hat."

"I don't think so," he says.

"How old are you?" Reagan asks.

"Twenty-six," Riley says.

"Really? I wonder why you didn't see it," Reagan says.

"I wasn't really allowed to watch TV," he says.

"Oh," she says. She takes a drink. "What did you do all the time?"

"Oh, practiced for symphony and stuff," Riley says.

"We didn't have symphony at my school," Reagan says.

"That's a bummer," he says.

Thomas returns and hands Reagan a full beer. The brown glass frosts in the summer air.

There is a small pause.

"Have you been to the Midwest?" Reagan asks Thomas. "It is a crazy place. In like 1909 or whatever they discovered natural gas, which is like the gas that sits on top of oil, and they burned it all off in these flambeaus. Flambeaus. They made this fancy word for basically sticking a pipe in the ground and burning the gas right out. They used it to make light displays like for the state fair and to put electricity in houses and power glass bottle plants and like light the streets. And it all burned off. Now the natural gas is all gone and this is the really good part - underneath it is oil. Millions of barrels of oil, but without the gas they don't have enough pressure to get the oil out of the ground, so it is just sitting there underneath Indiana and Ohio, these riches of the earth, and they can't be moved."

Reagan's boyfriend appears finally and puts his arm around her.

"It is totally crazy there," he says. "I went there and ate deep-fried butter."

Riley and Thomas laugh and disperse. Reagan leans against her boyfriend.

"Where have you been?" she asks.

"Looking for you," he says. He kisses her forehead. "Should we take off?"

"I have all this beer," Reagan says. She lifts the bottle. Its label is peeling from its side, fluffy and wet.

"That's okay," her boyfriend says. He takes a swig and puts it down. "Come on."

They say goodbye to some people. Reagan holds her boyfriend's arm the whole time. The street is empty the way that busy streets are empty only in the middle of the night, the curbs heavy with white trash bags and the few people left on the sidewalk scuttling with their faces down-turned. Reagan's heart is floating lightly in her chest. They hurry down the damp subway steps and it sloshes around. She thinks they will hurry home and make love and her heart in its puddle paddles faster. She looks at the side of her boyfriend's face. Then they wait. Reagan can't figure out why the steps are damp. She holds onto her boyfriend's hand until it gets sweaty. He asks if she enjoyed the party, strokes her hair, stands there sleepily watching for rats. There are two other people waiting for the train. One of them is a man asleep sitting on the bench holding several shopping bags stuffed with objects somehow obviously not recently purchased. The other is a man in a black hoodie, pacing.

They hear a train coming and look expectantly. It is the trash train, a slow diesel engine pulling carts full of broken concrete and trash bags.

"Damn," she says. She and the boyfriend stare at the trash go by.

"Do you like your job?" she asks.

There is a small pause.

"Not really," he says. "But that's part of what makes it meaningful."

She looks at him. He looks tired. She looks back at the rat on the tracks. He clearly has a hole that he lives in, but it is unclear why he comes out of the hole, why he's looking for the train, too.

When the train finally comes it is bright inside in a way outside time. Through the train windows the dark subway tunnels fall away to the dark muddled haze of the city's starless night sky. Rooftops and subway platforms pull at her heart and under her head her boyfriend's

shoulder smells like her boyfriend and cigarettes. She feels like crying. Now that she is out of the stifling Midwest, now that she is somewhere that feels like home and everything between her and the boyfriend feels warm and calm and unbroken, what is it now, in this quiet and accomplished moment, that's missing from her dumb, insatiable heart.

At home they take off their shoes. The shoes by the door look familiar and epic like shoes that signify all the shoes left behind by couples ever. They collapse onto the boyfriend's navy sheets. She caresses him but feels dizzy. They fall asleep.

Sometimes Reagan wakes up feeling as if she is under several miles of ocean water. In the morning, the sounds of her boyfriend kissing her cheek are muffled and echoing. The sounds of the sheets moving away and back as he gets out of the bed are muffled. The sounds of the dresser drawers scraping open and closed are muffled.

"Are you getting up?" her boyfriend asks. His voice is muffled.

Reagan's lungs feel heavy and slow. She thinks coffee might help. She doesn't move.

She sits up and bed and looks at him dressing.

He leaves to go to the bathroom. Reagan looks around the room at the rumpled clothes on the floor, the empty water glass on the bedside table, the change on the dresser. They are coated with an aura of permanent rest the way museum objects are, a jelly-like sadness. The jelly is on the bed and on Reagan, too, and coating her lungs, making them slow, making the world an ocean expanse.

Last night Reagan dreamed that she was in an empty hallway, school-like but vague, with a bad feeling in her chest. She was carrying a can of orange Crush.

Reagan's boyfriend returns. She is still sitting in bed.

"I didn't sleep well," she says. "I've been having too many dreams."

He offers her coffee. She gets out of bed, puts on a hooded sweatshirt, and follows her boyfriend into the kitchen. He pours pre-ground French roast coffee from a red bag into a filter in the combination six cup coffee maker/toaster oven appliance.

"I hate this thing," he says. "It's like something from a futuristic cartoon. It's such a lonely man appliance."

The coffee maker/toaster oven begins to gurgle. The kitchen begins to smell of freshly-brewed coffee. There is pleasant sun on the small kitchen table.

Reagan's boyfriend scoops generic brand plain full-fat yogurt into a bowl and pours generic brand honey nut granola clusters "with real almond pieces" over the yogurt and stirs it with a spoon. He offers Reagan breakfast and she says she will eat later. She looks at the coffee pot expectantly. It gurgles. Her boyfriend eats the granola and the coffee pot finishes gurgling. She pours them each a cup. She drinks the coffee and her boyfriend walks back into the bedroom and sits at his computer. Reagan's coffee is half-full. She thinks it will help. She drinks the rest of the coffee and feels sleepy. Her boyfriend leaves his computer and goes to the bathroom. Reagan climbs back into bed and pulls the covers over her head. When her boyfriend returns he is humming quietly. At first she thinks it is because he sees her in bed and is trying not to wake her, but eventually she realizes that he doesn't know she is there. Reagan suppresses laughter. Under the blankets the air grows hot and thick.

I do want to live, she thinks.

In the late afternoon she takes the J train over the bridge. She walks past a large park full of old trees, a Whole Foods, a pile of trash on the curb with a rat darting from it, to her old favorite bar which looks, with grease-chalked windows and graffiti, like a child's decorated

cardboard box fort. She sits at the bar. There is a small pause. She orders a Yuengling from a female bartender with long hair and thick tattooed arms.

Reagan knows the things her boyfriend dislikes about her. He doesn't like the non sequiteur quality of her responses in conversations, the way she fidgets with the corners of her toenails until they break off, the amount of time she spends putting on her coat, the way she watches him thoughtfully and then smiles when he catches her gaze, and the way her stomach processes almost all foods loudly. She considers the oral practice conversations in beginning language classes, zippers, pedicures, drinking more water, leaving the room more often. It doesn't matter. Some of these things are probably within her control, but she isn't sure which ones. She isn't sure whether the phrase is really "within" or "inside." It doesn't matter. Why is it that her boyfriend is probably not thinking or feeling anything like what she is now thinking or feeling as she is here, like this? When her boyfriend talks he seems interested, she sees the proverbial gears turning and a spark in his eye, the things that are supposed to be romantic imagery seem somehow actual on his face, he appears to emit waves of literal ease in groups of people; when she sees him go through the motions of living, all the eating and shitting and showering and sleeping and running of errands, he appears, day after day, unbothered, self-contained, and what is the name for that? Sometimes when she looks at him and she tries to imagine what the thoughts in his head are, what it feels like, she feels something that would be awe except that it is a little uncomfortable, like the way she feels lately when she looks at herself in the mirror and feels as if something is not quite right, as if a single freckle were missing which she can't find.

Her glass is empty. She asks the guy next to her for a pen, which he removes from his shirt pocket and hands over without looking at her. She writes on the napkin under her whiskey

sour but the napkin is soggy and tears so fast Reagan doesn't even remember what letter she was trying to make. She slides the pen in front of the man she borrowed it from and smiles, even though he still doesn't turn to look at her. She smiles at the side of his head.

She likes the sounds her stomach makes, whistling and clicking noises, as if instead of intestines she is full of tiny dolphins which process her meals joyously. The sounds comfort her when she is alone and waiting to fall asleep.

What kind of lonely does she have to be to feel as if her digestive powers are keeping her company? Is it something that can be measured on a scale of 1 to 10? What kind of lonely would someone have to be to make a 1 to 10 scale of loneliness? Reagan looks out the window to where the sunlight in New York is bright and falling.

There was something she wanted to say.

She exits the bar. She turns her face upward towards a droning in the sky. It is an airplane moving overhead. When she was sixteen she built an airplane in her backyard with her best friend, day after day, a million separate pieces, the small screws, the long bars, the flat sheets, slowly coming together, awash in the summertime sun, wearing cut-offs, drinking lemonade. She could hear nothing but the incredible drone of the engine, she remembers, her hair blown back from her face, his shirtless back shining in front of her, the scraping of the lilac hedge under the plane's belly, the shuddering, and the incredible brilliance of his eyes as he looked over her shoulder just before they thudded back into the unused pasture. She'd thought, climbing in, that she wasn't afraid because she had nothing to lose and then, as the engine sputtered out, they caught their breath, lying in the grass. She moved her arms, nothing was broken, her heart slowed and she realized, laughing with him, looking up at the clouds, she had been. For two complete minutes they were ten feet off the ground.

Reagan begins to walk home. She realizes she is going the wrong way and stops. She could keep going and get on at the next stop. Why should it matter? She turns around. On the side of the bar she just left is painted: "After the Mars Bar, then what?"

2.

The 19<sup>th</sup> state.

LaSalle.

The French and Indian War.

The Hopewells.

The first time Reagan learns about Indiana history is second grade. Her desk is next to John. B, which she thinks of as John-Bee, and once the image is there Reagan can't help but hear a faint buzzing whenever he is around or think that if he rubbed his nose in flowers somehow honey would show up. Once he slipped while playing soccer during recess and slid face down onto a patch of clover flowers. Reagan saw this from the swings where she and other girls in her class were swinging and fighting over who got to marry which member of New Kids on the Block. When recess was over and everyone ran to line up and go back to class, Reagan stopped on the clover patch. She pretended to accidentally drop her pencil and when she bent over to pick it up she sniffed the crushed blossoms. Their faint sweetness was like honey and Reagan was happy. Once John had worn a yellow and black sweater to school. Looking at him, Reagan heard the buzzing twice as loud as ever. It sounded like the way being tickled felt and Reagan was happy. Everyone in their class called John "John-Bee" and everyone was delighted by the sweater. They were all tickled.

Reagan sits beside John-Bee in the lunchroom and in art class and in reading circle, when she and all of her classmates listen to Miss Kern read them a book and Reagan looks over constantly at John-Bee's face to see if he thinks the book is boring or funny; in music class she listens to his voice rise up behind her and knows it over all the other little boy's. John-Bee doesn't let the other boys pick on her and sometimes at recess they play house and she rests on

their pretend couch until he comes home with a sycamore leaf they pretended was a briefcase.

At home she watches Nickelodeon every day after school with her little brother, Travis, and eats Little Debbie snack cakes, and waits for her mom to cook dinner. She and Travis fight over the Legos and her mom and dad talk about putting things in the mail and the things the other one was supposed to do. John-Bee lives just down the road, so sometimes John-Bee gets to come over and play in the yard or she gets to have dinner at John-Bee's house.

When they have to sell candy to raise money for their school, Reagan and John-Bee team up. They walk around the loop of the housing division where John-Bee lives, knocking on doors with a glossy catalog, smiling and polite the way they were told to be, and then they cross the street to Klinger, Reagan's street, and see Reagan's next-door neighbor, Mrs. Dinger, standing in her concrete driveway with a large gray tabby cat on a leash.

Mr. and Mrs. Dinger were getting divorced.

First they had one cat, together, the way some couples get a puppy, but more practical. They both preferred cats. They took in a kitten from one of her co-workers, the long-haired one, because that kitten seemed the most special, and they named that cat Minnie and gave her catnip mice to play with and they were happy because they had a family. Then Minnie grew up and she liked her husband better, so they got another kitten, a boy kitten this time, Albert. Minnie was a typical cat: she grew fat in the middle, she slept in laps, she liked to lick tuna cans and ignored her catnip toys. But Albert was special. Albert's favorite toy was a hacky sack that he carried around in his mouth. He was a huge, strong-looking housecat, but he had a tiny little kitten mew, even after he was full grown. Albert slept in their bed right next to them with his head on the pillow like a person and Albert would lick at their arms, trying to groom them like they were cats, too. She loved him more.

But one day Albert went missing. They put up posters and circled the neighborhood shaking the hacky sack and the food bag, but he didn't come home. They called the animal shelter and knocked on their neighbors' doors, but they couldn't find him. During this time she and her husband were not happy. They bickered about what to do about the missing cat, about each other's attitudes about the missing cat, and all the other things, too—their bills, their chores, their bedtime. She started going out on the weekends with her coworkers and he watched TV all the time and the two of them didn't spend time together like they used to. Then she and her husband had the talk about how it wasn't going to work out and it was over and after so long of arguing they were both relieved. They owned no property together. He took his car and she kept the rental.

At night sometimes it got lonely. But she didn't miss her ex-husband; she missed Albert, the lost cat. So she'd adopted this cat. His name was Peter. And she was training him to walk on a leash.

All of this Reagan's neighbor, Mrs. Dinger, tells Reagan and John-Bee, there in the driveway, to clarify that she was no longer "Mrs." but "Ms.," and to explain what she is doing, there in her driveway with her cat on a leash.

Reagan had never talked to someone who was getting divorced. Some of her friends at school had parents who were divorced, but those divorces were all in the past, like they had never happened to her friends, just happened, sometime before they could remember. Reagan could remember Mr. Dinger, though. He liked to garden and he didn't like their dog, Jelly, because sometimes when they let Jelly out to pee he dug up Mr. Dinger's zucchini plants.

"Ms.," Ms. Dinger says again. "With a z."

And Reagan thinks about John-Bee buzzing.

“Cats can walk on leashes?” John-Bee asks.

Ms. Dinger says Peter is learning. Do they want to pet him?

The cat rolls on his back, back and forth in the driveway, coating his fur in dust, crushing a dandelion that had grown in a crack.

When John-Bee’s big sister Karen shows up to walk him home, Reagan watches from her front step as he gets smaller and smaller, then turns the corner and disappears. She always watches him until he disappears, waving when he turned around. Then she walks into her living room where her dad is watching TV with a bowl of popcorn on his stomach.

“Ms. Dinger is teaching her cat to walk on a leash,” Reagan says.

Her dad laughs.

“I’ve heard about her cat-walking,” he said.

Reagan’s mom yells from the kitchen that he should knock it off. Her dad rolls his eyes at Reagan and she giggles.

“Well I never heard of a cat walking on a leash,” he says. “It sounds funny.”

“Yeah, it looked funny,” Reagan agrees.

“She oughta get a dog,” John says, looking back at the TV. “I don’t see why anyone has got to force a cat to walk on a leash.”

“She said she’s getting divorced,” Reagan says.

“She told you that?” he asks.

“She said they lost their cat and that made them fight and then Mr. Dinger took his car,” Reagan says. “And that he watched TV too much.”

“Renée, you hear this?” he calls.

“She shouldn’t talk like that to little kids,” Renée calls back.

“No, she shouldn’t,” John says, looking at Reagan. “That’s grown-up business.” He changes a channel.

Reagan looks at the TV as the channels flip by, people from the knee-up to the left of the screen, a newscaster looking straight-ahead, wrestlers in a knot on the ground, a game show crowd applauding.

“Will you and mom ever get divorced?” Reagan asks.

“Course not,” John says. He puts his arm around Reagan and she leans her head on his chest until his chest hairs get in her ear and tickle.

Reagan has a whole nursery of babies in her room that she feeds and burps and sings to sleep. When her school went to the children’s museum she saw diagrams of babies in their mommy’s tummies and learned how to change a diaper and give little newborns baths. She carries her babies while carefully supporting their heads to go see Renée, who is lying down in her parents’ bedroom on their big waterbed.

“Look, Mom, this is how you hold a baby,” Reagan says. She holds out her arm which is cradling a baby doll stiffly up towards Renée.

“I know how to hold a baby,” Renée says.

“Am I doing a good job?” Reagan asks.

“Sure,” Renée says.

“Babies are so cute. I want to be a mommy just like you when I grow up,” Reagan said. She starts singing to the baby.

“My baby is going to take a rest with you,” Reagan says.

“Ok, put her down, I’ll make sure she goes to sleep,” Renée says. She puts her arm over

the baby doll. “Go on now. Let me rest.”

Reagan goes back to her room and tells her little brother Travis to make sure the babies stay asleep so she can rest.

Reagan’s mom gets headaches a lot. She lies down and goes to the doctor every day, it seems like, as soon as she gets home. Reagan is watching TV with her dad and Travis when her mom comes home from the grocery store and says she is going to lie down. They eat chicken nuggets with their dad at the dinner table. He squirts ketchup onto their plates and pours them milk and makes them eat three green beans before he will let them get up from the table. Renée doesn’t come to the table to eat. A lot of the time she isn’t hungry. Then Reagan and Travis fight over the she side of the couch with the armrest closest to the TV until their dad sits down in between them and put one arm around each of them and they quiet down, watching *Clarissa Explains It All*.

It’s all normal until the first commercial break, when John gets up and goes to check on their mom in their bedroom. On the TV screen, Clarissa’s parents, Mr. and Mrs. Darling, are fighting about what to do on their wedding anniversary. Reagan is thinking about Clarissa’s headbands. Then Reagan’s dad walks very quickly out of the bedroom.

“Kids, I have to take your mom to the doctor,” he says.

“I don’t want to go,” Travis says.

“You’re staying here,” their dad says. He is already holding the kitchen phone and dialing. “I’m asking Ms. Dinger to come over. You guys get in your PJs.”

Then he talks into the phone. “Debbie? Hey, could you come over for a few hours? Renée’s had an allergic reaction and we have to run to the hospital.”

Reagan’s mom walks out of the bedroom with her shoes and coat already on, looking sad

or tired or sick.

Reagan asks her mom if she's okay and Renée just stares at the floor. Then her parents leave and Ms. Dinger comes over and doesn't pet the dog and Travis crawls into her bed to sleep. They pray for their mom together. And in the morning her dad is sitting with his coffee at the kitchen table with his face in his hands. Reagan asks about her mom's allergies and he says they just have to make sure Mommy doesn't take that kind of headache medicine again.

Then pours Reagan a bowl of cereal. Reagan looks at the empty dog bowl.

"We better feed Jelly," she says. She starts whistling for the dog. "Breakfast!" she yells.

John shuts the fridge door and looks at her.

"Where is he?" Reagan asks. She whistles again.

John sits down without pouring the milk over Reagan's cereal. He pulls her into his lap and says that the bathroom door was open and Jelly got into something he wasn't supposed to.

"He died," he says.

"We're supposed to shut the bathroom door!" Reagan yells.

"Sweetheart, I'm sorry, we were in a hurry," he says. "I had to get your mom to the hospital."

"Mommy left the door open?!" she cries. "It was mommy?!"

She cries the most when she's mad. She hurts her throat and lets her face get red crying and then Travis walks in rubbing his eyes and he starts crying just from looking at her. Both of them stand there crying in the kitchen; eventually John forces them to get dressed and puts their backpacks on their backs, while they're still wailing and whining and kicking their feet, and he pulls off their PJs and pulls on clean shirts and ties their shoes drags them outside to wait for the bus, one kid on each hand, telling them they have to stop crying.

When the bus driver pulls up they're still crying,

"Their dog died," he says to the bus driver.

"Maybe they ought to stay home," the bus driver says.

"They have to go," John says. He lifts them both up onto the first step of the bus, first Reagan, then Travis. "Go on," he says.

When Reagan comes home there is a pile of dirt in the yard and stuffed dog on her pillow.

Everything stays the same except that she doesn't feed or play with Jelly anymore. At home she plays in the back yard and at first she can see the dirt over Jelly's grave, piled up, then flattened, and by spring it's just another bald spot on the lawn. She and John-Bee play in the leaves still piled up along the chain-link fence.

"There's not supposed to be leaves on the ground in the spring," Reagan says. She picks them up one by one and tossed them over the fence. "They got stuck."

In Reagan's mind, leaves migrate in the fall like birds.

"Fly away!" Reagan tells the leaves. She and John-Bee watch one scuttle into the street and when it stops they turn back to throwing other leaves over the fence.

"We have to get a new house," Reagan tells John-Bee.

"Why?" John-Bee asks.

"My mom just said we couldn't stay in this house anymore," Reagan says.

"Are you getting evicted?" John-Bee asks.

"No," Reagan says. She thinks he said convicted. She doesn't know what evicted meant.

"Maybe you are getting a new baby," John-Bee says.

Reagan gasps.

“Oh, I want a sister!” she says. “I’ll dress her up and snuggle her and love her so much. Oh, we have to teach my new little sister how to walk,” Reagan says. “And we can have a real baby when we play house. She’ll be so cute! What do you think my mom will name her? I hope she names her Sarah,” Reagan says. “That’s the name I like.”

John-Bee crushes leaves under his shoe.

“Don’t do that,” Reagan says.

“Why?” John-Bee asks.

“They need to fly away,” Reagan says. She scoops up a bunch of the leaves and tosses the heap into the air, but the leaves only fall to the other side of the fence. There’s no wind.

“They turn back into dirt,” John-Bee says. “Like how sand is made out of rocks that get broken into lots of tiny pieces. The leaves break into tiny pieces until they turn back into dirt.”

“That’s what my dad said about Jelly,” Reagan says.

A car drives by, stirring a lot of the leaves into the air. The leaves don’t get very far.

“Leaves are supposed to blow away,” Reagan says.

They climb on top of the fence and try throwing the leaves from higher in the air. Then Reagan gets a broken paddleball paddle from her room and chases the leaves down the street until Renée sees them playing in the street and yells outside for them to stop.

“I’ll build an airplane,” John-Bee says. “And then we can carry the leaves away and drop them on the South Pole.”

“Can you really build an airplane?” Reagan asks.

John-Bee chews on his lip.

“I think so,” he says. “I have to get some books from the library.”

“Like a big one that we can go in?” she asks.

He nods and looks her in the eye and grabs both of her shoulders so that their faces are just inches apart.

“I don’t know how we’ll do it, but I think I can make it work,” he says.

And Reagan is happy because she wants to taste a cloud in the sky with John-Bee. So they stop playing with dead leaves and sit across from each other trying to keep straight faces and making each other laugh until John-Bee’s big sister Karen shows up to say it’s time to go home and Reagan stands on the step watching as her best friend gets smaller and smaller, feeling an irresistible urge to chase after him and jump on his back, to grab his hand and run forever, past his house, just running.

\* \* \*

His daughter Reagan melts his heart, she really does, the sweetheart, she is definitely a special girl, but maybe not always special the way a parent hopes for. Was he a bad parent for saying so? For thinking so? He doesn't feel as if he loves her less.

She's pigeon-toed for one thing, which means she trips all the time, and the poor girl she can't help that, can't hold it against her, she was born that way, can't hold it against her, and they've been to the doctor and it should all straighten out, the doctor said to try roller skating and they signed her up last week and she's pretty excited about it, has new white Barbie roller skates with pink laces and glittery bobble things on them. Didn't tell her the lessons were for her feet, don't want her to worry, she's little enough they decided she didn't really need to know. So the pigeon-toed thing is under control, but the thing that's odd, just a little odd, gives him pause, maybe it's nothing but he wonders, a parent wonders, is when she trips and falls she never seems to put her hands out to catch herself, and that's what seems strange, at least a little off. Maybe it's

something she'll grow out of. But why doesn't she put her hands out to catch herself when she falls? Only seems natural. You trip most people they can't help but put out their hands, but not Reagan, for some reason, she trips and falls flat on her face, scrapes it up good, she's got scrapes all over her nose and cheeks. It looks bad. It looks like it hurts, he means. And what father wouldn't worry about something like that? It's a normal concern, isn't it, you want your kids to grow up okay, developmentally you want them to be normal, you need to watch out for disabilities.

No he doesn't think she's retarded or anything.

Well yeah he's wondered.

There's another thing she does, she sleeps with her eyes open. Like the eyes of the dead. It's not her fault, it's not as if she does it on purpose, but it creeps him out. He'll walk into the living room where she's watching cartoons and she's layed down to take nap on the couch and he walks in and sees her eyes are open and his heart jumps in his chest, it really scares him. He wonders if something has happened. Then he watches her and her chest is moving and he knows she's alive but her eyes just stare out at nothing, not like when she's distracted. You know, sometimes she's doing her homework and gets distracted and sort of stares off. And they have to say, "Reagan," you know, "Concentrate." She's little, that's nothing to worry about, all the homework they have kids do these days, it's tough: he wasn't the best student and she's a lot better than he was. But when she's sleeping, she sleeps with her eyes open, and this isn't like that, it's not like she's distracted. Her eyes are dead-looking. And sometimes they go out for dinner and she falls asleep at the booth and her eyes are open and the waitress gives them a look, you know, and he wonders if there's something wrong sometimes, that's all, you know, physically, or maybe in the brain.

Honestly, yes, probably his concern is also about how people are looking at them, himself and her mom as well as her, and wondering if they think they're weird, sometimes people give these looks and you think you can see there's some kind of pity in it, like she's special or something, and it's not that there's anything wrong with that, of course, having a child with special needs or anything, not that it's anything to be ashamed of, certainly not, but it's uncomfortable, that's all, to be stared at. He knows he tries not to look that way anymore when he sees anyone with a child with special needs.

It's worse for her. She's little now and she doesn't know that people are giving her looks, she doesn't know what it means to be weird, but she's a little weird and soon enough she's going to be old enough to know it and that's going to hurt her feelings. That's a normal thing to some degree, sure, but he wonders if it isn't a bit too weird, too much. He doesn't want her permanently made fun of. Sometimes he even wonders a little if she's really his. He doesn't really think Renée cheated on him. He just wonders a little every once in awhile. He's gone a lot with the job driving trucks and you wonder sometimes. Especially now as things aren't the happiest. He wonders that she was young when they got married. She's got a flirty personality. Guys are always chatting her up. She likes dirty jokes. It didn't bother him at first, you know, she fit in with the guys and that was nice. They were all patting him on the back when he started bringing her around. They liked her a lot. She was popular. And he's gone a lot and he wonders if maybe even just once. Once is all it takes, you know. No, he doesn't really think she did. She couldn't lie about something like that, for so long, no, he doesn't think so, not even now after everything. Things are pretty bad at the moment but he still doesn't think she could do a thing like that. It's just that Reagan is so strange sometimes he doesn't know where it comes from. He loves his daughter. He's pretty sure she's his daughter. She looks just like her mom, so it's hard

to say. His eyes a lot of people say though he isn't really sure how they can tell, what's so different between his eyes and Renée's eyes, they both have brown eyes. The shape he guesses. People started pointing it out right away. He didn't really see it but now he does a little sometimes. There's something about her that's like him. Her personality, some of it. But then there's nature versus nurture and who knows. It's a stupid thing to worry about. She got it from one of them, he supposes, the thing with the tripping and sleeping with her eyes open and the other stuff. She's just kind of weird. He loves her, she's his only daughter, and he feels guilty about it, but he wishes she wasn't so weird. It makes him feel awkward around her and what if she can tell. It breaks his heart to think.

The other day she came home and asked about the day she was born, it was for a school project, and God, it's a great story. Their doctor was the doctor for the college basketball team, you know, Ancilla, up the road in Donaldson. Great guy, retired now. And it's the sectional game and over the loudspeakers they page the doctor and the Sheriff escorted him and me right across the floor. Gee whiz he was proud. This was his first kid, you know? He was grinning ear to ear. Well and then they have that thing that measures the contractions and Renée starts yelling while he has his eye on the screen and it's a smaller one so he tells her "Oh that didn't hurt as bad as the last one." Punched him in the arm, might have got him in the nose if he hadn't ducked. But man when it was all done and he had her in his arms. There's nothing like it. You've got kids, don't you? Yeah, so you know. It's some feeling. Anyways, not everyone's birth gets announced in front of everyone, he told her. She was taking notes, you know, very seriously, and she said "Daddy, that is not where babies come from." He didn't know what to say to that. It's kind of funny, actually, isn't it? She's smart. She gets that from her mother. Well and so what if she's a little different, right? He's just worried that with this divorce she'll turn out, well, even

weirder, and it will be their fault.

She does seem happy. You're right. She does seem happy. You know, that's a relief. He thinks she's happy. Things are harder on her than he wishes they were, but she's going to turn out alright. He sure does love her. Can't never stop worrying, can you? But she's happy. That's what's important. She is happy.

Her brother her doesn't worry about so much. He's a boy. They're tougher.

\* \* \*

At school Reagan learns about eclipses, that sometimes the moon goes in front of the sun and casts a shadow on the earth. Their whole school gets to go outside and stand on the blacktop with pieces of paper with holes poked into them and watch the moon cover and uncover the sun.

When they all line up to go back inside, Reagan sees all the fifth grade girls holding pink bags. She waves over from her line at John-Bee's big sister, Karen, in the fifth-grader's line.

"Are you having a birthday party?" Reagan asks.

Karen snorts.

"Yeah, they're presents for becoming a woman," she says.

Karen's friends laughs.

Back in her classroom, Reagan asks Miss Kern what presents she got when she became a woman.

"Who told you there are presents?" Miss Kern asks.

"All the fifth-graders had presents outside," Reagan says.

"Those weren't presents, they were tampons and deodorant," Miss Kern says. "You don't

need to worry about it until you go through puberty.”

“What is puberty?”

She should ask her mom.

3.

T-shirts are important. They are not all the same. The ones you get for free and most of the ones at Goodwill are made with different T-shirt fabric than the good ones. The good ones are less stiff and the necks don't come up too high. If you are going to look cute, you need cute T-shirts.

In the Spring 1998 Delia's catalog Reagan circles several t-shirts she wants to order, but her mom doesn't do online shopping, so for Reagan's thirteenth birthday they are going to the mall with her friends Leslie and Annie. Reagan likes a baby blue shirt with a glow-in-the-dark star in the center, a yellow shirt with a fuzzy cartoon tiger, a blue and white ringer shirt, a V-necked t-shirt with orange and blue stripes, a gray faux athletic shirt, and a baby blue eyelet fabric shirt. In the catalog, she circles them. She wants, too, to wear spaghetti straps, but Renée told her she had to wear a bra, always, and that the straps could not, ever, show, so if she wanted to wear spaghetti straps, she would have to get a strapless bra—and these were always falling down, especially at recess, but even just when walking down the hall, and, the strapless bras, there was no subtle way of pulling them up. Renée also doesn't think that \$22 is a reasonable price to pay for a t-shirt. Twenty-two dollars sounds like a lot to Reagan, too, but she understands the difference between t-shirts the kind you get for free at church events and t-shirts the good kind that come from cool stores or Delia's. She tries to explain this to her mom; her mom doesn't understand, says, It's your money.

At 5 o'clock her dad pulls up in the driveway to pick Travis up and Renée asks Reagan if she's ready to go. Past the front door her dad is leaning against his car holding a small white box.

"Happy birthday, sweetheart," he says, kissing the top of her head. "13. Gee whiz. You're a woman now."

Reagan opens the small white box. Inside are small pearl earrings.

"Those are pretty," Renée says. "Why don't you put them on, Reagan?"

"They're really nice," Reagan says. "Aren't they too nice to wear with blue jeans?"

"I'll help you," Renée says. She pushes a stud into Reagan's ear with a pop and Reagan yelps. "The skin grew over the back. You have to start wearing earrings more, Ray."

"Mom, don't call me Ray," Reagan says.

"You look all grown up alright," John says. And he tears up, leaning against his Camaro.

Reagan hugs her dad and hops into Renée's van, a teal green 1997 Pontiac Montana 4-door minivan. They like the commercial where the cowboy runs through both doors; sometimes Reagan and Travis enact it to make their mom smile. In this van Reagan pulls down the passenger side mirror and looks at the earrings in her red ears. The minivan begins to drive away and behind them, Reagan could see in the bouncing mirror, John stands in the driveway, waving, until they are out of sight.

"What a dork," Renée says, smiling at the rearview mirror.

Reagan starts to take the earrings out.

"Leave them in," Renée says.

"I just don't want to lose them," Reagan says.

"Leave them in," Renée says.

Past the corn field is the subdivision where John-Bee's house is, a heavily wooded cluster of winding roads and wood-shingled, 3 bedroom houses called "Hidden Hills."

"There's John-Bee's trampoline," Reagan remarks. Hidden Hills slide by. The Christian radio station plays a contemporary rock version of "What A Friend We Have in Jesus." Reagan had tried to put on the local top 40 station, but Renée told her they weren't going to listen to that crap. Now Reagan turns the radio off.

Around the bend and over the railroad tracks they slow and turn into Leslie's driveway. Leslie is waiting on the front porch and runs down the cement path connecting the porch to the driveway. The path is lined with the husks of chrysanthemum plants and Leslie jumps over one before slapping her hands on the side of the van and letting herself in.

"It's cold!" Leslie says.

"Why were you waiting outside, silly goose?" Reagan's mom asks.

"Honk honk," Leslie says. She pauses. "In goose I just said 'I don't know.'"

They pick up Annie from her house on the main street of the town and Reagan stands waiting in the foyer, looking at shoes in the shoe cubby, heels and loafers and flip-flops. Her friends' houses are strange, shaped around unfamiliar lives, driveways holding strange cars. Leslie's house is new and big, with a small yard and bright vinyl siding and dormers on the second story windows. The lines from the sod had grown invisible, but the lawn was still so flat and new that it looked like a rug that could be picked up. Annie's house was on the street with all the nice old houses, brick, with a little brass plaque that said "Historic Home 1896." It smells vacuumed. Reagan waits while Annie looks for her shoes but keeps getting distracted by the show her older sisters are watching on MTV.

"Aren't these your flip-flops?" Reagan asks.

“No, I want the orange ones,” Annie says.

“It’s too cold for flip-flops!” Annie’s mom calls from the kitchen.

Annie makes a face.

When Annie gets into the van, she says “Hi, Mrs. Fuller. Happy birthday, Reagan.”

Then it’s quiet for three minutes.

“Turn the radio on,” Leslie says.

Reagan turned the radio on and quickly turns it from the Christian station. The top 40 station is playing “MMMBop.” The girls all squeal and start singing along.

“They’re gone so fast,” Annie sings.

“Can you tell me who will still care,” Reagan sings.

“Plant and water,” Leslie sings.

“It’s ‘plant any one of those’,” Annie says.

“No way,” Leslie says. “That’s too many syllables.”

Renée sighs and starts to sing along, too.

“MMMBop, dop a doo,” Renée sings.

“Don’t quit your day job, Mom,” Reagan says.

“What?” Renée asks.

“Your singing,” Reagan says. She makes a pee-yew face by pinching her nose.

“That’s not nice,” Renée says. She changed her grip on the steering wheel. Usher’s “Too Close” plays next and when the line “you’re making it hard for me” plays Renée changes the radio station to oldies.

“That’s filthy,” Renée says.

Reagan turns and makes a face at her friends.

“What are you talking about? It’s not dirty.” Reagan says to Renée.

“You better not know,” Renée says, and hums along to the Beatles.

The mall was 30 minutes away in a neighboring city. On the way there the teal minivan passes Fireworks billboards, a block of strip clubs, a church called “Living Water” in a big blue pole barn, and a series of signs that make a rhyme about gun ownership. Then the minivan enters the mall parking lot and the girls spill out.

The first place they go is a Sam Goody so that Reagan can buy a Britney Spears CD.

“I should get my hair cut like this,” Reagan says to Leslie.

“Makeover!” Leslie squeals. She folds Reagan’s hair over her forehead. “Yeah, you’ll be totally cute with bangs.”

Annie looks.

“Not that thick,” she says. “Her forehead will stick out like a caveman’s.”

Reagan scratches at the plastic over the CD case until it snags and tears away.

Annie and Leslie want to go to Gameland next. Gameland is next to a Regis Salon, so Reagan asks if they’ll wait for her, but Annie has already walked into the store.

“We’ll find you,” Leslie says.

Reagan shows the CD to the hair stylist and tells her not to make her bangs too thick. 20 minutes later Leslie and Annie aren’t in Gameland or anywhere she can see. She walks quickly through the crowd, tucking and untucking her hair from behind her ears, then finally finds them at a Gloria Jeans kiosk.

“You’re SO pretty!” Leslie says, and Annie nods in approval. They’re both holding slushy-looking drinks with whipped cream on top.

“I think I’m going to get a hot chocolate,” Reagan says.

“You have to get coffee,” Leslie says.

“I don’t really like coffee,” Reagan says.

“You have to get used to it,” Annie says. She orders a mocha with extra whipped cream for Reagan.

“Aren’t there supposed to be sprinkles on this?” Annie asks when the drink was set out.

“Chocolate sprinkles?”

Reagan tucks and untucks her hair. Annie hands her the drink.

In The Limited Too, Leslie spreads pink body glitter over Reagan’s breast bone.

“This is supposed to draw boys’ eyes to your chest,” she giggles. Reagan giggles.

“Maybe this will finally get John-bee’s attention.”

“Stop!” Reagan laughs.

“You like John-Bee?” Annie asks.

“No,” Reagan says.

“Yes! You’re blushing!” Leslie says.

“No, I don’t! I don’t!” Reagan says, laughing so hard she can hardly talk. Leslie reaches out and smears the body glitter behind Reagan’s ear. Reagan stops laughing. “Leslie, it’s in my hair!” She tries to rub the body glitter away.

“Really, do you?” Annie asks again.

“No,” Reagan says, repetitively stroking the sticky strand of her hair. “I like Scott Phend. John-Bee is like my brother. That’s gross.”

“Does he like anyone?” Annie asks.

“I don’t know,” Reagan says. She starts to browse sunglasses, touching them without trying them on. She picks up a pair of blue plastic heart-shaped ones and stares at them in her hand.

“Do *you* have a crush on him?” Leslie asks Annie.

“No,” Annie says. “He’s short. Mallory does, though. She’s *crazy* about him.”

Annie twirls a finger next to her head to illustrate “crazy.”

Reagan could see her reflection in the sunglasses, but only sort of.

“They’d make a cute couple,” Leslie says.

“Oh my god, their babies would be so tiny,” Annie squeaks.

They laugh and continued to describe the babies, whose eyes, whose hair would be the funniest, John-bee’s cheek mole.

“Try them on already!” Leslie says suddenly to Reagan. She grabs the sunglasses from Reagan’s hand and places them on Reagan’s face. Reagan looks at herself and Annie and Leslie looking at her in the mirror.

“No,” Annie says.

“Yeah, no,” Leslie says.

Reagan takes off the sunglasses and looks at the blue hearts in her hand.

“Let’s go to the photo booth,” she says.

“Hold on, I want to try this on,” Annie says. Annie takes a T-shirt to the dressing room and Reagan follows Leslie around until Annie buys the shirt.

Outside the photo booth they preen in front of the 4-inch plastic mirror taped to the outside.

“Your new hair is so cute,” Leslie says, brushing it away from Reagan’s face.

A group of older boys by the Orange Julius place catch Reagan's gaze. Leslie follows it.

"They're looking at you!" Leslie whispers.

"Are you flirting with those guys?" Annie asks.

"No!" Reagan says.

"Look at their pants," Annie says. The boys are in baggy jeans. One boy, the tallest, has Jco's that rest several inches below the band of his boxers.

"This mall is so ghetto," Annie says.

The girls climb into the photo booth and Reagan perches awkwardly on her friends' knees. After the last flash the tall boy with the pants that won't stay up jumps into the booth and put his tongue into Leslie's ear.

"What the—" Leslie says, jumping up.

The boys run away laughing.

"He put his tongue in my ear!" Leslie yells, rubbing the side of her head.

"I guess he liked you," Annie says.

"Gross," Leslie says.

"Is that something people actually like?" Reagan asks.

"I know!" Leslie says. "God, the sound!"

Annie cracks up, slapping the photo booth. Reagan had meant the question sincerely, but doesn't bring it back up.

When they leave the mall it's dark. The girls sit in the very back of the mini-van and whisper.

"I'm not a chauffeur, you know," Renée calls back. The girls make no response.

"Truth," Leslie says.

“Okay,” Annie says. “Tell the truth: what’s the furthest you’ve been?”

“With a boy?” Leslie asks.

“Um, yeah,” Annie says, holding out the short a sound.

“I’ve only held hands,” Leslie says.

“But you did more with a girl?” Annie asks.

“Shhh,” Leslie says, looking towards Reagan’s mom.

“What did you do?” Annie asks.

“That wasn’t your truth,” Leslie says.

“Holding hands is not a good truth,” Annie says.

There is a small pause.

“Reagan and I play sex,” Leslie whispers.

“Oh my God, you’re lesbians!” Annie says.

“Shhh!” Leslie and Reagan hiss.

“It’s for *practice*,” Leslie says.

Reagan feels carsick.

“What do you practice?” Annie asks.

Leslie describes how she and Reagan hug with their shirts off, rubbing their hands up and down and calling each other by their made-up boy names.

“Reagan always goes by Ryan,” Leslie says.

Annie looks back and forth between Leslie and Reagan.

“That’s really gay, you guys,” Annie says.

“Whatever. It’s gay if you’re nervous. If you’re comfortable that means you don’t have feelings for the other person,” Leslie says.

“I think that’s weird,” Annie says.

“I think I have to go sit up front,” Reagan says. “I think I’m carsick.”

“Are you gonna puke?” Annie asks, wrinkling her nose.

“No,” Reagan mumbled. She crawled to the front.

“Finally,” Renée says. “Some company!”

Reagan says nothing and stares out the window watching streetlights flash past at regular intervals. The girls are quiet for the rest of the way home. Renée drops them off and they say “thank you” and “happy birthday” and “goodnight.” As they pull into their own driveway, Renée turns to Reagan and smiles.

“Did you have a good birthday?” she asked.

“I guess,” Reagan says.

In her room Reagan tapes the photo booth strip to her wall and cut the tags off a white Roxy T-shirt with navy flowers and sets it out to wear the next day.

The t-shirt still smells like petroleum and French fries, like the mall, when Reagan wears it to school the next day, but also like her sugarplum body spray. Leslie leans on the locker next to hers.

“Nice shirt. Did you get a Crush can?”

“I just got here,” Reagan says.

Leslie pulls a slip from the bottom of Reagan’s locker.

“Someone’s got a crush on you!” Leslie says. She shoves the slip into Reagan’s stomach.

Reagan looks down at the tiny bubble jet printer flier which proclaims, in orange font, “Someone has a crush on YOU! Find out WHO! \$1”

“Did you send it to me?” Reagan asks.

“No,” Leslie says. “That’s weird.”

Reagan looks at the slip and a feels a fluttering in her chest.

“Maybe John-Bee sent it to you,” Leslie says.

“Stop it,” Reagan says. She folded the mini-flyer and placed it in the front pocket of her jeans.

Reagan collects her Crush can at the folding table Yearbook had set up in the front lobby of the school under the lacquered, wood-mounted photographs of scholarship recipients.

“It’s a dollar to find out who your crush is,” the girl tells her.

Reagan looks at the can which is tearing up with condensation.

“Wouldn’t my crush just tell me?” Reagan asks.

“I guess,” the girl says. “But maybe not. Maybe they’re shy. That’s sort of the point.”

Reagan has a dollar, but she wants to save it to buy a package of Oreos to share with John-Bee at rehearsal after school.

“Can I come back?” Reagan asks.

“Um,” the girl says. “I guess so.”

Reagan takes the Crush can and studies it in her hand. It’s red-orange and lined with the absence of lines, small silver slivers of plain can that match the aluminum top. An orange slice sits on the canted white block letters lined in green: Crush; subtitle: orange. Through the course of the day, she memorizes its feel. The warm can feels emptier than the cold can. She doesn’t drink it at lunch. She spends the moments between other thoughts thinking “crush.”

After the bell rings she buys a package of four Oreos. On the way to the auditorium Reagan passes the Yearbook table again and hesitates.

“You have a crush,” Yearbook says, pointing at the can in Reagan’s hand.

Reagan smiles and keeps walking.

This auditorium is always dim, the red flip-down seats glowing slightly and artificially. The Crush can in Reagan’s hand and the seats seem like the same color until they’re next to each other. Everyone is waiting in the front two rows for the drama teacher, Mrs. Cole, and Reagan sits behind John-Bee just as Mrs. Cole flips the lights to signal the beginning of rehearsal. Reagan passes John-Bee an Oreo.

He points silently at her Crush can because they’re not allowed to talk once Mrs. Cole flips the lights. Reagan shrugs to say “I don’t know who sent it” then points to him to say “do you?” John-Bee grins and shrugs to say “maybe.” On the stage Mrs. Cole is telling them what scene is going on stage and what the others should be doing. Reagan blushes and twisted her Oreo.

She has a small part as Peter’s mom and usually sits with homework or a book if Mrs. Cole doesn’t have one of the volunteer drama coaches take her and Daniel to practice their scene in the hallway. She’s reading *Dubliners* and then Darren White leans over the red-orange seats from the row behind her and whispers.

“Reagan, Reagan,” he says. He pokes her side. Reagan is at the part of “Eveline” just after the foreign words. “Escape!” she reads.

“Look at John-Bee!” Darren White says.

Reagan looks at the stage where Mrs. Cole was shaking her head and having Mallory practice sitting on John-Bee’s lap.

“Not like he’s a *chair*, Mallory,” Mrs. Cole says. “He’s your daddy dearest. Put your arms around his neck.”

“Look,” Darren White says. “I think he has a hard-on.”

Reagan is confused.

“Oh my god, he does!” Darren says, giggling. “He has a boner!”

Reagan laughs nervously. She’s looking at the khakis spread across John-Bee’s lap but doesn’t know what she’s looking at.

“Boner!” Darren yells and ducks behind the theater seats.

Mallory and Mrs. Cole and John-Bee all look at Reagan. She laughs nervously.

“That wasn’t me,” she says, laughing.

“Darren, go home,” Mrs. Cole says. Darren White walks out of the auditorium still laughing and lets the door slam. Reagan squeezes her book in her hand. While Mrs. Cole has been watching Darren, Mallory has looked into John-Bee’s lap and John-Bee is crossing his legs and glaring at Reagan. Then Mrs. Cole turns around and sees Mallory’s red face and John-Bee’s crossed legs and rolls her eyes. “Bathroom break,” Mrs. Cole says. Then she gives Reagan a dirty look.

Reagan rushes to the hallway where John-Bee is heading for the bathroom with his hands in front of his crotch and his face turned towards the gray Marmoleum flooring.

“It wasn’t me!” Reagan says. She is trying not to laugh but can’t help it.

“You’re still laughing!” John-Bee says.

“I can’t help it!” Reagan says. She is also crying. When John-Bee goes into the bathroom and she waits outside the door, leaning on the cement wall. By the time he exits she isn’t laughing anymore.

“I’m sorry I laughed; I didn’t think it was funny. I hate Darren White,” Reagan says.

“I’m not talking to you,” John-Bee says.

“Do you like Mallory?” Reagan asks.

“Go away!” John-Bee says. He didn’t stop to talk to her; she has been following him. Now she stops following him. He enters the auditorium and she stays in the hallway, crying and wiping her nose on her sleeve. In the hallway between the auditorium and the drama classroom are posters tacked to a construction-paper covered bulletin board that read “Drama=Life” and “Act!” They look Clip-art-y and bad and way too brightly colored. When Reagan thinks about Mallory sitting on John-Bee’s lap her chest feels tight and sinking. Hot pink poster board blurs in front of her. She grabs her stuff from the auditorium without saying anything to Mrs. Cole and on her way out of the school carries the Crush can in her hand like it is the last happy memory she will ever have. The can is bad and way too brightly colored, too, garish and unfitting for the whole dusky walk home. When Renée says something about how she was going to pick her up and asks what’s wrong, Reagan says nothing, just walks into her room and shuts the door and puts the Crush can on her dresser and begins weeping into her pillow.

After two minutes, Renée opens the door without knocking and Reagan yells “go away” and “knock” with sobs.

Renée stands at the door.

“What happened?”

Reagan says nothing and Renée sits on the edge of the bed and waits before asking again, “What happened?,” and Reagan tells her mom that Darren White yelled “boner” at John-Bee during play practice and she thought he had a crush on Mallory. Renée has a series of questions for Reagan: Did she know what that word meant? Did she see anything? Reagan answers: yes, yes, and Renée is on the phone to John-Bee’s mom in no time flat.

“What is wrong with your son? He’s flashing people at school!”

And Reagan yells from the bedroom for her to stop, that isn't what happened, but she doesn't stop.

The weekend stretches out as long as the field out her window and Reagan, staring out at it, imagines her sadness filling the whole thing. It isn't gray outside at all and the sunlight makes everything seem worse. That morning, she had pulled on her only black t-shirt. She had thought continuously since the boner remark that she would never be happy again. She swears not to eat, then around lunch time gives in and eats a Nutrigrain bar, in gulping dry and sticky mouthfuls and dramatic swallows. Then she looks at their driveway. She had started thinking that if she prayed enough John-Bee's mom's Camry would be there, that her mom would run out apologizing to his mom and his mom would say that John and Reagan were such special friends, this shouldn't come between their special friendship; or maybe that just John-Bee alone would be standing there in his blue windbreaker, would have walked all the way there to say he was sorry and he missed her. When Reagan passes through the living room Renée looks up from the TV and says,

“Oh, baby. You'll survive. Stand up straight.”

That makes her want to leave the house. So she says she's going to go ride her bike and pedals to the road behind John-Bee's cul-de-sac with the fall wind in her eyes and the dead leaves twisting themselves into her spokes and just stands there, straddling her bike on the edge of the country road, facing the half-suburban cluster of brown houses where she could see a bright orange pumpkin in John-Bee's backyard and the window which she knew was his kitchen window, but nothing through it. She prays and her heart sinks and she wonders how her heart

can keep sinking if she never feels it go up. It's a Shephard tone, she thinks, like she learned about in Science.

She doesn't see John-Bee that weekend and at school Monday, from the moment she gets off the bus in the school parking lot, she's looking. But she just sees Leslie, waiting next to her locker.

"So," Leslie says. "You and John-Bee had a falling out."

"That's not true," Reagan says. She looks at her combination and her backpack and her books and not Leslie. "How do you get here so early every day?"

"My brother always wants to get to his school early so he can play Magic in the cafeteria with his nerd friends," Leslie says. She made a wizard hat out of her two hands above her head.

"I haven't talked to him," Reagan. "My mom called his mom."

Then Annie walks by and looks over and doesn't stop to say hi. That's when Reagan knows it isn't over yet. During Math Mallory's friend Becky turns and looks at her with her eyes squinted and tosses her hair, and then all through Science she is distracted with worry. When she leaves class Leslie is somehow already by the door with a girl she know from English class, Jessica.

"There are rumors," Jessica says. "That you are spreading rumors about John-Bee and Mallory because you are jealous that they are going out."

"They're going out?" Reagan asks.

"Since first period," Leslie says.

"But I didn't even know that," Reagan says.

"They're snobs," Leslie says. "Becky and Mallory and John-Bee and their other boyfriends. They're preppies."

Mallory enters the hall flanked by Becky and Annie and passes them. Becky is looking directly not at any of them in the chin-in-the-air way and Annie is looking at the floor and Reagan is looking at Mallory who is hurrying a little, it seems, in her baby doll dress and panty hose. She's pretty, Reagan thinks.

"Annie is a traitor," Leslie says. Then Leslie slips her arm through Reagan's and Jessica does the same and in this way Reagan is led into the cafeteria, in the wake of Mallory, and is obliged to set her books down at the table across from the other girls' so that when they return with their lunch trays she and Leslie and Jessica are sitting to eat their lunches with their backs to the others and every next addition to their lunch table, Tiffany and Britney and Andrea, with the rippled plastic of their salad containers and the neon boxes of their fruit drinks, chooses a side, and sides with her.

Reagan had a wall of things from her friends that faces her bed. She's staring at it when the phone rings, twice, and her mom answers it, then knocks on her bedroom door and says John Bailey is on the phone for her.

"Hello?" Reagan says.

"Hi," he says.

Reagan watches her mom leave the room and listens to her footsteps head back into the living room.

"I don't want to be best friends anymore," John-Bee says. "I think we're going in different directions."

Reagan is immediately crying.

"Since when?" she asks. She hears herself sniffing back tears.

"I don't know. I'm sorry," he says. "I have to go."

When she sniffs, the sound her sniff makes through the phone is like a scratching.

It's at this time that Reagan begins to imagine her Jr. High school divided like a brain is split left and right. On the left side, which she calls "the boring side," are the preppies, and on the right side, which Reagan knows is the creative side, are herself and her friends. This division is embodied most fully in the lunchroom as Reagan and her friends sit at one of the large, round, 8-chair laminate tables and Mallory and her friends sit at a different large, round, 8-chair laminate table situated approximately catty-corner. There in the red magma of the low red-and-black berber carpeted lunchroom, the girls make two brown circles ringed in brunette and blonde. They always sit at the same tables.

"Our tables are like a brain," Reagan says to her friends. "Like two different sides. We're the right side."

Tiffany asks about the brain stem. Reagan doesn't know what the brain stem would be. She keeps wondering as she goes to Math class and Science class and Health class.

She has to keep going to play practice. She'd wanted to quit and she'd told her mom about it, but when Renée had agreed that it certainly made sense and that none of the teachers were fair and that students with parents in high places would get away with anything, then started talking about the basketball player at her Christian college who everyone had known was a rapist but the championships were coming up, Reagan thought her mom had missed the point and she stopped listening and her mind wandered to who would play Peter's mom now that the play was almost finished and would Annie feel bad knowing she was part of why Reagan had quit or would she be haughty, triumphant over driving her out, would they go on without her with relief, happiness, glee, would they, when she was far from earshot, talk shit about her and

make fun of her bangs, would Mrs. Cole know about it and smile and not stop them, or would no one even notice she was gone? She had spent a long time getting her costume to be Peter's mom.

"I should probably stick it out," Reagan says to her mom. "I don't want to make it worse than it already is."

So she keeps going to play practice, and in the times when she has to wait in the auditorium, she slouches with a book, trying not to look at anyone. This is how she is when Daniel Miller creeps up behind her and taps her shoulder very lightly, one gentle, slow open-palmed tap that seems to already be asking if she is ok.

But what he says is "Mr. Anderson is here." Reagan follows Daniel out into the hallway to practice.

They do not have a lot of lines to practice. In most of the scenes they remain in the background, but in one scene it's just Reagan and Daniel. The scene ends with an embrace.

Reagan has summoned every romantic comedy she'd seen to know how to look at someone she loved. The scene closes with a blackout, so they have to hold their embrace and keep acting. Mr. Anderson had reminded them several times. Reagan realizes in this run that she's grown familiar with Daniel's laundry soap smell as she leans into him with her eyes closed.

Mr. Anderson applauds and Daniel Miller releases her. She and Daniel smile at each other. Mr. Anderson makes a camera gesture with his hands.

"Are you two really married?" he asks. "That was great! Make sure you do it just like that on the big night."

"I was thinking," Daniel says, "since the pause is so long until blackout, that maybe I should do something, like stroke her hair or something."

“No, no, no, no, no,” Mr. Anderson says. “Just like you just did.”

Reagan looks at Daniel, who shrugs.

“You were great,” he says. “Do you want a pop?”

When Daniel Miller offers her the pop, it is suddenly revealed to Reagan the way things are revealed to men in the Bible—she has that thought—that Daniel Miller has a crush on her, that he had since they’d started play practice and that all this time she had not ever noticed or considered it, that all these hugs over the weeks had been real for him, that he wanted to stroke her hair, that he wanted to be her boyfriend, and that she was going to have to think fast about if she liked him back or not: did she want to kiss him? No one had asked her out for real before, not since she’d started Jr. High and it really meant something. She becomes quiet and blushing and afraid to look Daniel in the face.

“Okay,” she says.

She follows Daniel to the pop machine at the end of the hallway. They have to walk past at least five classrooms and it’s silent the whole way and her palms are sweating and she hadn’t brushed her teeth that morning.

“What kind of pop do you like?” Daniel asks.

“I don’t know,” Reagan says.

They both stand there in the red Coke glow.

“Do you like Orange Crush?” Daniel asks. “Did you get one last week?”

Reagan nods.

Daniel swallowed.

“Did you find out who had a crush on you?” he asks.

“No,” Reagan says.

“Oh,” Daniel says.

Regan wipes her palms.

“I like root beer,” she says.

He says one root beer is coming right up. The pop machine makes a mechanical munching sound as it takes his dollar and then Daniel hands her the can and they make eye contact for the first time since their scene. Daniel looks away.

“Hey, Reagan,” he says. “Has anyone asked you to the Spring Fling yet?”

The Spring Fling is more than four months away.

“No,” Reagan says. She holds the root beer can unopened.

“Oh,” Daniel says. “Well,” he says. He looks at her, then at the floor again. “Do you want to go with me?” he asks.

Reagan sees Daniel Miller, blushing and awkward, his bowl cut falling into his eyes every time he looks at the ground. He is tall and pale and skinny, but he doesn't have acne and his shirts are good. He has his hands in his pockets, waiting, holding his breath, for her. And the fact that Daniel Miller has a crush on her means that it wasn't all just random who liked her, based on cliques that had started way back in elementary school, that she wasn't just 'not preppy' and 'not rich' and 'not on the honor roll,' but desirable, crushable, by Daniel Miller who was not bad-looking, and she remembers the long, sad weekend without John-Bee and thinks “things are different now” and says,

“Okay.”

Which isn't at all how she describes the experience in *The Notebook*, a blue, 80-page college rule with a cover pasted over in stickers that Reagan and Leslie and Jessica and Britney and Andrea and Tiffany passed around to each other in the hallways. *The Notebook* is full of

secrets. They gossip and whine and doodle, about boys, about girls, about clothes. They devised a ranking system for boys composed of a letter for overall body, then a number for eyes, a number for face, and a number for personality. Justin Williams, the forward on the basketball team, was an A211, losing some points for having pretty standard brown eyes, but otherwise found to be impressively handsome and, they guessed, from his cute face and mild manner in the classroom, a both sweet and smart personality. Darren White was a D233 for being pretty fat (though not entirely) and, okay, nothing really wrong with the eyes but a too-round face and awful personality. They used code names in case the notebook should it ever be intercepted. In the notebook, Reagan swoons over Daniel Miller's good looks, the fact that his eyes weren't really brown but sort of hazel, and that it had been so romantic, their first kiss there by the pop machine, and so sweet the way he was shy about telling her that he had sent her the Crush can.

Just before lunch, in Science, Reagan has the notebook and makes lots of doodles. Mr. Dean lectures about the organization of the periodic table. Gasses here, solids here, and mass. In front of Reagan is a quiet girl named Shelby who loaned her a pencil once. In the front row by the door sits Mallory. Mr. Dean says, "Noble gasses." Reagan thinks of princesses with princes rescuing, her mom resting in her dark bedroom with the window open. Mr. Dean says, "Potassium, Calcium, Scandium." Mr. Dean says, "The lightest come first."

What Reagan most often observes about Mallory in the notebook is that her jeans are stiff and that she is probably anorexic, but her observations which go unrecorded are that Mallory has excellent posture, that Mallory often gets notes from her mom at lunch and doesn't act embarrassed at all but smiles and sometimes shows them to the friend beside her, that Mallory's hair is almost exactly the same color as a Werther's Original candy.

Class ends at the bell. Reagan has drawn a tower with a window but no princess yet.

Usually at the end of lunch, before heading to the playground, they pass around the notebook to look at new entries or discuss the T-shirts the preppies were wearing or the haircut of a boy in their class, but today is different.

“I want to try this game,” Leslie says.

It’s the first time they play “the laughing game.”

“All that you do is make up a laugh,” Leslie says. “And everyone keeps laughing. Okay?”

Leslie laughs like Count Dracula. Reagan laughs. Andrea laughs. Andrea snorts. Tiffany laughs. Jessica laughs like Eddie Murphy and Andrea laughs. Leslie laughs. Reagan makes a high-pitched laugh like a chipmunk, which isn’t exactly what she was going for, but makes her blush and laugh and Leslie laughs and Andrea laughs and Jessica laughs and Tiffany laughs. Tiffany makes a “huck huck huck” laugh and Andrea falls off her chair and Leslie slaps the table and Reagan’s sides hurt and Tiffany laughs and Leslie laughs and Reagan laughs and they all laugh.

It is this they let out, their laughter, careless and grieving, uncovered by their force and sarcasm and set loose over the cafeteria, over the sporks, the soda cans, the low red carpet, the green fiberglass lunch trays, the aluminum steam trays, the heads of their peers and the heads of their teachers, this lie that made itself true, this gasping and shaking and snorting, this joy under what they’d put on. All around the cafeteria eyes are on them. They don’t need anyone. They laugh and laugh. They cannot stop.

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In the last weeks of the school year, the windows are open in all the classrooms, and that's where Reagan's eyes are, out the window and on the bright blue sky stretched over all the places she'd soon have her whole days to spend at. From time to time the rumble of a lawnmower, the smell of cut grass, the rattle of an old engine, or even a moment of shade cast by a cloud passing over the sun reminds her of the vast spaces outside the classroom, her backyard and the public pool and the trees by the river and the long days of free time to match it. She will lay out on her roof and tan and drink lemonade and read books and write poems and be left alone for once to do something meaningful with her life. Whatever she wants to do, it'd be up to her, and she won't have to be in class with Annie or Mallory or the other Jessica.

On the last day of school she and Leslie and Tiffany link arms and run down the halls telling the sixth graders to duck. They are taller and better dressed and more grown up than those little kids because after this summer they will be on top, in eighth grade. They are practically already in high school, and high school is the part of life always on TV and movies. Their time is almost here.

On those summer mornings the sun comes up before 6 and Reagan hears her mom getting ready and birds singing and then the crunch of gravel as her mom's car makes its semi-circle around the house's circle drive. She falls back asleep and wakes up again when the sun is brighter and her bedroom hot. Her t-shirt sticks to her and she hears her little brother watching TV in the living room. She walks the couple steps to the bathroom and showers and pick out something cute to wear and eats a Nutrigrain bar for breakfast while staring out the sliding glass doors on the breakfast nook at the bright sunlight on the grass and the fields and thinks about what to do that day. Then she fights with Travis over what channel to watch or walks around outside alone, squinting, not looking at anything in particular but the horizon.

She is only allowed to leave Travis alone after she makes him lunch, and only for a few hours, and only if he isn't scared. He whines a lot about being left alone and how he's bored and scared and Reagan doesn't believe it but her mom babies him. At first that summer when she'd want to be at the pool with her friends and didn't want to take Travis along he'd threatened to call their mom and tell, she'd get mad and be mean to him to try to get him to let her go. She took his Army guys and popped their legs off and then called him into his room and showed him how she was driving a tank over them and they couldn't fire their guns because she'd broken their arms off and now they were dead. She jumped up and down on them. "Look at your stupid Army guys now!" she yelled. Travis cried and told their mom and she was grounded for a week. She felt bad looking at them fifteen minutes after Travis ran from the room. She popped their arms back in and went and got Travis and showed him how they were fine, she was just playing, they were really strong, she promised. She was really sorry. She begged him not to tell their mom, but he did. Now it was tense between them every afternoon. She'd threaten not to open the Spaghetti's and make him eat a peanut butter and jelly sandwich if he didn't let her go. She'd do something like start building a fort with him in the backyard and when he was really into it she'd say "why don't you just do this till Mom gets home? Ok?" and then run out of the yard before he could say anything. But he ran out of the fort looking terrified, standing there next to the circle drive looking in both directions to see if she'd taken off on her bike already, and she sighed and stopped. "Travy, I just want to see my friends!" she pleaded. "Everyone else gets to go to the pool all day and I'm stuck here with you! Why don't *you* have any friends to play with?" Travis kicked over the fort and cried and told their mom when she got home.

Renée gets home at 4. But when she's home she asks questions and Reagan has to say that no, she wasn't going to be alone with Daniel. She's too afraid to lie to her mom, so a lot of the time she calls Leslie and begs her to go to the park with her and Daniel. Leslie catches on.

It's a summer day just like that. Reagan is sweaty, holding onto the kitchen phone and staring out the sliding glass doors feeling so antsy she thinks she might really explode if Leslie can't go to the park.

"Please, Leslie. I'm dying here. I've been home with Travy for weeks," Reagan says.

"I don't even know if you really want to be friends with me anymore," Leslie says. "You only call me so that you can hang out with Daniel."

"Of course we're friends," Reagan says. "I just spent the night last week. We had our girl time. You're a really good friend helping us be together."

Reagan can hear Leslie sigh.

"We better really hang out this time," Leslie says. "You better not just wander off and make-out."

"We're not just going to wander off and make-out," Reagan says, though that's what she was hoping to do. She bikes as fast as she can to the park and pulls her lip gloss out of her pocket and then there he is, her boyfriend, walking past the picnic tables, holding a lily. She waits, blushing. Behind him Leslie is riding up on her mountain bike looking morose. Reagan hugs Daniel and kisses him and then stops when she hears Leslie ride up. The two of them say hi and face her, holding hands. She looks them over and rolls her eyes.

"I swear to God, if we don't actually hang out this time, I'm going to kill myself," Leslie says.

Daniel raises his eyebrows at her and thrust his head toward Reagan.

“Leslie,” he hisses.

“WHAT,” she says.

Daniel says her name again with a pleading inflection.

“Reagan’s mom,” he says.

“Oh,” Leslie says quickly.

“What?” Reagan asks. “What are you guys talking about?”

“See, it doesn’t matter,” Leslie says.

“What doesn’t matter?” Reagan asks.

Daniel gives Leslie a dirty look.

“I just don’t think it’s funny to joke about suicide around you after what happened with your mom,” Daniel says.

“It was just a joke,” Leslie says.

Reagan looks between her boyfriend and her best friend. They don’t really like each other. They only hang out together for Reagan. Now they are staring each other down, Daniel’s face stern and concerned, Leslie slouching defensively, about to launch into the same thing she always says, the same thing Reagan had heard on the other afternoons like this about how Reagan was her best friend and she’d known her a lot longer than he had and once they got to high school she and Daniel probably wouldn’t even be together anymore. But she has no idea what they’re fighting about today.

“What are you guys talking about?” Reagan asks.

And their expressions change.

“Your mom was in the hospital,” Daniel says. “When we were little.”

“She didn’t commit suicide,” Reagan says.

Leslie and Daniel look at each other. Reagan hears a fly buzz by her ear and brushes it away and stares at these faces of the two people closest to her in the world, acne-spotted and sunburned and freckled and awkward and sad and scared and not looking at her as she realizes that five years ago her mom had attempted suicide and she has just found out.

What had she thought this whole time? Just that her mom had left pills out on the back of the toilet like she always did. When she was eight, what did she know about suicide? Nothing. Nothing. The dog had always been getting into things. They were always supposed to close the bathroom door because he'd get in there and shred the toilet paper and her mom had left the door open and left the pills out when she went to the hospital overnight for her allergies and Jelly had died and that was all she knew this whole time. Her mom was going to the hospital all the time back then and still now and it was never serious. She didn't know. Her mom had almost died. This whole time she didn't know.

"I didn't know," Reagan says.

Daniel still doesn't really look at her, but he pulls her in for a hug. She can hear him swallowing.

"I'm sure she's better now," Leslie says. Her voice has softened almost to a point Reagan doesn't recognize. "That was a long time ago."

Everyone else knew.

Reagan starts to cry.

"It's okay," Daniel says. He strokes her hair. In the distance a lifeguard blows a whistle. Children are laughing. Her childhood is over.

Leslie throws her bike on the ground.

"I hate the world!" she yells.

Later that night Reagan and her mom and Travis are all watching TV together after dinner. Renée tries to put her arm around Travis to snuggle and he squirms away.

“Stop, Mom,” he says.

And out of nowhere Reagan hears herself snap at him.

“Be nice to our mom,” she says, and pinches him on the arm.

All three of them are taken aback, but they just keep watching Dr. Quinn Medicine Woman.

Just before school starts again, Reagan’s dad takes her out for lunch, just the two of them. All summer Reagan watched Great Chefs on the Discovery channel while she ate frozen pizza. In her hometown, there are restaurants the kind you go to with your parents—Applebee’s, Bob Evans, Pizza Hut—and that’s it, not restaurants the kind on Great Chefs, but she still orders the steak at Bob Evans, medium-rare, thinking of an episode of Great Chefs she saw about Kansas City.

Reagan asks John if he had steak in Kansas City.

“Sure,” he says. “It’s pretty good beef out there.”

Reagan asks why the beef would be any different in Kansas than it was in Indiana and he guesses something about the soil and grass, then told her that Kansas City was mostly in Missouri.

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Reagan said.

He laughs.

“I reckon they’re not as smart as you, whoever came up with that,” John says. “You kids are smart. You get that from your mom.”

Reagan wants to know about other places he'd driven through in his truck.

"Oh, I don't know," John says. "The highway looks mostly the same everywhere." He doesn't elaborate and butters a roll. He takes a sip of his Mountain Dew.

He wants to talk to Reagan about boys.

"Dad, I already heard 'the talk,'" Reagan says.

"Yeah? What'd your mom say?" John asks.

"Mom didn't say anything; I heard about it at school," Reagan says. Her dad looks surprised so she adds "Years ago."

"Well what you heard might not have been accurate," John says.

"Dad," she says. "I'm almost fourteen. I know about sex."

His ears turn red just hearing his daughter say the word.

"Almost fourteen?" John asks. "Now look here, your birthday is 4, almost 5 months away. You're not almost 14. And don't you get in a hurry to grow up so fast. That there attitude is why I have to talk to you about this."

Reagan hides her face with a dinner roll and stares at her plate. For a second she is worried her dad can see straight through her, knows exactly how much she knows about sex. Because she had learned about sex very generally at school, about cycles and pregnancy and abstinence, but over the summer while her mom was at work, when she was at Daniel's house where his parents let him close his bedroom door, when they were walking around the church basement after youth group, she hadn't gone all the way but she definitely knows how to get there. She knows enough about how to get there to feel a little sick when "purity" is mentioned at youth group.

“Now I know it’s embarrassing to talk with your parents about this, but you oughta ask your mom about the birds and the bees so that there’s no surprises,” her dad says.

“Okay, Dad,” Reagan says.

“I mean it,” he says. “Okay? And that’s not it. Now I know Daniel is a good guy,” he said.

Reagan doesn’t dare look up. She sips her Mountain Dew.

“He is, right?” John asks.

Reagan nods.

“He better be,” John says. “Alright, but even if he is a good guy, even good guys his age have hormones. Especially at his age.”

“Dad,” Reagan whines.

“Alright, alright, I’m almost done here, but I just need to tell you that you need to be careful not to get carried away,” he says. “I love you and you need to know that you’re special and any guy who’s good enough for you can wait until he puts a ring on your finger. Your mom and I, we got carried away. You weren’t a surprise, but things happened and we got married.”

“Okay,” Reagan says. They wait in silence until the waiter brings their food.

In the car on the way to drop her off at home, John tells Reagan he isn’t going to be able to take her out to lunch so much anymore.

“We don’t have to go to restaurants so much,” Reagan says. “I like when you make pancakes for dinner, too.”

John smiles and pats her knee.

“It’s not that, sweetheart,” he says. He tells her that he’s taking a job in a town about an hour away and that he and her mom had agreed that she and Travis would come stay with him every other weekend.

“I don’t want to leave every other weekend,” Reagan says.

“Well, that parts not up to you,” John says.

Then they don’t talk for awhile. Reagan stares out the window.

“You know, the highway does look a little different in places,” John says. “Like in Florida, of course. There’s swamp and palm trees and bugs, tons of bugs, they get all over my windows. And in Iowa there’s corn fields like we’ve got here but they’re huge, far as the eye can see.”

“Do you ever drive through cities?” Reagan asks.

“Oh sure, sometimes. Some of the interstates you can see the city from. St. Louis is like that. You can see the arch from far away.”

“If you’re going to move you should go to a city,” Reagan says.

“Whys that,” he asks.

“There’s stuff there. Museums and cool restaurants and lots of stuff to do,” Reagan says.

“Well I’d miss you too much,” John says.

Through the window of her dad’s car Reagan watches Indiana slide by. On all sides, crossed with county highways and drainage ditches and abandoned rails, is the not-quite prairie. The trees are thin and small. There are puddles, half-swamps, small soy fields, electric fences surrounding a shed and two horses. It is not beautiful, asks for nothing. It’s okay.

Later that week, two days before the first day of school, Reagan gets her first period. She wads up her underwear in the laundry hamper and finds her mother’s maxi pads under the

bathroom sink and shuts herself in her room. She thinks, The moment we've all been waiting for. She thinks, I can't believe I have to do this every month. Then she cries. When she gets home from work, Renée comes in to grab the laundry hamper.

“What’s wrong, baby?” Renée asks.

“Nothing!” Reagan shouts.

“Jesus, the hormones,” Renée mumbles as she leaves the room. “You don’t have to be so nasty.”

Five minutes later Renée returns.

“Did you shit your pants?” she asks.

“No!” Reagan yells. She sobbed into her pillow.

Renée leaves again. Reagan can hear the washing machine start up. Then Renée comes back and sat on Reagan’s bed. She strokes her daughter’s hair. She assures her she will get used to it.

At school, at lunch, Reagan puts down her backpack at the regular table from last year; next to it, Annie is putting down her backpack at the preppies’ regular table. Reagan says hi to Tiffany, then says she has to go to the bathroom and takes the backpack with her.

The bathroom doesn’t have any of the little trash cans so Reagan has to walk out of the stall with a wad of toilet paper to the trash can under the paper towel dispenser. As she’s washing her hands, Becky walks in, with a little purse slung across her chest. Reagan hears a sticky sound like a Band-Aid being removed.

The bathroom, Reagan thinks, is the brainstem.

In the town in Indiana where Reagan grows up, all of the schools are taking a standardized test when the two planes fly into the twin towers in New York, all of the students filling in Scantrons until lunch when the teachers announce the tragedy and turn on the classroom TVs. Reagan feels a vague fear as she watches the footage of the towers falling play and replay. She rolls her yellow pencil in the pencil groove at the top of her desk. In her homeroom some of the girls are crying, but the only person from their school who has a relative in New York is Eric Matthews, who has already been called down to the office to get a note from his mom that said his cousin was fine, far away from that part of New York—they are all sitting around talking about these things, and about if there will be a war, and about Indiana’s safety from terrorist attack. Some of the students are holding hands and praying.

The principal announces over the intercom that so long as they have a safe way home they are free to go and that a time will be set up to finish the I-Step after school. Two of the most hysterical girls excuse themselves, but Reagan and everyone else in her homeroom look around at each other and remain seated. The TVs are turned off. They go back to filling in bubbles.

Thirty minutes later Reagan is called down to the office where she finds Daniel sitting on the edge of one of the mauve and teal armchairs that face the secretary’s desk.

“Daniel came to walk you to his house. I called your mom and she said that if you aren’t feeling well you can go to his house,” the secretary says. Reagan is confused and looks back at Daniel.

“I know how you get such bad stomach aches because of your stomach thing and your house is so far away so I had Mrs. Deeter call your mom to see if it was ok for you to come home with me if you’re not feeling good,” Daniel says. “I knew you probably wouldn’t want to bug your mom at work.”

There is a small pause.

“Oh,” Reagan says.

“Are you feeling sick?” the secretary asks.

“Yes,” Reagan says. “My stomach hurts.”

“Alright, let’s have Daniel sign you out,” Mrs. Deeter says. Reagan takes Daniel’s hand as they leave the office. “No PDA,” Mrs. Deeter calls after them.

When they get to the sidewalk Reagan hugs Daniel dramatically. She isn’t sure why. But she doesn’t let go of the hug and Daniel rubs her back with a whispery sound coming from the friction against her windbreaker.

“We’re going to be safe, right?” Reagan asks.

“Of course,” Daniel says. “Nothing is going to happen to us.”

She pulls away.

“You snuck me out of school,” she says.

“I wanted to be with you,” he says.

“I don’t really understand what’s happening,” Reagan says. “With the airplanes.”

“Don’t worry,” Daniel says. “Someone did something evil, but we’ll be alright.”

The whole town looks a little quiet. At the post office the flag has been lowered and no one is going in or out. Traffic on the main street is thin and they cross without waiting, holding hands the whole way. Daniel touches her back when he opens the front door like he is guiding her in, like she really has a stomach ache, and his face in its somber expression looks older a little when he turns to face her, when he takes her coat and hangs it in the closet by the stairs of his family’s crowded duplex. He has to pull hard because the door is always sticking and some of the other coats fall when he makes room for her coat.

“You don’t have to hang up my coat,” Reagan says.

He hugs her and kisses her. No one else is home. They sit silently on the couch.

“Should we watch the news?” Daniel asks.

“No,” Reagan says. She puts her head on his shoulder and he kisses her. The world is changing, Reagan thinks. She keeps kissing Daniel. Something bad had happened and what are they going to do? They are alone and Daniel unbuttons her jeans. Things keep happening. They are supposed to wait. She doesn’t want to do anything that will count.

“We should stop,” Reagan says, but they cannot stop. Then Daniel goes into the bathroom for the toilet paper. He kneels in front of her with it, wiping the couch.

“When we graduate we’ll get married,” Daniel says. “It’s ok.”

He reaches up and pulls her down to him and her head dangles over his shoulder so that she is staring at a piece of lint on the flat blue carpet.

“I want to spend my whole life with you,” Daniel says. “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” Reagan says. Then they put on their clothes and flip through the channels on the TV, looking for a network that isn’t showing coverage of the attacks, until they find a cartoon on Nickelodeon.

His sister is up on that stage smiling like I'll get out looking so sweet, and his mom and probably those judges up there, too, they're all smiling back, all of those girls in their dresses looking like "such nice girls," that's what everyone's thinking, he can tell. Well, they're not. Stuck up and dirty—depraved is the right word—always going through the hallway with their noses in the air like they're too good for everyone and on the weekends they're sneaking off to drink beer in their cars. He knows! But everyone here is just falling for it, their sweet little smiles. They've got the wrong idea about every single one of them, except maybe the fat girl and the girl in the wheelchair who they're all acting like such good friends with but he'd bet a hundred dollars that after tonight they won't even look at the fat girl.

They're all so shallow! Last night Reagan started yelling at their mom for not ironing her t-shirt for the fitness portion. And when his mom told her it was silly to iron a t-shirt she started crying and yelling—she's *always* crying and yelling—that "she doesn't understand" and "just because no one ever asked her to be in a beauty pageant" and "why won't she ever support her" and stormed off to her room to cry and his mom, who was tired and just watching Survivor with him like they always do, got up to iron the stupid shirt. Can't it wait till after the show? He asked. Tell me what happens, she said.

Reagan doesn't understand how hard their mom works, never helps out. She takes everything for granted. Everything is all about her, all the time, so now here he is at this stupid "scholarship program" watching his sister walk slowly in a figure eight like a cow on the selling floor at the county fair, his mom on the edge of her seat because she wants her to get the ribbon that "means so much to her." The prize isn't even close to college tuition. She'd of been better off using all this time practicing studying. He doesn't understand why no one is seeing the truth

here. His mom thinks it's her fault that Reagan is so sad and angry all the time. She says so. She says to him, when he apologizes for Reagan, "it's my fault."

Because of the divorce. When they moved to the new house Reagan wouldn't talk to her for a week. She went in her new room and wouldn't come out and his mom, leaving for work, would kiss him goodbye and just look at Reagan not even looking back. He was little then and he knew then, at five or six, that his sister was being no way to be. It would make him cry, his sister being so mean to their mom. He'd yell and once he punched her in the arm, but his mom would tell him to "leave her alone. She's mad at me."

But they decided together. His mom and dad. It was nobody's fault. If she should be mad at anyone it ought to be their dad. His dad could have gotten a job that left more time for their family.

But no one's ever asked him what he thinks about the divorce. Everyone's always trying to make Reagan happy. Well fat chance of that happening.

Just as he thinks that his mom leans to him and whispers in his ear: "She needs to keep smiling." And sure enough her teeth aren't showing anymore like they're supposed to and she looks almost like she's smirking. Why'd he have to come here to "support" her if she can't even try for one night? She won't be happy with nothing.

Like this dress she's wearing. Reagan's prom dresses were all wrong for the pageant. Reagan didn't care about that, but his mom heard from Linda at work whose daughters were in the pageant once that the judges want the girls to look conservative, so his mom borrowed her this dress, with the neckline up at a reasonable height. It's a pretty dress. He likes it. But not Reagan. She doesn't like how it's lavender or sparkly. She wanted to "be herself." What's the point of that in a beauty pageant? And why broadcast to the whole community that your

personality is best expressed in frowns and cleavage, anyway? No, his mom wouldn't be so worried about making her happy if she'd walked in on what he's walked in on after school in the family room. He knows it's not his mom's fault, but the fault of Reagan's own wickedness that she can't be happy.

That's what the pastor said at Christ Youth. Last month their youth group rode in the church van two hours to stay at the convention center for the rally. Reagan came, too, but the whole time just kept sneaking PDA with her emo boyfriend. She should've been listening to the message. Pastor Steve was all lit in the stage lights and pacing with conviction and just about crying God had laid it on his heart so hard. He said, Children of God, keep your eyes on the cross. This is your prize. It's like baseball—you have to keep your eye on the ball if you want to make contact. Don't let your eyes stray. Don't let yourself be tempted. In first Corinthians the apostle Paul says to run in such a way as the get the prize. He is preparing you a mansion in Heaven. The Devil wants you to fail. The temptations of the flesh are traps the Devil has set for you. But you must be strong, young men and women in Christ. Maybe it's spaghetti straps, or maybe secular music, or pornography. You don't need that junk. The Devil's snares. First Corinthians 10:13 says God will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear and that God will provide you a way out. God is good amen? What a loving God we serve.

When they bowed their heads he memorized the verse. First Corinthians 10:13. A way out. First Corinthians 10:13.

Then the band played a ska version of "I've got the joy joy joy joy joy joy" and they all danced in the presence of God. And that's what he has that Reagan doesn't. Down in his heart, a way out.

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Reagan couldn't see him, couldn't find anywhere her boyfriend, who, at his house before she came here to the school to get ready for Junior Lady, had a fresh cut on his arm in the row of scars and scabs on their way to being scars covering his whole left bicep. She doesn't understand the cutting. She's depressed, too, but she doesn't understand what cutting an arm does to help it. Daniel doesn't have any good answers. He said he just felt like doing it and that doing it he felt release. It's too literal for her to grasp. It doesn't solve anything. He's always having to worry about getting caught. He can't take his shirt off to go swimming and when they go to concerts and buy all those tight black band t-shirts he has to look carefully at the sleeves. Sometimes they're too short and he wastes his money on little shirts he can't even wear, because of the cuts.

All of the girls in Junior Lady had just finished the opening ceremony and filed into the gymnasium they were using for a dressing room. It has a wall of mirrors on one side that they use sometimes for gymnastics, but now has cafeteria tables drug in front of them, covered in duffle bags and makeup and changes of outfits. They have their gowns and their business casual interview clothes and their workout clothes and their talent costumes all spread out there. The physical fitness portion is next, so around the gymnasium girls are pulling on sneakers and practicing the aerobics routine together. They step-kick and high knees prance and punch at the air.

Reagan hates the way she looks in the Coca-Cola t-shirt they have to wear during the physical fitness portion and she doesn't like her gown, either. The t-shirt is too big so it drapes over her hips and makes her look fat. They rolled up the sleeves and tied ribbon around them to

make them more cute, but she still looks fat. And the dress is too pink. It's not her. It's girly and she isn't girly at all. She doesn't like pink or glitter or pop music or highlighting her hair. She's in a band. She reads Hemingway.

She doesn't have a good sports bra and the fitness portion makes her boobs flop and it's embarrassing. She wanted a better sports bra but her mom thought the one she already had was fine, but it isn't. During this aerobics routine she would do 300-some jumping jacks in a bad bra and she doesn't know that her depressed boyfriend is safe out there in the audience. Mrs. Michaels, their coach, had said you can't see anyone in the audience because the stage lights are so bright. She said it to make them not nervous, "Just pretend no one is there!", but actually it isn't very hard to see everyone out there. She saw her mom and her brother and Annie's parents and empty seats in the back, but not Daniel.

Around her excited chatter echoes off cinderblock walls. Everyone is so excited that the big day has finally arrived and tittering with adrenaline after being on stage. They are talking to each other about their lip gloss or the cute socks they got for this fitness portion. Mallory has some socks with ruffles and Annie has tall athletic socks with pink stripes. Reagan hadn't even thought about what socks to wear. Hers are regular cotton socks, not even new.

"I love your dress, Reagan," Andrea says.

While Reagan was standing there staring off and worrying about her socks, her old lunch friend Andrea had walked away from the cafeteria tables to greet her. Reagan jumps a little and looks at Andrea and looks down at the dress.

"I borrowed it. I don't really like pink, but my mom said my other dresses wouldn't work."

“Oh, it’s not pink. It’s more lilac,” Andrea says. She turns her head back and forth, gazing admiringly at Reagan’s dress. “It’s so pretty! And you look so pretty in it!”

“Thanks,” Reagan says. “You look pretty, too.”

“Everyone is so pretty!” Andrea says. “It’s so great. I sort of wish every day was like this. It’s like we’re princesses.”

Reagan shrugs.

“Oh no, are you nervous?” Andrea asks. She grabs Reagan’s hand. “DON’T worry. You’ve got this down. You just have to get dressed and then it will all come to you. You won’t forget anything.”

“I’m not nervous,” Reagan says.

“Oh no, did you lose your gym clothes?” Andrea asks.

“No,” Reagan says. “I’m fine.”

Andrea is still staring at her with a kind of feverish, excited concern.

“We’re really all in this together, you know? It’s a lot more than a competition. We’re like a family. So don’t be nervous, ok? We are all on each other’s sides.” Andrea nods at her own words.

“Okay,” Reagan says.

“Have fun! That’s the real point!” Andrea says.

Reagan wants to say that she’s worried her boyfriend is off hurting himself and wipe the smile off Andrea’s face, but instead she says she has a little stage fright.

“You can do it!” Andrea says. “Go get your gym clothes on!”

Now Reagan feels watched as she changes into the Coca-Cola t-shirt amended with ribbons and cotton shorts and old socks and sneakers. By now everyone else is dressed and

practicing together. She doesn't have any deodorant. She forgot to pack the deodorant into her duffle bag this morning and called her mom from the school office to ask her to pack it for her before she brought her the duffle bag and then when her mom gave her the bag at the school before Reagan went back stage Reagan was excited and nervous and forgot to ask her mom if she remembered to pack the deodorant for her. She just hugged her mom and her mom told her "good luck, baby," but now she doesn't have any deodorant.

Becky says that they should all huddle up so they do, arms over each other's shoulders, leaning in. Some of the girls are so excited they're giggling.

"If one of us falls down, the rest of us will, too," Becky says.

Everyone nods.

This sounds very stupid to Reagan, but she nods, too, hoping they can all stop touching each other now, but around the circle girls throw inspirational pep talk phrases around, Andrea the most, Reagan just nodding and smiling and feeling her palms sweat onto the backs of Andrea, who she doesn't hang out with anymore, and Sarah McKenzie, who she hardly knows, until finally they break.

Reagan doesn't place in the pageant. There are so few girls and enough categories that everyone but herself and the fat girl gets an award for "poise" or "talent" or "athleticism," but not her. It doesn't make sense to Reagan because she's a lot prettier than all the other girls. They were all holding hands when the awards started being announced, lined up on stage with their gowns and toothy smiles. The winners went to stand stage right so they had to keep squishing together to hold hands and when the final award was announced Reagan was left holding hands with chubby Bethany. They shrugged at each other while they clapped and kept

smiling big like they were supposed to and Reagan thought, I guess it really wasn't a beauty pageant.

That's what her mom says in the car, too.

"You were definitely the prettiest," Renée says.

Reagan doesn't care that her mom thinks she's pretty.

"It's not a beauty contest, Mom," Reagan says.

After the competition was over, Reagan found Daniel in the hallway, holding flowers for her. He'd been in the back row the whole time, he said. So now they're dropping him off before heading home themselves, Reagan and Daniel in their old minivan's bucket seats because Renée won't let them sit in back together and Travis riding shotgun because he gets carsick. Daniel walked three miles from his house to the high school to see Reagan in the pageant because he wrecked his car at a four-way stop three months ago and hasn't saved up enough Subway paychecks for a new one yet. He won't ever; it would take years.

"Thank you so much for the ride, Mrs. Webster," Daniel says.

"Koller," Renée says.

"Oh geeze, that's right," Daniel says.

"Why don't you just call me Renée," she says.

"Thanks, Renée," Daniel says. "For driving me around all the time."

Daniel has told Reagan about how he always mentions her and her mom giving him rides to embarrass them. When he gets out of the car he'll thank Renée again, loudly and profusely.

"All the girls who won just won because their dads have connections."

"That's not true," Reagan says.

"Well, I don't think it was fair," Renée says.

“It’s not about winning, Renée” Reagan tells her mom.

“I’m your mom. *You* can’t call me Renée,” Renée says.

“Whatever,” Reagan says. She continues: “We were all a team up there. It was more than a competition. It was a good experience.”

“Those girls don’t even need money for college,” Renée says.

“You didn’t smile enough,” Travis says. “You looked all depressed and emo.”

“Shush, Travis,” Renée says.

“Yeah, shut up!” Reagan says. “God, you’re such a stupid little prick.”

“Reagan! I’ll wash your mouth with soap,” Renée says.

“It’s *wash*, not *warsh*,” Reagan says.

Then there’s no sound in the car except Focus on the Family.

“You forgot my deodorant,” Reagan says.

Renée sighs.

“I’m sorry, Ray,” Renée says.

“Don’t call me Ray,” Reagan says.

“You know what? I’m your mother and I’ll call you whatever I want,” Renée says.

“Well maybe I would have smiled more if I wasn’t so worried about my damp pits,” Reagan says.

Renée laughs.

“It’s not funny!” Reagan says. “Why do you forget everything?”

“You forgot it first,” Travis says.

“Shut up, Travis,” Reagan says.

“I’m sorry, Reagan,” Renée says. “I set it out on the counter and everything, but I was worried that we were running late and I rushed out of the house and forgot it.”

“You forget everything! This is just like how Jelly died,” Reagan says.

“You’re never going to let me forget about that stupid dog,” Renée says.

“He wasn’t a stupid dog! I loved him,” Reagan says.

James Dobson talks about a woman who saw an ultrasound of her child and changed her mind about an abortion. Stoplights blink and the minivan tires hum.

“It’s really hard to smile for that long,” Reagan finally says. “It makes your face hurt. They even told us that in practice. I had to practice smiling that big. All week I’ve been sitting in my room smiling like an idiot to make my face muscles strong.”

Renée laughs.

“They even made us smile during the sit-ups. Did you see how we had to turn our heads towards the audience and smile while doing sit-ups? Who does sit-ups like that,” Reagan says.

“That did look kind of weird,” Daniel says.

Renée laughs again and Reagan cracks a smile.

“Well, I’m proud of you,” Renée says. “I know you did your best.”

“Me, too,” Daniel says. He pats Reagan’s leg.

“Gag me,” Travis says.

“Shut up, Travis,” Renée says.

It’s when they’re getting out of the car at their house, after they drop off Daniel and Reagan kisses him goodnight, that Renée says maybe Reagan shouldn’t spend so much time with him.

“You can’t make me not spend time with my boyfriend,” Reagan says. She stares at the bouquet in her hands and clenches her jaw.

“I know that Daniel is a nice guy, but he has a lot of problems right now, and I don’t think it’s good for you to be around that so much,” Renée says.

“Screw you,” Reagan says. “He brought me flowers! You didn’t even get me anything. You forgot my deodorant.” She stomps into the house.

“Reagan Marie,” Renée says. “You won’t talk to me like that.” But Reagan is already in her bedroom. In the kitchen Travis is digging around in the pantry for a Rice Krispie treat and Reagan’s deodorant, sure enough, is standing there on the counter, cap up, a missed cue.

After that, Renée doesn’t tell Reagan she can’t see Daniel, but she talks to Daniel’s parents. They agree that the two spend too much time together, Daniel needs to stop being antisocial, they don’t like the music those kids listen to, he needs to spend less time getting all worked up, play sports or something. Daniel’s parents tell him all that and tell him Reagan’s mom agrees. Daniel tells Reagan all this at school, carrying her books for her. Fucking sports, he says.

No one says they can’t see each other, but the parents start asking questions and calling their cell phones all of the time and even though Reagan hates her mom telling her to do anything, she hates to lie, too, so it works. She stops going to Daniel’s house after school, stops driving over to pick up Daniel in her car on her way to Leslie’s house, stops lying about speech team practice. And when her mom tells her she’s been on the phone too long, she tells Daniel she’ll pray for him and that he should pour all of his emotions into his music and please don’t let

her down, then punches the button to hang up the cordless phone and reads a book instead of trying to cheer her depressed boyfriend up all night, and feels a little relieved.

But this means that at every opportunity Daniel wants her to sneak off to have sex. Schools been out for two weeks and all during the long days Renée says it's not okay for Daniel to be over while she's at work. She has Travis keep an eye on Reagan. So Reagan has been watching TV and sun tanning in the yard and going to work and being so bored and so sick of frozen pizzas. A few times she's gone to the pool with Leslie, but they don't have that much in common anymore. Leslie doesn't have the same lunch hour because she didn't take art; almost all of her old friends joined sports in high school and have a different lunch hour. Reagan eats lunch with Daniel's friends now. Then one Wednesday Renée says it's ok for Reagan and Daniel to eat at Wendy's together before youth group. Reagan is hungry and actually really does want a cheeseburger and a Frosty, but when Reagan gets there to pick Daniel up, Daniel assumes that going to Wendy's is a cover for them to sneak off and spend some time alone. Reagan is driving her car in the direction of Wendy's and from the passenger seat Daniel has reached his hand over onto her thigh, staring at her with both eyes, while she tries to watch the street.

"Right before youth group?" Reagan asks.

"Let's skip youth group. Let's go to the park," Daniel says. "I miss you."

"I miss you, too," Reagan says. "I'm really hungry, though. I can't concentrate on sex when I'm so hungry."

"We'll eat first," Daniel says.

"But I want to go to youth group. I like it," Reagan says. "And what if my mom calls to see if I'm there?"

"Your mom doesn't go to church ever," Daniel says.

“It’s because she’s embarrassed about getting divorced all the time,” Reagan says.

“So why should you worry about skipping church to be with me then? She’s a hypocrite,” Daniel says.

“Shut up, Daniel,” Reagan says. “Not everyone’s parents stay married. You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

So then Daniel gives her the silent treatment. Reagan parks at Wendy’s and unlatches her seat belt.

“Are you coming in?” Reagan asks.

He keeps staring out the window.

Reagan has opened the car door and now shuts it.

“What’s wrong? Are you mad at me because I want to eat?”

“You don’t really care,” Daniel says.

Reagan looks at the door to Wendy’s, then back to her boyfriend. She puts a hand on his shoulder.

“What’s wrong,” she coos. “Come here.”

Daniel puts his face on her shoulder and cries.

“This has been really hard for me,” he says. “I feel so alone. I’m scared you’ll forget about me.”

“That’s crazy,” Reagan says. “I love you.”

“But I never see you anymore,” he says. “I can’t feel that you love me.”

This is what Daniel has said about them having sex, that it is the only way he can really feel that she loves him. And that her love is the only thing he lives for. So she tells him fine, she’ll skip youth group, and parks the car in an empty parking lot at the park, eats her

cheeseburger and Frosty, then lets her boyfriend make love to her. She moves her Bible into the backseat window to make room. And then she doesn't really want to be around him anymore, so she tells him she wants to go to the library, where he never wants to go, and he says maybe he'll go home and practice the songs they wrote together for their band, and she says, "Good idea, sweetie," and drops him off and drives to the library. She wants to read *The Bell Jar*. She knows that it is about Sylvia Plath's first suicide attempt and that Sylvia Plath's character goes away to New York to work at a magazine, which is something she'd like to do.

The library always has a smell like ozone. She likes to wander randomly and discover books. They all come from somewhere else; there's a whole section for Westerns and she's never met anyone who reads Westerns. That excites her. She knows she's not supposed to read Westerns and she doesn't really want to, but likes to look at the books. Their spines are different colors than the other books. And sometimes there's a man in a plaid shirt there. He's a farmer, there's no ranches anywhere except dairy farms, but it's almost like he fell out of one of the books. She thinks about the future in the library, all of the places she might go.

She's looking for *The Bell Jar* when a tornado siren sounds. At first she ignores it, but a library staff member tells her they have to ask everyone to go into the library's central meeting room away from the windows and wait until the all-clear signal.

So now for sure she is busted. Her mom will call the church to make sure she is ok and she won't be there and she'll be grounded. She sits in a corner of the meeting room and starts reading *The Bell Jar*. She just wants to get out of this place. She thinks about throwing herself into the tornado. If she ended up in Oz she wouldn't leave. She doesn't look at anyone until 20 minutes in to *The Bell Jar* when she looks up from the book in a dazed way, wondering what it's

like to be in a cab or to be stuck in traffic or to go to a stranger's apartment or to be drunk, when her eyes focus on someone familiar.

It's John-Bee.

John-Bee has been gone for four years, all of high school, away at college. Just after eighth grade he passed a test to make him a genius and he skipped high school and went straight to college at 14. He lived in some kind of special dorm with other genius kids and traveled every summer to Europe to learn about culture and to Africa to do work projects. She doesn't have to be in touch with him or his parents to know any of this; one hears about these things in small towns. He's on the front page of the newspaper all of the time because of the projects, too: he invented a better mosquito net. He is working in Seattle to cure AIDS. She's never once bumped into him since he left and never once talked to him since seventh grade. She probably wouldn't even recognize him if it weren't for the newspaper photos. But newspaper photos are grainy and in black and white and even with their help it takes her a few minutes to really recognize him. He's skinny and wearing this too-big old-looking sports jersey and cargo shorts and chucks that are all white and new-looking. She can see his armpit hair. And the hair on his head is bleached and spiked up with gel. He's sort of absent-mindedly picking at the meeting room's berber carpet. He looks like a loser. And Reagan is surprised.

John-Bee looks up and at her and his face says he realized she was in the room already. She waves. He waves. They keep looking at each other. Then John-Bee sort of crawls and scoots the eight yards that had separated them. It's awkward and she doesn't know where to look.

"Hi, Reagan," he says.

"Hi," she says.

He's positioned himself so that they aren't exactly looking at each other, just sitting next to each other, so it's possible for her to go back to reading her book. He looks away from her and gazes over their townfolk crouching and fanning themselves with musty paperbacks as if he's looking out over the ocean. She looks down at chapter three.

"Have you read this?" she asks him.

"Oh what's that?" he asks, then looks at the book in her hand and answers his own question. "*The Bell Jar*. I've heard about it, but I haven't read it yet. Do you like it?"

Something about the way he talks is very different. She can hear in his voice this freedom of adulthood and the satisfaction of meaningful projects and the largeness of the coast.

"Yeah," she says. "It's about her going to New York to work at a magazine. It sounds really great."

"Doesn't she kill herself?" John-Bee asks.

"I haven't gotten to that part yet," Reagan says.

She thinks she hears something buzzing and checks her phone, but it doesn't get reception in the meeting room. John-Bee's hair sort of matches his eyes, she realizes.

"I haven't talked to you in a really long time," Reagan says.

"Yeah," John-Bee says. He looks at her and looks away again, this time at the rounded corner of the library meeting room's table, covered in that dark brown plastic stuff, gouged in one place all the way down to the particle board. "How have you been?" he asks.

Reagan tells him that she has a boyfriend and about her mom divorcing Webster and marrying Steve and about the Junior Lady competition.

"I guess this is all really boring to you," she says.

“No,” John-Bee says. “All I have to talk about is recombinant circumsporozoite proteins.”

Reagan smiles a little.

“Yeah, but, didn’t you go to Africa and stuff?” she asks.

John-Bee says a few things about Africa, and, at Reagan’s prompting, about Europe, and then about New York: he did ride in a cab. There were a ton of rats there. In Seattle where he lives during school there aren’t so many rats; it’s very clean and there are mountains and the sound. He likes Seattle better.

Reagan has to be told what a sound is.

“That all sounds better than here,” Reagan says, gesturing at the meeting room, meaning the entire region. “What are you doing here this summer anyway?”

John-Bee shrugs and says he felt like being home.

Reagan and John-Bee talk a lot while trapped in the library meeting room and before the all-clear signal sounds they talk about how bored they are all day, melting in their houses doing nothing, and Reagan tells him she still has the same phone number and a cell phone, but she’s only supposed to use the cell phone for emergencies. John-Bee has a cell phone he can use all the time and gives her the number.

He calls her the very next day. She’s watching the Travel Channel with Travis and drinking this powdered iced cappuccino that you stir into milk when the phone rings and her heart skips a little. It’s John-Bee. She’s grounded, but she calls her mom at work and Renée says she supposes it’s okay for John-Bee to tutor her in French since that’s educational, and that’s how it starts, the glorious summer when they become friends again. Every day John-Bee

jogs over from his house and they watch TV together or play Mancala or walk around Reagan's big yard talking and laying in the grass and sitting under trees. On days when she works at the local Pizza Hut, he comes and drinks root beer and reads science journals, sometimes for a few hours, and she rolls silverware sitting at his table, and then he leaves her a big tip. They try out recipes together and go on picnics and go swimming. Sometimes Reagan invites Daniel, but he works mostly during the day, so usually she doesn't have to. He doesn't like her hanging out with John-Bee so much, but she promises she's not attracted to him: "I mean *look* at him," Reagan says. And he is homely. He has a premature wrinkle across his forehead and his body is all straight lines; his voice even cracks, still. He has a charming smile, though, and he's fun to be around. She could talk to John-Bee for hours about nothing at all, sit on the edge of a parking lot just kicking stones and feel happy. Sometimes that's what they do. And his eyes are greener than anything that grows in Indiana. That part she doesn't mention to Daniel. "We're just old friends," she says.

One day when they're circling inside the unused pasture, John-Bee looks out over the cornfield behind Reagan's house.

"It really is flat out here," he says.

"Did you forget?" she asks.

"No," he says. "But sort of." He says how when he first got to Seattle his big toes would get sore from walking the steep hills up and down, how he couldn't tell which way anything was because the horizon was cut short by dips in the road.

Reagan thinks that sounds great.

"No," he says. "I think I like this better. Here you can see how big the earth is."

"I guess," Reagan says. "But you have to live here where everyone is boring."

John-Bee looks back and forth a few times like he is measuring the length of the pasture.

“Remember when we were going to build an airplane?” he asks.

Reagan laughs.

“I really wanted it to happen when my dad left. I thought you could take me to live with him,” she says.

John-Bee puts a sympathetic hand on her shoulder. It surprises her. She is used to her bitterness being met with other bitterness.

“Oh well it wasn’t a big deal,” she says.

“I think we should do it,” John-Bee says.

“What?”

“Build an airplane,” he says.

She realizes that, obviously, John-Bee is a genius and therefore can build an airplane, so she doesn’t ask how, just jumps up and down excitedly.

“Holy crap,” she says. “My mom will flip out.”

They spend a few weeks shopping for homebuilt kits and researching. They measure the pasture. The parts arrive and their parents tell them they can build it, fine, but no way are they flying an airplane. They have to take flight lessons and they’re not sure they’re going to let them take flight lessons. They can do whatever they want when they turn 18, but they’re not letting them do something stupid like go up in the sky in a homemade airplane. Reagan is there when John-Bee’s parents tell him this. They stand next to the sink in their gingham wallpapered kitchen with little shelves with Longaberger baskets and wooden ducks on them. John-Bee’s parents look at him uncertainly while they say it, as if they want him to tell them if they’re saying the right thing.

It's hard to have a kid who is smarter than you, Reagan thinks. She thinks she should be nicer to her own mom.

John-Bee tells his parents not to worry and winks at Reagan.

It is so exciting. The whole summer she wakes up smiling, thinking about the airplane and John-Bee. She's clumsy with the tools so she stands by while John-Bee builds the airplane like a TV nurse in surgery, handing him parts and getting him water. She talks constantly about where they'll go. She wants to see all of the countries John-Bee's been to and she wants to show the airplane to her dad and she wants to go to New York and Seattle and Vegas. The Travel Channel said that two of the world's largest swimming pools are in Vegas and she wants to go swim in them and eat wedding cake by the slice and people watch in a casino.

One day she asks John-Bee where he'd like to go. He shrugs.

"I just want to hang out in the clouds with you," he says.

One day it's raining, so John-Bee decides to stay home. Reagan suggests they watch a movie, but his parents are at work, and he doesn't want to bike in the rain, so Reagan has to say she understands and then do something without him.

She is watching the rain fall outside on the half-built airplane and realizes that in just two months John-Bee will leave again and go back to college.

Then every day will be like this.

Reagan leaves her bedroom. She opens the refrigerator and closes it. She remembers this time in elementary school when she and John-Bee dressed up as artists for the final art show

of their after school art program. He was Gaugin and she was Van Gogh. His painting was a lot better, but he got to paint people, and she got a still life.

They are old friends, she thinks. John-Bee was her first real friend. That's special. She thinks, that means he will not forget about her.

She tries to find the photo from the art show in the basement. She thinks she will give it to him so he remembers that they're old friends. She won't say that, she'll just give him the picture, and that will work, that will mean he will write her letters and call sometimes and hang out with her on Thanksgiving.

There are lots of boxes in the basement, old boxes that came from the last house. She wasn't supposed to play with them when she was little and then she never thought to look in them, but that must be where her mom has the old, old photos from when she was little. She's seen her mom come up from the basement with photos before.

One box is full of baby clothes. Another is full of old tax forms. On the top of the third box is a wedding veil.

Reagan takes the veil out of the box and tries it on. She runs up the stairs to look in the mirror. Travis is sitting on the couch watching TV.

"What is that?" he asks.

"A veil," Reagan says.

"Is it real?" he asks.

"So what?" Reagan says.

"Where did it come from?" he asks.

Reagan tells him to mind his own business.

“I found it in a box. I’m not doing anything to it,” she says. She rounds the corner and enters the bathroom and finally sees herself in the mirror. It’s the kind of veil with a halo-like hoop top all covered with silk flowers and pearls, not the kind Reagan wants for her wedding, but she thinks it looks pretty on her. She tries to pull it over her face but there’s no blusher, so she goes back downstairs. It’s when she goes back to the box to look for the blusher that she sees the photograph of her mom in a wedding dress and the veil she is currently wearing standing with her dad in a tux under an arch of roses. She’s never seen this picture of their wedding before. Her dad looked so different when he was younger, she thinks. Then she realizes the man in the photo is not her dad. He is not her dad and he is not either of her two stepdads who came after her dad. In the photo her mom looks happy.

Reagan takes the photo from the frame and puts everything else back. She squares the box with the other boxes. Then she takes the photo with her back up to her room.

In the photo her mom looks happy; the man looks kind and loving, kind of handsome, very proud.

Reagan holds the photo away from her and tears fall into her lap.

When Renée comes home she calls out hello. Travis says “Hi, mom,” and Reagan says nothing.

“Where is your sister?” Renée asks.

“In her room,” he says.

Reagan is sitting on her bed holding the photo. She heard her mom’s car pull into the driveway, heard her open the door, heard her talk to Travis, and knows she is now walking towards her bedroom, that in one minute she will open the door and see her holding the photo.

Renée opens the door.

“What’s wrong?” her mom asks.

Reagan stares back.

Renée folds her arms.

“Are you going to make me come over there?” Renée asks. She sighs. “I’m getting tired of all of this drama, Reagan.”

She crosses the room to where Reagan is sitting cross-legged on the bed and looks at what’s in Reagan’s hands.

“Why do you have that?” Renée asks. “Give me that.” Renée takes the photo from her daughter’s hands. She looks at it briefly, then stares at her daughter.

“You shouldn’t be digging through things that aren’t yours,” Renée says. She holds the photo at her side. “Well what are you so mad about?”

“Do you have another family?” Reagan asks.

“Of course not,” Renée says.

“Why were you married?”

“What do you mean, why was I married,” Renée says.

“You don’t have any kids,” Reagan says. Her voice wavers. “How could you be married to someone before dad?”

“Sweetheart, I don’t know why this is upsetting you,” Renée says. She shifts her weight a bit to prepare to sit on the bed next to Reagan, but looks at her face and thinks twice about it. “I don’t have another family. You and Travis are my only children. Your dad and I loved each other very much.” She pauses and looks at her daughter’s face. “I’ve been married two times since I was married to your dad,” she says. “You didn’t cry about that.”

“That doesn’t count!” Reagan cries.

“Doesn’t count for what?” Renée asks. Reagan isn’t looking at her anymore, but staring with her jaw clenched at nothing in front of her, tears falling without sobs. Renée looks at the photo.

“I was pretty young when I got married the first time,” she says. “We were in college and we fell in love, but we were too young.”

“Too young for what?” Reagan cries.

“For it to work out,” Renée says. She watches Reagan’s face as it reddens and gets wetter. “Honey, calm down,” Renée says. “I don’t understand what’s wrong.”

“How could you stop loving someone?” Reagan yells. “You were married!” She hiccups. “You didn’t even tell us! Did you tell Dad?”

“Of course your Dad knows,” Renée says.

“How could he want to marry someone who just stops loving someone?” Reagan cries.

“Reagan, I don’t know where this is coming from, but you’re obviously too young to understand,” Renée says, standing.

“You’re such a liar! How do I know you aren’t hiding something else? I don’t even know you!”

“You are really overreacting,” Renée says.

“You didn’t have an allergic reaction!” Reagan says.

Renée stays there beside the bed, just barely not touching it, holding the photograph from her first wedding.

“What?”

“Everybody knows about it! Everybody knows you just leave everyone just like you tried to leave us,” Reagan says.

“What is she talking about?” Travis asks. At some time during the conversation he started standing in the doorway.

“She tried to kill herself!” Reagan yells.

“She’s lying,” Renée says. She storms out of the room and shuts the door on Reagan behind her.

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When Renée was married, the first time, she was given a spice rack, a coffee maker, a potato masher, a toaster, a frying pan, a sheet set, a stack of hot pads, a Longaberger basket, an empty photo album, other things. And now here they all were again, in Aunt Florence's living room, sitting on the same royal blue velour wrap-around sofa, placing their plastic punch cups filled with the same sherbet and 7-up punch on the same lace doily coasters, crumpling and discarding neatly the same heart and dove printed wrapping paper and the same foil ribbons and the same double ring embossed envelopes, now empty, and Renée’s eldest niece was now sitting in the same tall-backed armchair, balloons taped to its back, and given a spice rack, a coffee maker, a potato masher, a toaster, a frying pan, a sheet set, a Longaberger basket, an empty photo album. She was not given a stack of hot pads because Renée’s mother's best friend Starla had been the one who made the pot pads—she crocheted them—and Starla had died between then and now, of complications from diabetes, but one of the niece's sisters, another niece, too young to be getting married yet, had given an oven mit made up to look like a puppy dog, an equivalent substitute, at least as far as material reality. Renée remembered Starla, her perfectly

white hair long and softly curling, her yellow and brittle looking teeth, and her way of using her ever-present cup of coffee—hazelnut, often, haunting the room with its cloying perfume—as if it were an extension of herself, a body part that could be set down delicately or forcefully as a response in a conversation, and she still had the stack of crocheted hot pads, but the bridal shower went along now for Renée’s niece much the same as before, this event that had held so much excitement for Renée as it anticipated an even larger event endowed with even more meaning, The Wedding Day, and now such a short time later it was hard to remember some of it after all, the names of her bridesmaids or whether it was her first husband or her older brother who was allergic to shellfish: it no longer mattered.

Renée’s mother was eighty-two now; her father and her mother had stayed married until the day he died, at 63, more than twenty years ago. He’d been there to announce the engagement to, there to ask his cousin Cora to bake their wedding cake, but between tasting cakes with Cora and the big day, he had died, unexpectedly.

She had felt as if her marriage was a source of comfort and hope for her newly widowed mother and her mourning family in general. There had been a special section of the wedding ceremony to honor Renée’s father. Beside the unity candle, they lit a candle in remembrance. Renée’s uncle, who officiated the ceremony, had narrated this to the wedding guests.

"As many of you know," he'd said, "My brother, Van, is not here today. He passed away just a few months ago." And here, Renée’s uncle had paused to blow his nose into a handkerchief, because he was crying without sobs, they all collectively realized, though his voice was still strong when he continued. He was practiced in delivering these kinds of speeches, he’d been a minister for over forty years, but he'd never had to speak for one of his own family until that day. He said, "Van considered it pure joy, the marriage of David and Renée. I know he

wanted to be here to walk his little girl down the aisle." And his voice had cracked and he'd paused to smile wetly at Renée, and then at David, and then out at the close friends and relatives sitting in the gauze-draped pews. Then he'd said: "In times like these it is more important than ever to honor family and life. And here they are, Renée and David, making a life together. I'm sure that Van is awfully proud."

After the ceremony, in the receiving line, family members from both sides shook the couple's hands and leaned in for hugs and kisses. Many repeated the compliment "beautiful ceremony." On some of their faces, signs of crying were still present. One aunt of David's was still sniffing and dabbing at running mascara as she said, "Lovely ceremony, just lovely. The way you remembered your father, it was so touching. Everyone was touched, dear. Not a dry eye in the place."

At the reception, Renée did not toss her bouquet. It was given to her mother to place on her father's grave. This went unannounced. It had seemed unattractive to distract any further from the joy of the occasion. Likewise, the couple did not place the bouquet there themselves the following morning, as this seemed an inappropriately somber note with which to begin one's first day as husband and wife. They had considered every detail in the planning. They had been careful with everything.

But Renée had been thinking about it the next morning. After the reception, she'd handed the bouquet to her mother as their wedding guests sent them off with rice. Her mother had smiled. "I'll be sure to tell your dad all about it in the morning," her mother said. Then David and Renée had grabbed hands and kissed to hoots and whistles from the crowd and waved goodnight and climbed into the car. It wasn't covered in streamers and shoe polish as she'd half expected it to be. She'd wondered briefly if the tone of the wedding had conveyed a formality

that clashed with a car dragging tin cans. Then the next morning, for one quiet moment as David was in the bathroom and Renée was lying in the big white hotel bed, waiting for room service to be delivered, Renée had pictured her mother perching on her father's tombstone holding the wedding bouquet all full of roses and daisies and looking down at the still visible seams of turf under her feet, describing out loud: "You would have liked it, Van. Your brother gave a great sermon for the ceremony and the icing on the cake was not too sweet, just how you like it."

When David left the hotel bathroom and returned to the bed with the sea sounds of an ongoing flush in the background he caught Renée's wistful eye. He kissed her neck. They knew each other so much then that they didn't need words to ask questions.

And then Renée said, "Our marriage is like a bright boat. And it will help my mother be hopeful."

Because she had, every day of it, imagined her marriage as a small, bright boat her mother could invest hope in that would bring larger and larger returns with each voyage, that her new marriage would be a tribute to her parents' marriage, that the new hope of the new life she was setting out on could slowly blot out the meaninglessness of grief.

But they only stayed married a year.

She'd been twenty years old.

Renée remembered still this day later in that year, the napkins in her pocket, her friend Kristen, the pizza place, their cat Boots, and standing there in her towel, knowing.

That morning she was putting on her winter coat for the first time of the season and found a wad of napkins in her pocket. All of the previous winter she'd saved them for David to blow his nose because his nose always ran after they biked here or there. For some reason Renée's own nose always remained dry, but in coffee shops and restaurants and gas stations, whenever

there were loose napkins lying around, she'd grabbed a small stack and shoved them in her pocket for David to use. Then there they were again, year-old tissues in her pocket on a November morning with the first frost of the year in the forecast.

She went to class, then to work, at the sandwich place in the mall where she acted mostly as cashier. The first holiday decorations were up in the parking lot, tinsel snowflakes swinging from the great brown light poles, and beyond them the white and pink mall with lights wrapping its leafless saplings, and beyond the mall the great, damp, flat Midwest and the drone of steady traffic on a small highway. The running joke at the sandwich place involved flapping the required green aprons and squawking like birds. At one point, she slipped while squawking and was stunned as she hit the slick linoleum beside the bread slicer. Everything stopped for laughter and the manager came out of the office. He looked around at them and, she could see it, suppressed a laugh. He asked if she was okay and she stood up and dusted off her ass and the manager told them to get back to work, but smiled. In an idle moment after that, at the register, she touched the new bruise on her thigh and looked out onto food court's holiday lights and the families hunched over fast food bags and felt as if everything was working for good.

At 4 pm she punched out, unlocked the Bonneville, and drove home. She was happy because REO Speedwagon's "Keep On Lovin You" came on the radio. Outside the car windows the cheerless gray of mown-over grass slid by familiar and homely. When she opened the door onto their brown and yellow kitchen, the cat jumped off the counter and rubbed against her legs.

"Hello," she said to the cat.

"Hello!" David called to her.

From the front door she could see through the living/dining room to where he was leaning over at his desk, studying. He glanced up at her, marked a place in a book, then swiveled

around to face her as she hung her coat. She felt a pang in her heart of wanting to be near him, and then she crossed to the other side of the house and she was.

That night they decided to go out for dinner, to the “good” pizza place which was located on their small town’s main drag and played the kind of classic Italian music that features accordion. On the red and white checked tables wine bottles held candles. They smiled at each other through the glow.

“Let’s get fancy pizza,” David said, which meant one of the specialty pizzas with more than one topping. Renée always wanted to get one of the specialty pizzas, but David was usually more practical.

“Which one?” she asked.

“You pick,” he said.

“Just no onions,” Renée said. She was reading the laminated menu item by item. “You usually want meat. Maybe ‘The Woodsman.’” They’d met during their sophomore ecology class and their first date had been a study date, to visit the arboretum, where David had plucked a Cottonwood leaf and handed it to her. You’re holding my heart, he’d said. Renée looked up and her husband was watching her, smiling, and handsome. They reached across the table to hold hands.

When the waitress arrived to take their drink order, David ordered water, but Renée dug into her purse and pulled out the few crumpled bills she’d made as tips at the sandwich place; after some gracious refusals she treated them to two glasses of the house red. The waitress, middle-aged, big-pored, slouched impatiently and checked their IDs skeptically. Over the course of the dinner they came up with a plan for David’s economics class research project, made plans to pick out new towels at K-Mart the next day, invented nick-names for Renée’s fat Shakespeare

professor, and said I love you at least six times. They drove home slightly buzzed and from the car they kissed all the way into the house.

But then the next morning there was no coffee and she couldn't find her shoes. She was late to her 8:30am class and got a terrible caffeine headache. David, whose first class was at 10, remained asleep in bed under the quilt her grandmother had made for their wedding present.

After the class she went to the student union to get a coffee. The line was long. She was in a terrible mood. She added non-fat creamer and zero calorie sweetener to the coffee, then she sat at one of the plastic tables and began filling in an astronomy worksheet due in the next hour which she had forgotten about the previous evening. She flipped forward and backward through the heavy textbook, looking for an answer to the fourth question.

“Renée?” someone said. She looked up. Her friend Kristen was grinning, holding a half-eaten apple. She slid into the chair across from her before Renée even had a chance to answer. “You look pissed.”

Renée rubbed her temples.

“I can't find an answer for this astronomy worksheet,” she said.

“Skip it and come back to it,” Kristen said. She took a loud, crunchy bite of her apple. “When did you get so invested in astronomy? New mystical beliefs I don't know about?”

Renée laughed. She closed the textbook to chat with Kristen who was getting really into the poetry in her 18<sup>th</sup> Century class and dating someone new, a pre-med student.

“Actually, he knows someone David knows,” Kristen said. “That girl he dated freshman year that he pulled that streaking stunt with.”

Renée knew the girl Kristen was talking about, but she had never heard about a streaking stunt.

“Oh really?” Kristen asked. “Yeah, I guess it was really funny, the RA was about to yell at David but when he saw that girl—what was her name?”

“Abby,” Renée said.

“Right, Abby. When the RA saw Abby he got so embarrassed, I guess. He was like a really shy, nerdy guy and I guess he just turned red and tongue-tied and went back into his room.”

Renée chewed on the tiny opening of her plastic coffee lid and stared down at the table.

“It’s a really funny story, I’m surprised he never told you,” Kristen said. “What a crazy girl! Did you ever meet her?”

Renée shook her head. Kristen’s apple was eaten down to the core.

“No, I guess it never came up,” Renée said.

Kristen examined her apple core.

“Well cheer up,” she said. “Astronomy! Who cares? Just a bunch of burning gas and space dust, right?”

“That’s the universe,” Renée said. She watched Kristen walk away, then she looked at a clock. She had five minutes left until class and the worksheet was only halfway done. In the discussion section her TA checked the homework and gave her half credit. The discussion was something about how big a star had to be to create a black hole when it died. She couldn’t concentrate. She’d forgotten to eat lunch and the caffeine from the coffee had filled her with a reverberating emptiness.

When she got home David was not there. The cat ran into the kitchen to see her and meowed repeatedly by his food dish.

“Oh my god, Boots,” she said. She fed the cat. “For fucks sake.”

She dumped her books on the counter and looked for something to eat. Her choice was Saltines or store brand Raisin Bran. She ate a few handfuls of each, standing in the kitchen. The house was totally quiet, and then the heater kicked on. Her mouth was dry and the crackers were forming a gummy wad she had to concentrate to swallow. She climbed into bed with her coat on and cried.

David came home thirty minutes after expected. His footfall was jovial. He meowed at the cat.

“Hello?” he called. He pulled the quilt from over Renée’s head. “Tough day?” he asked.

Renée flipped over onto her back and stared at him.

“I forgot to feed Boots this morning. He was starving when I got home,” she said.

“That explains the cat puke,” he said.

“Are you serious?” Renée asked.

David patted her shoulder.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said. “I’ll clean it up.”

“Why didn’t you feed him this morning when you saw I forgot to?”

“Oh, I guess I didn’t notice,” he said. “Is your coat on because you’re all ready to go to K-Mart?”

He was giving her a chance to reset the rest of the day, but Renée didn’t say anything.

“Didn’t we decide to get new towels today?” David asked.

“I’m not doing anything,” Renée said. She pulled the quilt back over her head. She heard David leave the room and flush the toilet, which meant he had cleaned up the cat puke. She heard him return to the room and sit at the desk.

“Why were you late?” Renée asked.

David cleared his throat.

“Oh, I ran into my old friend Peter who used to work in the lab with me and we caught up for a while,” David said. “It was really good to see him, actually. He just got married two months ago. I thought we might go on a double date.”

Renée didn't say anything.

“Do you want to come out from under the covers maybe?” David asked.

“No,” Renée said. Eventually she heard David punching numbers into his calculator, writing and erasing. She remembered her own homework for the evening. Her stomach growled. Things needed to happen, but she didn't feel like she could do anything. She climbed out of bed. David ignored her.

“I can't make dinner,” Renée said.

He turned.

“That's fine,” he said.

“Will you make something?” she asked.

“Fine,” he said. “What would you like?”

She knew he was mad at her and she felt, suddenly, embarrassed.

“I don't know,” she said. She began taking off her clothes. He turned away. “I'm going to take a shower.”

In the shower she thought through things. They could have spaghetti for dinner and then she could sit down with her philosophy text book and complete her reading in bed while David did his homework at the desk. It would be cozy. She liked when they studied at the same time, liked to look up and see him bent over in concentration. This was its own kind of fun. Once his life had been running around naked with his girlfriend pulling fire alarms, and now it was this,

and this was not so bad, it was not bad at all, this was marriage. He had asked her; this is what he wanted. She could go to the grocery store right after dinner and get coffee and maybe even something special for dessert to make up for her grumpiness. David liked the German Chocolate cake. She would say sorry.

When she went back into the bedroom, holding the towel, David had his head down on the desk. She stood beside him with her arms wrapped around her, silent. She wanted him to look up, and after a moment he did. For a thick minute their eyes met and blinked and held onto each other. Everything between them was there between them. She was just beyond arm's length from where he sat in the office chair and one step from either of them would have closed the distance.

She wanted him to tell her it was okay, but this isn't what happened.

Renée took all of the wedding souvenirs when she and David divorced. She had regarded and then placed each item one by one into the cardboard box which all this time later was still taped shut and shoved into a corner of the garage. She remembered carrying the box from room to room. She had paused with an anniversary card from a distant relative, someone about whom she could not exactly remember how they were related to which relative, and opened it: inside was "still remember your beautiful ceremony!" The phrase soaked through her whole day. It presented itself as a question for every object and memory: Beautiful ceremony? The photo album. The memory of taking the photos. Renée, holding the box of ceremony relics. The weight of the box. The marriage, the divorce. Taping the box shut with the clear, tough packing tape and carrying the box to the car and setting the box on the trunk to free her hands to pop the trunk and moving the box to the asphalt to lift the trunk lid and moving aside the old newspapers already waiting in the trunk to be recycled and picking the box up again and putting the box in

the trunk and shutting the trunk and how hard she shut it. When she arrived at her new apartment and opened the door and regarded the stuff that was not hers and in her bedroom the sparseness of a space furnished with just half of the last house's furnishings which had been picked out for that house and looked wrong now in this space and how when she carried the box into the mostly empty closet and shoved the box to the far corner of the top shelf there was no reason to shove it into the corner because the rest of the shelf was empty and the way that she carried the box there and how hard she shoved it onto the shelf and the fact that she took a shower afterward, using shampoo from a bottle which had been half used up in the old shower in the old house, a shampoo bottle which had been complete in the complete house and was half-gone in this house.

When did the ceremony end, Renée wondered. A lot of things had happened and some of them were not ceremony but she wasn't sure now or ever which things belonged to which category. Now she was in the ceremony of the eldest niece's bridal shower and her mother was smiling a genuine-looking smile and handing the eldest niece another brightly wrapped package.

Renée watched the niece open the presents. She drank another cup of punch. She refilled the cup of another bridal shower guest. She helped gather the crumpled wrapping paper into a white trash bag, which looked when stuffed with the light paper a little like a non-Hydrogen-filled balloon. Renée hugged her eldest niece, her older sister, her younger sister, her younger niece, her aunt, and her mother. She waited for a family friend whose car had parked Renée in to leave in their car so that she could get her car out of the driveway. She backed out and did not hit the mailbox. She drove three miles back home.

In the back yard, Reagan and the old neighbor kid were circling the airplane.

"You are not going up in that thing," Renée said.

Renée entered the quiet house. She opened the freezer and removed a low-fat ice cream bar, the last in the box. She threw away the empty low-fat ice cream bar box and saw, behind it, another box, a small, square box, pushed into the far corner of the freezer, which contained the top layer of wedding cake from Renée's last wedding.

Renée had no idea about when or why couples began freezing the tops of their wedding cakes to eat on their one year anniversary except that someone in her family told her at some unmemorable, early point in her life that it was "good luck," and that she had seen several friends and relatives do so. Renée had even helped these friends and relatives prepare the tops of their wedding cakes to be frozen in a manner that helped to retain freshness, wrapping the cake box in several tight layers of plastic wrap and then, outside the plastic, additional layers of aluminum foil, and then pushing the box into a large freezer bag and pushing all of the air out of the freezer bag and even, sometimes, when they were close friends and relatives, using a Sharpie to inscribe the freezer bag with a personalized "congratulations!" message. Renée had done this to her own tops of wedding cakes from her own weddings three times; she had done this after each of her weddings except the one to Webster, because the whole premise of the marriage to Webster had been one of a romanticized non-romance, a court room ceremony, some shrugging over the concept of "being in love" and rolling of eyes over couples who went on "date nights," the critique frequently uttered being that dates were for teenagers but they were practical adults and that marriage was a practical thing. Webster in his tireless black orthopedic shoes putting plastic on the storm windows and asking, without even turning from his task, exactly how did it hurt that he never took her out to a restaurant for dinner when she was thirty-nine years old and had her own money, her own checking account, and could take herself out for dinner in her own car if she felt that was a good use of her paycheck, but as for himself he was happy enough with a

frozen dinner or a plate of spaghetti and didn't have a need for restaurant dining. His completely placid eyes as he looked at her while saying these things, his actual non-comprehension of the need for any sort of "specialness" in their relationship or their life. That non-romance had been the springboard for the hyper-romance of the marriage to Steve, the mutual affirmations that though they never thought it would happen again, they had found themselves deeply, madly in love, and were willing to run up their credit cards to have a wedding on the beach in Hawaii and to make-out in public and to skinny dip in the local pool and to throw plates at each other when they were angry and to share socks. After seven months of marriage like the very first time Steve was back with the mother of his second child and Renée had the wedding cake top in her freezer, showing its face every time she ran out of frozen pizzas or ate the last ice cream bar, looking smug as any blank object could, like it was literally chiding her, "it's time to go grocery shopping and don't forget to finish the divorce paperwork."

Renée stared into the kitchen from the table in the adjoining breakfast nook while eating the ice cream bar. The refrigerator was most notably dirty where a red dribble of spaghetti sauce had dried in solid brownish crest near the top of the door, but there were also noticeable, if you were looking for them, greasy fingerprints around both the fridge and freezer handles.

From the yard came a mechanical roar as the airplane lifted off the ground. The plane made it a few yards up, brushed the top of the lilac hedge, and came back down dragging green leaves and brown cones of flower remnants, her daughter too small in the distance for Renée to read her face.

Fucking up the lilac bush. Her daughter doesn't listen. She'll learn the hard way.

All the things that a kitchen can hold, crowding wedding registries from one generation to the next. The blenders, the baskets, the flatware, the saucepans, the waffle makers, the salad

bowls, the water glasses, the champagne flutes, the electric turkey carving knife. Her niece had a list over fifty items long. The kitchen the heart of the home. It was the kitchen items she most jealously seized after the first marriage. She was the one who used them, she should have them. There was nowhere to put them in the small apartment with the roommate and the musty carpet. She was overwhelmed with self-pity every time she walked in the door, that whole time she lived there, and all the kitchen things she shoved in and piled on top of the cupboards, irking the roommate, the rice cooker taking up half the counter. There was no reason she couldn't just cook for herself, she was saying, why she would no longer need the omelet pan, the bread machine, the Cuisinart. On a Friday night the roommate came home after drinks with friends while Renée was eating at the table a Lean Cuisine turkey tetrazzini and the roommate's voice was not mean, though irritation was detectable: she said, "Renée, you really could put this stuff in storage. You just eat those frozen dinners." And Renée had stared down into the white, microwaved noodles, feeling like she'd been told Santa Clause wasn't real all over again, and started crying, the material reality of her lonely life so obvious it smarted to have it pointed out. It was that night she backed down and called the appliance repair man.

The worst four weeks of her life. If only that girl hadn't said anything. All the years after David and before John just shit.

But she'd met John and married John and had the kids and things had been alright for awhile. Then there was "the event." And after "the event" she left John.

For a long time she asked herself what had happened. She had been trying to plan the grocery list. She wanted to plan a special meal for that Sunday because it had been a bad week and cooking a big meal cheered her up, made her feel accomplished, took up hours in the day that would otherwise be spent worrying about going back to work. There was a recipe for

seafood casserole she wanted to try, but she wasn't sure if Miracle Whip would work as a sub for mayonnaise and she needed to know if John liked pimentos. But when she asked him about it he just shrugged.

"It's sort of important," she said. "Seafood is expensive. I don't want to ruin it."

"If you want to make an omelet, you have to break a few eggs," he said.

"I'm not making an omelet," she said. She went back to the fridge and checked their stock on margarine, eggs, and oranges. She put on her coat.

"I'm going to the store," she said. "Any last requests?"

He shook his head. She left the house. He didn't look away from the TV the whole time.

The grocery store was oddly empty for a Saturday afternoon, but she still managed to run into Emily Sheehan, whose son was in Reagan's class.

"Oh, hi," Emily cooed. Her baby, sitting in the cart, waved and gurgled. "Looks like you're stuck running errands on Saturday, too. Isn't that the way? Everyone at our house is having fun playing Twister and Mommy has to run to the store. I never knew being a mother was going to be so behind the scenes!" Emily was addressing Renée, but kept turning back to her baby to make faces at it and modulating her tone to fit an infant.

"I don't know about you, but I think weekends are the *most* exhausting. Monday comes and I'm like 'TGIM! Get these kids out of here!'" Emily laughed.

"It sure is exhausting," Renée said. She was looking into Emily's cart which was full of brand name baby food and fresh produce.

"Oh, you don't look it at all, though," Emily said. "You look great. You must have a beauty secret."

Renée smiled.

“No,” she said. “No secret.”

“Good luck, then,” Emily said. “Or good genes. I bet your parents aged well, too.”

“I don’t know,” Renée said. She stared at the baby.

“Well,” Emily said. She was staring at Renée. “Look at me gabbing on. Your popsicles are going to melt all over.”

Renée looked into her own cart: popsicles, cheap toilet paper, Life cereal.

“Do you know where the pimentos are?” Renée asked.

“Mmmm,” Emily said. “Yummy. They’re usually with the pickles. What are you making?”

“Seafood casserole,” Renée said. She smiled at the baby. “I like to make something special on Sundays.”

“What a treat!” Emily said. “I love that stuff, all those creamy, gooey things. They go straight to my hips, but it’s so nice to indulge.”

Renée nodded.

“See you Monday!” Emily said. She pushed away, blowing raspberries at her baby. Renée saw no hips for anything to go to.

She had been trying to pick out a salad dressing. In front of the salad dressings was where it had gotten really bad. She couldn’t decide which would go best with the seafood casserole and she wanted to get a low-fat dressing, but that limited the options. One brand of dressing was on sale, but the other looked better. A man in a polo shirt stood beside her, selected a dressing, looked at her, then walked away. Her eyes were starting to well with tears. She took one dressing from the shelf, held it in her hands, and stared at the others. She put it back. She grabbed another. She read the label copy. She looked around the aisle, as if there might be

another section of salad dressings. The dressings in the glass bottles looked the best, but they were expensive. She put a plastic bottle in the cart. Someone else entered the aisle and she left, circled, came back and traded the plastic bottle for a glass bottle dressing, then hurried to check out.

“Your popsicles, mam.” The teenaged check-out clerk pointed to the box of popsicles which was soggy and dripping. Renée looked behind her at a trail of red drips.

“Oh no,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

He followed her gaze and paged for clean-up.

“Do you want to get a new box?” he asked.

“No,” Renée said. “I’m sorry.”

“Are you sure?” he asked. “I can send someone to get it.”

“No, that’s okay.” Renée said. She lifted the box into a plastic grocery bag and tied the handles closed. “Just trash this. I’m sorry.”

She couldn’t look up at him through all the rest of the beeps signaling the recording of the value of what she’d selected, not even when she handed him the check for the total. It was dark outside and the large orange lights of the parking lot were casting halos onto nothing.

When she got home the kids were playing with Barbie’s in the living room.

“Mommy, we’re hungry!” Travis said immediately.

John looked away from the TV to his watch.

“You were at the store that whole time?” he asked her.

Renée didn’t answer.

“How about some chicken nuggets?” she asked the kids.

“With ketchup!” Travis said.

“You bet,” she said. She set the oven dial and laid out a cookie sheet. John entered the kitchen and rooted through the grocery bags.

“Did you bring something home for us?” he asked.

“I’m not hungry,” she said. He was staring at her; she could see him do it from the corner of her eye. “You can eat chicken nuggets, too.”

“Daddy, you’re going to eat chicken nuggets with us?” Reagan asked.

“You bet,” he said. Renée looked up at him, a hard glare between both of them. She continued to put away groceries.

“After the oven preheats, just leave them in for twelve minutes,” Renée said.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Going to lie down,” she said. All of the bags were unpacked. She realized she had forgotten pimentos. The bedroom was cool and dark. In the dining room she could hear John joking with the kids. They were asking for popsicles. She couldn’t do a goddamn thing to be thinner or happier or a better mother. Her excuse was always that it had been a bad week. Thirty-one years of life and she still couldn’t make anyone happy. She left her shoes on until it was too uncomfortable and then it felt like a huge effort to pull the covers back off and untie her shoes. She started crying.

It was easy to move into the bathroom. She looked into the medicine cabinet for a long time, sitting on the edge of the tub. From the living room she could hear the TV switch on and the echoey sounds of Nickelodeon, commercials for Gak, Reagan telling John she loved him. It was just groceries, shoes, a failed diet. She should join her family on the couch but she couldn’t. She usually choked when taking pills, but didn’t this time. That part still seemed ironic to her.

She was told later on that shortly after they arrived in the ER, while she was answering

questions about what she had taken and how many, she had suddenly started to convulse with seizures and fallen from the coarse woven cotton of the waiting room chair onto the pulp-textured tile floor; that at that time nurses came running with a crash cart and a stretcher, shouting, in an orderly fashion, various orders, and someone took John to a quiet room attached to the waiting room, where he continued to complete the form; that IVs were inserted and a chest tube was inserted and it was not a coma, but a pharmacologically-induced paralysis, this part that she remembers as a scraping in her chest and a feeling of being underwater as above her a nurse said "paralysis is setting in;" she thought that there was something she needed to tell John, that they needed to wait, she was not paralyzed, she could hear them and the beeping of the heart monitor, she was more than just her heart, she was trying to stick out her tongue to show them, there was something she needed to say. And when she came to again he was there, leaning against the white wall facing her. He was right there waiting for her to wake up.

And that's when the stupid dog died. John had told Renée about the dog while she was still in the hospital, that at some point while they were in the emergency room the dog had gotten into the opened pill bottle. John didn't give her the details, but the neighbor, Debbie, who didn't know about the pills, did. She thought Renée was in for a severe allergic reaction and had no idea what had killed the dog, but she'd called Renée in her hospital room to explain. At first Jelly had seemed to be drooling a lot, Debbie said, but she didn't know if this was unusual. She kept watching QVC, feeling grossed out, then the dog started having seizures. She had tried to shove a spoon in the dog's mouth. She had looked all over the fridge for their vet's phone number, then she had called the hospital where they had her on hold for at least 30 minutes and by the time John got home the dog was stiff, surrounded by urine soaked towels. Debbie was sorry for their loss.

She'd come home and the living room had looked strange, though the only thing changed was that on the credenza was a big vase of pink roses with a Mylar "Get Well" balloon tied to it. On the sofa the afghan was folded over the arm in just the place she always put it, so she knew John had tidied up for her homecoming. Right away Travis was in her arms telling her he'd missed her and grinning into her face. "Are you feeling better, Mommy?" he asked. He showed her the balloon. Reagan was standing beside John with her arms folded.

"Reagan, go give your mom a hug," John said. But instead Reagan handed her a card made of yellow construction paper with a red heart scribbled on the front and "I love you Mommy" written in crayon. Reagan's name was signed in small, loopy cursive in the bottom right-hand corner.

"I made the card, Mommy," Travis said.

"You did a good job," Renée told him. Reagan's arms were still folded.

"Let's let your mom rest," John said. He put his arm around Renée and led her down the hallway into the bedroom, as if she didn't know the way. He started to take off her shoes.

"I can take off my shoes," Renée said. But as soon as he left the room she wished he hadn't.

She woke up to the house smelling like food. John had brought home a rotisserie chicken from the Family Fare and warmed it in the oven with a tin of dinner rolls. He'd made mashed potatoes and glazed carrots. These were things Renée made on Sundays. And after dinner they all watched a movie together on the couch and Renée read the kids their bedtime stories.

"Goodnight," she told Travis. She kissed him on the cheek and pulled his covers up under his chin.

"Goodnight," she told Reagan. Her daughter pulled the covers over her head and turned

onto her side, away from Renée.

“Reagan,” she said. “Can Mommy kiss you goodnight?”

“No,” Reagan said.

“Please?” she asked.

Reagan turned over.

“Jelly died,” Reagan said. The little girl’s lip quivered. “It’s all your fault,” she said. She was holding a stuffed dog toy. John must have gotten it for her.

“I know,” Renée said. She looked at the quilt. It was made of small squares of fabric scraps, old dresses and handkerchiefs in colors and patterns that didn’t go together at all. “I’m sorry.”

“I hate you,” Reagan said.

One of the greener scraps, Renée realized, was from her one of her sister’s doll’s dresses. Renée covered her face with her hands, then flicked out the light and left. In the kitchen, John was waiting with a mug of hot chocolate. She took it into both of her hands and carried it to the couch and looked across the room to the roses and balloon. Instead of flowers or hearts, the balloon was covered in balloon images. It was already ever so slightly divoted with deflation. It did not say “soon.”

She’d thought if she just had some space and some time she could figure things out, how to stop being that way. She’d thought she could handle the kids, just couldn’t be married anymore. So they’d left the house on the end of Klinger and she’d rented the farmhouse and John had gotten an apartment.

How bad is it on the inside. The black seal of the gasket hiding crumbs and mold, the sticky puddles under the condiments on the shelves inside the door, the swampy corners of

forgotten vegetables in the crispers, and the salad dressings, half-empty applesauce containers, freezer burnt burritos, all the things just too old, to be thrown out and wiped away. Her women's magazine told her it was time to stop joking about the refrigerator being a science experiment, but Renée had never made that joke.

How to stop being that way.

The first thing to do was to take everything out. Renée examined low-fat Italian dressing for a black machine-printed expiration date, wondered what she had been doing when the salad dressing was still good and could not remember. Into the trash went the low-fat Italian dressing, a brown bag of shredded iceberg, a single serving sized fat-free vanilla yogurt, a small Tupperware half full of orange taco meat, and the white box containing the top tier of Renée's fourth wedding cake, which she did not unwrap or otherwise inspect at all, which she hardly, in fact, even passed eyes over as it dropped with a sepulchral and resounding thud, Renée thinking "so much for that" as she with the gray plastic 13-gallon step-on trash can continued the plangent symphony of disposal.

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One day the airplane is finished.

Reagan circles it while John-Bee checks all the bolts, retightening them with his wrench.

From the driveway they hear crunching and look over their shoulders to where Renée is driving up in the teal minivan. She gets out and stands by the van, looking at them. Reagan can't believe the airplane is finished. It really looks like an airplane. And John-Bee looks like a man in a movie right then. The sun has melted all the gel out of his hair and he's sweating and

tan, bending over the airplane with his shirt off, using a wrench. She thinks her mom will praise her for being so grown up. But after a moment Renée just says crossly,

“You are *not* going up in that thing.”

And goes into the house.

She hates her. She doesn't care if the airplane does crash in a fiery explosion.

Earlier when she was waiting for him to come over, she was thinking again about how John-Bee will go back to college. She would have to wait until he came home for Thanksgiving before she could see him again. It would be the same waiting as this morning, but times 1800 and some. She put a bunch of numbers into the calculator. It'd be like 1800 mornings of waiting all pushed together. In all of that time her whole life would change and he might even forget about her. She has nothing else to look forward to. This whole year of her life is pointless. She wishes she could sleep through it. There's nothing for her here.

In her diary she wrote:

How to be happy

1. Don't worry about feeling like no one understands. The friends you don't have yet will understand.
2. Remember the world is surprising, so even though you think you know what will happen, maybe it won't.
3. Wait six months.

Now she looks at John-Bee and he winks at her.

Maybe, she thinks, she really doesn't care if she dies. When she thinks about it, she feels a blankness, a stillness and emptiness like the eye of a tornado, just like she does imagining life after death. Then she thinks about God and Hell and feels guilty and scared, then mad at God.

When John-Bee leaves, she won't be able to take it. And didn't he say he only gives you what you can take? So it's God's fault, then. She really doesn't want to go through one more year of high school, of living with her mom. She thinks she'll have to die or run away to survive.

John-Bee stands, stretches, surveys his work.

"She's ready to fly," he says.

Reagan bites her lip, smiling.

If she went up in the airplane now, her mother would ground her and she wouldn't get to see John-Bee anymore. She could wait until right before school starts again, because she doesn't care if she's grounded after John-Bee goes back to college.

If she waited until summer was over, it would be months before she could be in the airplane.

"Are you scared?" John-Bee asks her.

No, she thinks. She doesn't care if she dies and she doesn't care if her mom grounds her. She'll fly away and not come back. She'll be a barista in Seattle until she can finish high school there and go to college or she'll just be a barista forever. She doesn't care. She's going to fly in the airplane. She answers John-Bee by climbing in.

John-Bee grins and fastens the helmet strap under her chin for her. They meet eyes when his face is close to hers, his fingers touching her throat.

She's going up in this airplane with him if it's the last thing she does.

It's a two-seater like the airplanes in old photos. She's sitting behind him, still with no shirt. John-Bee starts the engine. It's very loud and the gasoline fumes are strong. Almost instantly she has a stomach ache and her heart races.

John-Bee looks over his shoulder at her.

“Ready?” he yells.

She nods.

He pulls blue-tinted swimming goggles down over his eyes.

When they start taxiing to take off the weeds in the yard thwap the sides of the plane loudly, faster and faster, until the roar of the engine and the roar of the plant life blend into one continuous roar. Then suddenly, with the same feeling as an elevator coming to a stop, the grass thwapping stops and they’ve lifted into the air. Reagan can look down and see the grass getting smaller. But just by inches. They are approaching the electric fence and it doesn’t look like they will clear it, then they do, they’re really flying and then there’s a loud squealing scrape.

John-Bee looks over his shoulder at her then. She can’t see his eyes behind the goggles.

No wait, she thinks. I don’t want to die.

They’d run into the lilac bush and the plane crashes into the grass. It drags along the ground roughly, jostling them hard, and they almost slide into the razor-edged corn. She grabs John-Bee’s shoulders and braces herself and then the engine sputters out.

“Come on!” he says. He grabs her hand and starts running away from the airplane. She doesn’t look back and once they’ve gone a good distance, back out of the pasture and into the side lawn, he collapses to the ground under a tree.

They lie in the grass, panting, and look at their crumpled airplane. The long grass around it has rebounded and surrounds it like water, shimmering in the distance, like it’s a dented boat.

“I thought it might explode,” John-Bee says.

They stare at the airplane waiting for it to explode. Nothing happens.

They didn’t get very far. They’d made an airplane that didn’t fly.

“We failed,” he says, laughing.

Reagan looks at the shining bits that are the tops of the long grass resting their seed tops against the body of the airplane, and the purple clover flowers near them wavering slightly, upright, unphased, expectant. A big branch of lilac had come with them, broken from the bush and crushed now beneath the airplane like a big brown arm; it is dead and out of place in the whole scene, the whole yard, because in the air is a smell like honey and grass and gasoline and John-Bee's Old Spice deodorant and so much life. She can see life wavering out away from them in the heat wave.

"No," Reagan says. "No, it doesn't matter."

They hadn't gotten anywhere. They were still in her backyard, and this backyard, the same one that had always been there behind her house, with the gravel driveway and the electric fence and the mulberry trees and sucker maples thin and leafy along the property line, it is on this day so bright that her backyard is full of contrast and vivid colors. The pathetic trees make lace on the lawn under a blue sky. It's so beautiful. It is a beautiful day.

It was the single best thing she'd ever done in her life, those weeks in the yard with John-Bee. She knew the names of all the wrenches and how he liked his iced tea, and now here they were gazing at this bright thing they'd made together, and her heart is buzzing, and there's something she wants to say.

On the tip of her tongue it's there. There's something she wants to say. She's not sure what the right words are. It's right there. Something about the airplane and John-Bee and the whole summer is buzzing through her whole body. She is about to say something.

What does she want to say?