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A STORY THAT MADE YOU UP: A NOVEL

by

Rachel Haley Himmelheber

A Dissertation Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
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ABSTRACT
A STORY THAT MADE YOU UP: A NOVEL

by

Rachel Haley Himmelheber

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Under the Supervision of Professor Valerie Laken

A Story That Made You Up traces the dissolution of a long friendship between two women, Mia, the novel's first-person narrator, and Jules. The focus of the novel involves the importance in women's lives of having close female friends, and the devastation that occurs when those relationships end. The novel begins with the termination of the relationship and then moves backwards, in achronological fragments, to tell the story of the full twenty-five year friendship.

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Multiple Worlds, Multiple Selves: Formal and Perspectival Fractures in Four Novels

My fiction has been influenced by contemporary novels that use their own materiality as constructed objects to expose multiple dimensions of their characters. This strategy of using formal fractures that call attention to a book as a tangible thing, such as the strategy of including repeated blank or white space between more typical blocks of prose text, is sometimes associated with postmodernism. Brian McHale contrasts “fiction in the realist tradition [which] has sought to suppress or neutralize” its own materiality “by conventionalizing space right out of existence” with postmodern fiction in which the “introduction of blank space has the effect of foregrounding the presence and materiality of the book, and of disrupting the reality of the projected world” (181). These disruptions create liminal space where the reader must fill in the blank. The novels I will examine use formal fractures that signify spatial/geographical and temporal fragmentation to underscore the perspectival shifts that force the reader into an active role as co-constructor of character.

Of course, readers are always participants in the structuring of any given narrative: each reading experience of a single text is necessarily individual. While we as readers “do not reply to the writer, we usually feel s/he is addressing us [as individuals], and we bring a story into being by posing and answering questions (even if unconsciously) about what we read” (Martin 152). The difference I want to highlight in this discussion hinges on McHale’s definition of postmodern fiction as a departure from

the modernist tradition. He argues that the “dominant of postmodernist fiction is ontological,” as opposed to the epistemological dominance of modernist fiction, and that this ontological focus can locate the postmodern in the positive realm of possibilities of multiple selves and multiple worlds (10). Within this distinction McHale explicitly connects postmodern fiction’s materiality with its narrative content: he sees these texts as asking questions such as “What is a world?; What kinds of worlds are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of worlds are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?; What is the mode of existence in a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects?; How is a projected world structured?” (10). These “questions bear either on the ontology of the literary text itself or on the ontology of the world which it projects”—in other words, the novel’s formal and narrative elements are both called into question (10).

As Wallace Martin argues, drawing upon structuralist theory: “a character or person is not a fixed entity with an essence [and] that may be because self and world exist for us only as a project, a becoming” (120). He uses psychoanalytic theory to link this “becoming” with the activity of the reading experience:

Character and plot, like self and world, derive their present significance from their position on a path that gathers together all the past and projects it toward a future. The conviction that characters are static entities can come only after reading, when the narrative cuts them off from the possibility of a future and they can therefore be fixed in retrospect. (121)

In a reading experience dominated by postmodern fracture (formal, spatial, temporal, and perspectival), this gathering of the past is a recursive process and the projection may be toward multiple, simultaneous futures.

The novels I will discuss use their twinned formal and perspectival shifts to ask questions of the reader. What is the nature of this material object, and what is the nature of this story? These questions foreground the development of character trajectory in these novels as the reader must examine how formal breaks expose the multiplicity of selves within any given perspective¹.

Carole Maso's *Ava*, Mary Robison's *Why Did I Ever*, Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, and Joshua Ferris' *Then We Came to the End* are easily identifiable as fragmented texts. Pick up any of these four novels and flip through their pages, and the formal breakages announce themselves immediately: the pages of *Ava* resemble stanzas of poetry, often only one line long, and the novel is separated into three titled sections—"Morning," "Afternoon," and "Night"; *Why Did I Ever*'s chapters consist of numbered (and occasionally, titled) sections separated by white space—45 such sections in the span of the first chapter's 17 pages; *A Visit from the Goon Squad*'s chapters are separated into parts "A" and "B" and include chapters in the form of an article from *Details* magazine and a PowerPoint presentation; and *Then We Came to the End*'s fifth chapter is followed by an unnumbered interlude chapter and then a numerical reboot—on page 233, we begin again with chapter one. *Ava* and *Why Did I Ever* seek to demonstrate the different selves

¹ Here, perspective may refer to a novel's singular point-of-view character and the multiple selves within that point of view, as in the novels *Ava* and *Why Did I Ever*, or it may refer to a novel's perspective on a character—which may encompass multiple point-of-view characters—as in *A Visit from the Goon Squad* and *Then We Came to the End*. In each case, the interest in this discussion lies in connecting this multiplicity with formal fracture.

from within the inherently complex unity of a first-person point of view, while both *A Visit from the Goon Squad* and *Then We Came to the End* utilize more radical perspectival fractures in the form of multiple points of view. None of these four texts employs broad historiographical fractures that seek to revise communal notions of historical truth, as in a text like Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*, where we are asked to reconsider our previous understanding of both *Mrs. Dalloway* and Virginia Woolf. However, each of these four novels demands that a reader's structuring of characterological history be recursive; as we follow the disruptions these fragments create, space opens for readers to revisit and reconsider our original impressions of who these characters are.

In the first two texts I will discuss, *Ava* and *Why Did I Ever*, subtle fractures within unified first-person perspectives reveal the narrators' most private selves. Despite similar formal strategies, the narrative distance in the two novels is quite different. *Ava* spans a single day, the last day of Ava Klein's life. Ava is not telling her story to anyone, not even to herself. While the reader by the novel's end can construct many events from Ava's life, this construction is enacted entirely by the reader. The fragments of the novel accumulate, and the reader is free to make meaning from them. But what we read in the novel is not meant to be read as Ava's conscious narration or an interior construction of her memories and thoughts, even as it includes fragments of speech that were obviously previously constructed or narrated. Instead, "Morning," "Afternoon," and "Night" are meant to be understood as a sort of unrestricted access to Ava's most secret, unselfconscious self. These segments of texts are unbidden thoughts, punctuated

occasionally by what I read as voices from Ava's present moment in the hospital²—as in, “Wake up, Ava Klein. Turn over on your side. Your right arm, please” (4). The text of this novel reflects a dreamlike state. Ava is not assimilating these recollections, or constructing a narrative: she is doped up in a hospital; perhaps she is unconscious. It is a closer narrative distance even than stream-of-consciousness because stream-of-consciousness is still being narrated and constructed into language. *Ava* functions as though we were *inside* Ava Klein, with her images and memories barely rising to the level of language.

In the list of *Sources* at the end of the text, Maso describes the fragments of her novel *Ava* as “what floods the mind of my Ava Klein on her final day [which] include[s]...the many private voices and versions of herself [as well as] those voices that arise from her ‘passionate and promiscuous reading’ of the texts of the world” (269). Of course, the voices of others, as filtered through Ava's memory, also make prominent appearance, as do textual voices that are not necessarily “texts of the world” but are private correspondence to Ava. Maso is in pursuit of the textural: the texture of Ava's interior, both her memory and the way her mind processes memory with old and new thought, image, and conversations both imagined and real. The novel is thus not a portrait of Ava's consciousness; consciousness does not fit as a term here because of its implication of awareness. It would be more accurate to say that the novel wants to show us Ava's soul.

The novel offers many modes of Ava's mind's articulation which constitute hairline perspectival fractures. Some sections have the polish of words that have been

² I read these intrusions from the present moment as the novel's most radical perspectival fractures.

previously articulated, while others are the type of unbidden thoughts or images I discussed earlier. It is possible to distinguish these sections by their level of articulation, by how adorned the language is. Some are what I will call straight image, or relatively unadorned impressionistic description: as in “A child in a tree” (5); or “Almond. Cherry. Small fig” (33). Some are images her mind has articulated in a more conscious way, not *the thing*, but *the thing described*, as in “Olives hang like earrings in late August” (3); or “That’s an almond tree. There’s a cherry. Small fig” (122). Some are unmistakable attempts to get the language and the idea right, as in the repetition of “We were working on an erotic song cycle” or “He bounded up the sea-soaked steps” (4), which may serve to self-soothe in their repetition, or may indicate some cyclical thought or anxiety. Some are intrusions of other voices from memory: “Tell me everything you’d like me to—your hand there, slowly” (4). And some are intrusions from the exterior, those aforementioned other voices from the moment.

By contrast, *Why Did I Ever*’s Money Breton is consciously narrating her story and the narrative distance is slightly greater. The voices here are no less private, varied, or interior than in *Ava*, but Money is working through and examining her story as she tells it. She is not unconscious; rather, she is constructing these pieces into a whole. Much of *Why Did I Ever*’s present moment action happens during Money’s solitary travel. She is alone in a car or a plane. The novel offers multiple clues that these trips might provide a way in which to conceive of the novel’s narration. In section 52, Money engages an inanimate object:

‘WORK FOR US’ reads the purple neon writing over a trucker’s garage.
I say, ‘Thanks, but I just want to drive right now.’ (20)

It may be helpful to think of the novel's narrative distance as related to this purple neon sign. Money is not crazy, so she is not truly talking to a sign. I do not read this moment as evidence of voiced speech. Instead, this section is evidence of a weird, private self, the kind of self many of us get to know on solitary road trips. Part of what makes *Why Did I Ever* pleasurable to read is the strange, jagged sense of humor apparent in Money's voice. She is working hard to entertain, but she is working hard to entertain herself, so a reader could not possibly get all of the jokes.

Money frequently narrates her own interior voice back to herself, as in section 466: "What it takes to survive out here is order, I realize and say to myself, 'Divide the day into equal periods. See this travel alarm? You get up, don your uniform, move according to the bell'" (174). Here, the reader sees multiple layers of her interior dialogue. First, Money realized that she needed order to survive, so she told herself to divide her day, to notice the travel alarm, to move according to the bell. This first telling is almost like action; it happened in real time. But section 466 is about a second instance of interior conversation, a moment when Money tells herself *about what she told herself*. After this realization about survival, she wants to repeat the self-talk to herself, to notice and mark what her interior conversation has been. So the second layer here is evident in the part of the quote that reflects the narration of the telling: "I realize and say to myself." Because Money has Attention Deficit Disorder and has run out of her prescription of Ritalin, these frequent moments of repeated interior dialogue—telling herself what she has told herself—can be read as a method of self-soothing.

Even sections that may appear to be in service of giving the reader necessary information can be read as Money's interior dialogue with her many selves. Section 10 is an example:

The name I use is an annoying problem. Everyone wonders about it. No one doesn't ask.

My name is Money. I picked it up and kept it and now it's what I'm called.

I say I'm tired of telling how I got the name. Or that the story isn't all that great. (4)

Here, it would be easy to assume that section 10 comes from a different point of narrative distance and is merely the novel's way of getting us necessary information, but a self can be in conversation with another self who is posing as an other. For example, Money is narrating to herself her annoyance about having to explain her name—that is, she is speaking inside her head rather than aloud—but she may be imagining a specific or hypothetical person as her audience. One of her selves is playing the role of someone else.

I read this self-other as an example of Mikhail Bakhtin's "double-voiced...double-languaged representation of another's words" (341). In Bakhtin's view, "the process of assimilating our consciousness to the ideological world...[or] [t]he ideological becoming of a human being...is the process of selectively assimilating the words of others" (341). Some of *Why Did I Ever's* sections read as though Money is rehearsing or imagining something to say aloud to another person (whether an actual person or a hypothetical person), while other sections read as purely interior

conversations between assimilated selves. I submit that all of the sections are evidence of Money's interior. These perspectival fractures, unified within Money's interior but reflective of her many selves and modes of private conversation, offer us insight into who Money is with information she would not be willing, or able, to share if the novel were told from a greater narrative distance.

In both *Ava* and *Why Did I Ever*, the formal fragmentation offers the reader evidence of how to understand the characters of Ava and Money through the novels' narrative distances. In *Ava*, the textual arrangement on the page reflects an unstructured narration, with many sentence fragments, repeated phrases, and missing punctuation marks. Ava's sections float through the hours of a day with little to delineate them other than the white space between. In *Why Did I Ever*, Money's narration is segmented into chapters, and each section begins with a hard break—either a number or a title. (The titled sections do not contain a number, but the titles replace the number. These sections do not disrupt the numerical trajectory.) This textual arrangement reflects *Why Did I Ever's* greater narrative distance and emphasizes Money's conscious sense of constructing a story. Both novels consist of small chunks of text (rarely more sustained than a quarter of a page, and often merely a few words) separated by white space. But whereas Maso slices Ava open to show us her mind's articulation with no acknowledgment that this is her aim and no guidance to locate the reader in time and place, Robison's Money constructs an interior narrative that nevertheless has some awareness of audience.

In spite of the higher degree of self-consciousness in Money's narration, both *Ava* and *Why Did I Ever* offer the reader a perspective that is compelling because of its

structural immediacy that has a purely idiosyncratic logic. This idiosyncratic logic affects the ordering of information. Both novels are collage narratives that are nonlinear in their chronology. In lieu of a plot, the reader has a puzzle, and the missing pieces establish suspense that pulls the reader through the novels' pages. For example, in *Why Did I Ever*, the reader grows increasingly worried about Paulie and more interested in discovering exactly what happened to him. The novel's strategy of withholding information makes sense within the point of view; after all, Money knows what happened, and while she is narrating her thoughts with some self-consciousness, she is not telling a story. This withholding makes sense as a novelistic strategy for a nonlinear collage narrative: the missing pieces of information create a sense of narrative tension. But this eking out of Paulie's story does more than generate tension, it also reveals something about Money's character. From the very first mention, the reader knows that something horrible has happened to Money's son Paulie: she was with him "before the NYPD began hiding him," his hands were in "bandage gloves," and he "was three weeks out of the hospital" (4-5). But the rest of the information comes haltingly, and while the reader can piece together a picture of Paulie's sexual assault and subsequent police protection, there are many parts of the story Money consciously avoids telling. It is not until the end of the book that the reader learns what has been so frightening to Money that she cannot bear to even say it to herself: "A little more waiting and then I'll get the phone call. Maybe in another four or five weeks after Paulie's six-months test. When he'll be able to say he's virus-free" (197). The chronology that is important to Money's character development is not the chronology of events but rather the order in which she manages to narrate them.

A Visit From the Goon Squad is told from multiple perspectives. While the novel uses many characters' points of view, it is primarily concerned with two characters' stories, Bennie and Sasha. For the purpose of this discussion, I will concentrate on Sasha and how some of the novel's perspectival fractures offer us additional insight into her character. *A Visit From the Goon Squad* announces its intentions from the outset in the epigraph from Proust: "The unknown element in the lives of other people is like that of nature, which each fresh scientific discovery merely reduces but does not abolish." The novel hopscotches through multiple points of view, all of which somehow inform, complicate, and enlarge our understanding of the novel's central characters. The first chapter is told from the third person point of view of Sasha. In this chapter, she has a session with her therapist and goes on a date with Alex, a New York City newcomer. In her therapist's office, Sasha discusses her problem stealing other people's items, and on her date with Alex, Sasha steals a woman's wallet but then pretends to find it when the woman panics. Alex tells Sasha: "[H]ere in N.Y.C.: you have no fucking idea what people are really like. They're not even two-faced—they're, like, multiple personalities" (12). Sasha tells him she understands but that "you get used to it." In the following exchange between them we see the novel's plan:

'I'd rather just go somewhere else.'

It took Sasha a moment to understand. 'There is nowhere else,' she said.

(13)

The reader, knowing how Sasha has just lied to Alex about the woman's stolen wallet, understands that these multiple personalities are already on display and that there is no

escape from this multiplicity. It is clear that these multiple personalities will be everywhere in the world of this book, no matter whose perspective is highlighted.

A similar moment occurs in chapter two, which is told from the third-person perspective of Bennie, Sasha's boss. When Bennie cannot find his box full of impotence-healing gold flakes, Sasha says she has it, and Bennie notes that "more and more, [Sasha was] finding things he'd misplaced—sometimes before Bennie even knew they were missing. It added to the almost trancelike dependence he felt on her" (34). This moment is important to understanding Sasha's character. The reader understands what Bennie does not: that Sasha has stolen, not found, Bennie's box of gold flakes. But what enlarges our understanding of Sasha is that she returns the box to Bennie when she does not have to. In the previous chapter, Sasha recollects discussing with her therapist "why she kept the stolen objects separate from the rest of her life...[and how] leaving them untouched made it seem as if she might one day give them back" (16-7). To then witness her return a stolen item is a thrilling insight for the reader, but the insight is limited in the text. Because the chapter is from Bennie's perspective, the text offers us Bennie's feelings in the form of his acknowledgment of a "trancelike dependence" on Sasha. Here, the perspectival fracture forces the reader, without help from the text, to address the mystery of why Sasha returned Bennie's box.

Some of this moment's tension is derived from the use of dramatic irony where the character is oblivious to information to which the reader is privy. Bennie believes Sasha when she says he dropped the box and she retrieved it, but the reader knows Sasha steals items. However, much of the moment's tension comes from possibility, from what the reader doesn't know. In the first chapter, Sasha makes it clear that she wishes she

could return these stolen items, focusing on how such an action might signal positive progress to her therapist: “She wanted badly to please him, to say something like *It was a turning point; everything feels different now*....Redemption, transformation—God how she wanted these things. Every day, every minute. Didn’t everyone?” (18). The reader moves from this unrealized desire to this instance of Sasha returning Bennie’s box. The reader is then left with multiple possibilities. Did Sasha have the transformation she longed for? Was returning Bennie’s box that dramatic redemptive moment in the story of her stealing? Or did she stop stealing long ago? Perhaps he did really drop the item, and she legitimately rescued it. Or perhaps she still stole items, but she wouldn’t steal from Bennie. Each new option erects a different Sasha to fill the fracture. It is thus possible for the reader to create Sasha many times over, and also fundamentally impossible to create her since each re-creation leaves a residue that complicates, enlarges, or contradicts the last.

Chapter 12 is a radical formal fracture in the text; the entire chapter is in the form of a PowerPoint presentation. In this PowerPoint, created by Sasha’s daughter Ally, we find in Sasha a new character; this formal and perspectival fracture signals a much more dramatic shift than the other chapters’ different vantages. In this chapter, she is literally reborn as someone new: “Sasha Blake=Mom” (236). The independent, sexually aggressive Sasha we know from chapter one who stole from her date’s wallet (17) and chose to have sex on the rug rather than the bed (15) is embedded inside of chapter 12’s “Mom” who chides her son for saying “hell” and posits that ““I don’t think of [David] Bowie as a chicken, so there must be some reason he opted not to pause there [in his song]”” (245). Here, the reader must reconcile the Sasha of previous chapters who

worked in the music industry in N.Y.C. and traded sex for money when she lived in Italy, with “Mom,” just another fuddy-duddy adult refusing to critique the music that used to be cutting edge, someone who is clinging to her old ideas of self. In merging these multiple layers of this character, the reader is constantly forced to enlarge and revise her sense of Sasha’s identity and capabilities.

Like *A Visit from the Goon Squad, Then We Came to the End* incorporates multiple points of view. It is told in the plural first-person until its unnumbered interlude chapter “The Thing to Do and the Place to Be,” after which the chapters reboot and begin again at number one. The interlude chapter is told from the close third-person perspective of Lynn as she decides whether to undergo her cancer treatment. At the end of the first chapter five, there is an elegant transition to the interlude that foregrounds some of the complications in the perspectival shift that follows. The collective office has enlisted Karen Woo to impersonate Lynn and call the hospital, so that they can determine if she really does have cancer. As Karen calls, the group “waited, [and] it was almost as if something swept the room and a collective epiphany dawned upon all of us at once and we knew for certain how wrong we had been about everything” (194). The epiphany that follows is a set of possibilities for Lynn: her cancer was a rumor, or there was a “scheduling conflict with the doctor, [or] some clarification was needed in the diagnosis, [or] more tests had to be taken, blood drawn, [or] the doctor was sick, [or] the hospital had lost power” (194). These are all reasonable possibilities to which the reader may find herself nodding along, implicated by the group’s power to become Lynn the character. Ferris encourages the reader to abstract Lynn here, to see her as a fictional character we are all creating. The reader must travel from Karen’s literal impersonation to the

collective trying on of Lynn's character in the form of these potentialities to the intimacy of Lynn's internal dialogue with her naked fears of trivialities like "that awkward ten minutes between the time you arrive and the time they dim the lights for the previews when against all reason you believe everyone in the theater is staring at you because you are a woman alone at the movies" (199). These transitions address the question of the boundaries of self. Throughout the novel, Ferris plays with the very idea of a singular self in the form of the unified collective of the ad agency's office identity. When the novel moves from this impersonation to such a vivid portrait of Lynn's life, so immediate and grounded in an extreme specificity of character, it is as if the novel were saying, you were wondering who she is, or how she could possibly be real, and so here are multiple possible answers.

And yet the questions keep coming. Within Lynn's interlude chapter, the reader is asked to reconsider everything about Lynn. Lynn has been a figure of mystery in the first five chapters: "[H]er communiques were brief, inconclusive, and often bewildering. She might leave us a voice mail that said, 'Forget about it,' or drop an email that said only, 'Don't worry so much – Lynn.' We spent hours trying to decode these simple messages" (50). In the interlude, events are decoded. For example, Lynn's feelings about dealing with the fired Chris Yop force the reader to revise her understanding of the event while at the same time not providing any startling information, just a normal response of incredulity at Yop's behavior (197). Lynn's chapter also asks the reader to reconsider the group, the *we*, when Lynn echoes the office's speculative tendencies by contemplating a possible outsider opinion of her:

She's avoiding her face in the mirror and all the lachrymose self-pity etched there. Fuck that. And for those of you who think Lynn Mason in addition to cancer suffers from the disease the talk shows diagnose as *Needing the Man*, if you think that's why she was parked outside Martin's office building, then you haven't yet understood the special circumstances of this Tuesday night, the forces at play that make her desperate and wanting in a way that is wholly unlike her. (224)

In these three sentences, Ferris moves from the first sentence's straightforward third person perspective to Lynn's interior voice ("Fuck that") to a sentence that is both an echo of the previous chapter's "set of possibilities for Lynn" and a direct and fierce response to what a collective *we* may think of Lynn. The irony in the third sentence is that it is the opposite of the group's rushed portrait of Lynn; the office often cannot imagine Lynn as a person who needs anyone (118). It is clear that Ferris' point here is that the reader does not know Lynn, despite having been witness to the obsessive conjecture that characterizes the numbered chapters. In *Then We Came to the End*, the radical perspectival fracture of the interlude chapter clears a path for a reboot, and when the reader returns to the office as part of the collective *we*³, it is with an enlarged sense of all of the characters' possibilities.

It should be edifying to the reader that these novels' possibilities can frustrate or forestall the potential for a unified understanding of a character. As new possibilities emerge, they sometimes cancel out old ones, and the text thus disallows the reader from constructing a whole or coherent narrative for a character. The sham here is in thinking

³ Ferris makes clear in the novel's end that the reader is literally a part of the collective: "We were the only two left. Just the two of us, you and me" (385).

that the goal of reading a complex character is to figure her out. No matter how complicated the psychological trajectory a reader lights upon, it is unavoidably reductive.

In these four novels, different types of fractures enlarge our understanding of the many selves within each single character. The reader must constantly revisit whatever perception she has developed in light of each new insight. These many selves are unified within a person but are often contradictory and inconsistent. A reader must revise and reconsider her prejudices and assessments throughout the reading experience. Formally fractured narratives are sometimes criticized as being tricky, or merely clever. All head, no heart. But the liminal spaces in these novels force possibilities for the way a reader interacts with fictional worlds, and these possibilities may allow readers to conceive of fictional characters more widely and with more compassion.

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I'm going to stare at the whorled grain of wood in this desk
I'm bent over until it's infinite,

I'm going to make it talk, I'm going to make it
Confess everything.

--Larry Levis, from "Elegy with a Thimbleful of Water in the Cage"

I drove because Ben couldn't stand me when I didn't have enough to do. He said, "A confined space with you idle has got to be my personal hell."

We were still an hour outside of Burlington, and our loot from the auction rattled in the back of Ben's piece of shit truck. That and the snow made driving tricky, but neither of us cared. I wanted something difficult to do, and Ben liked to sit back while I did it.

"It's your mom again," Ben said. My phone vibrated in the console between us. She'd been calling on and off for three hours.

"I'm sure it is," I said.

"They're going to keep calling."

"Turn off my phone then. If it bothers you."

"They aren't going to say anything bad to you, Mia. They know Jules is a handful."

It wasn't what they'd say but what would be implied. Which Ben knew perfectly well because I'd explained it to him, so I didn't bother responding. He'd been saying the same thing for days as if he thought repeating it would magically make it true.

In a clear retaliatory move, he answered the phone. "Hi Lida. It's Ben. Yes, happy New Year! I guess I haven't talked to you yet this year."

I couldn't safely take my eyes off the road to glare at him so I focused on the crawl of cars ahead of me. Blue Toyota, Heineken truck, snow, headlights. I wasn't going to say a word to my family, so that could be left up to him to explain since he'd taken it upon himself to answer.

“We’re driving back from the auction. She made out better than I did, a tiller and a new slicer. Odds and ends. It’s not too bad, but she can’t hold the phone. I’ll put you on speaker.”

Mom’s voice filled the cab: “Mia?”

I tightened my face and managed a peek at Ben. He held the phone out to me. Pleading. Which was not attractive.

“Mia?”

Ben said, “I guess the speaker isn’t working right. Do you want me to give her a message?”

Mom said, “I’ve been trying to call her all day. We received a letter from Jules. Well, Dan and Emmie and I did. I can’t get Merrie on the phone either.”

The last bit of hope I had: gone. She’d sent letters to everyone.

Maybe Ben knew he was being cruel to force me to listen after that piece of information because he switched the speaker off. He said, “Yes, she got one, too. Maybe two weeks ago.”

I thought of her letter: *It’s not that you take, it’s that you take over. After I’ve spent time with you, I’m depleted.*

Ben said, “I know.” He said, “Uh huh.” He said, “She did.” He said, “I’ll definitely tell her.” The he said good bye.

“I’m sorry, Mia. I know you didn’t want—”

“What’d she say?”

“It’s weird, it seemed like she was saying it might be good for Jules. Like to cut the cord.”

“And you didn’t believe me that they’d be on her side.”

“It wasn’t like that. She was worried about you, too.”

“Well, you don’t know them. I do. All any of us do is protect Jules. It’s our family’s full-time job.”

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The big reveal happened in health class. Health class was a joke. Jules and I were both smart enough to ignore most of class, do our homework in the twenty minutes before school when the bus dropped us off, in homeroom, and at morning breakfast break. We did almost all of it together.

I’d even changed from Spanish to German to be with Jules so that we wouldn’t have any different classes. This switch did not please Mom, who felt every American needed to learn Spanish. I told her the German would come in handy if the Gestapo ever re-formed and came for us. Dad said just because we didn’t practice didn’t mean we weren’t Jewish and that I should be ashamed of myself for making fun.

“I’m not a Holocaust denier. But we must laugh so as not to cry.” *We laugh so as not to cry* was a quote for our English midterm essay and so I would never have used it as an example around Jules, but Mom and Dad didn’t know that was my essay topic.

But Dad still gave me that look, like *I see you trying to sound smart*.

It was during this time that Jules stopped dreaming. She was pretty worried about it. I felt she just wasn’t remembering her dreams because I didn’t usually remember mine either and that was normal, but Bunny thought it was a protective impulse to keep herself from the trauma that dreams would certainly bring up. We’d been learning about

dreaming as part of well-being in Health class: REM cycles and getting enough hours and a balanced breakfast and drinking water and on and on.

We had the dumbest homework: mostly writing questions about sex for the anonymous question box—Jules and I tried to make ours extra dirty, asking about S&M, or extra lame, about wet dreams. We would never have asked a real question of the box, but everyone had to put a question in every week, and some of them were hilarious. We sat around a big table, like we were going to pray over and then eat our questions.

We tried to stay straight-faced throughout the reading of the question in order to see if anybody perked up, like they really wanted to know the answer. Several times we felt we caught people.

Next question: *Someone in this room was raped by her father. We all know about it. But how do we let her know we know about it?*

And dumb Mrs. Lotzenheizer read it out loud.

After that, we pretty much stopped being friends with anybody but each other.

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I said, “I found him!”

“Him who?” Jules said. She was painting a mural on the wall of her new bedroom in the basement. Since her room was connected to mine by the bathroom, I could smell the paint. It was kind of cool, like a forest scene that got trippy and weird if you kept looking at it. My parents would never have let me paint the wall, but I had to admit they probably were right to let Jules. It looked professional.

“What is that?” I asked, pointing at a purplish-black shadow that backgrounded a small clump of trees over the wall where Jules’ bed would go.

“It’s the Wicked Witch of the West. She’s just not appeared fully.”

“Is this *Wizard of Oz* woods?” It sort of looked like that but not really. It looked more like the faerie calendars and framed prints Nori had everywhere.

“Kind of. It’s lots of stuff.”

“It looks like Nori’s prints,” I said. “If her prints were on drugs.”

“Bingo,” she said, still painting. “This is your lame art, this is your lame art on drugs. Any questions?”

“So,” I said. “I found him. Aren’t you excited?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“The perfect guy for you to go out with. His name’s Michael, he works over at Cleveland Subs, and he’s just turned eighteen, so, like a little older but not too old. He’s totally sweet.”

Jules said, “What’s he look like?”

“Cute,” I said.

“Well, don’t say it like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like you’re put out that I’m asking. I’m the one who’s going to have to have sex with this guy.”

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The new girl’s name was Jules. Mrs. Heinz wrote her name on the board and where

she came from: Boston, Massachusetts. Mrs. Heinz told us that Boston, Massachusetts was three hundred and fifty miles away from where we were in Newark, Delaware and that was like running one thousand four hundred times around the football field. Jules looked pretty nice when she had to stand in front of the class and say hi to us; she had long brown hair with sparkly barrettes. In accordance with my policy of being nice to newcomers, I introduced myself at recess.

“Do you want to come over after school and play sometime?” Jules asked.

She seemed lonely to ask me that right away. “Sure,” I said. “What do you like to play?”

“I have two new Barbies,” Jules said.

“I like Barbies,” I said cautiously, even though I wasn’t allowed to have Barbies. I decided to change the subject. “My mom’s going to have a baby,” I said.

“Lucky!” Jules said. “I wish my mom would have a baby, but my dad says she doesn’t have time for another baby.”

“I don’t know if my mom has time either,” I said, suddenly doubtful. “She’s busy at work because she’s a lawyer which is the busiest job there is, but she’s going to take six months off to be with the new baby. And I’m going to help her out a lot. So’s my little sister Emmie, even though she’s pretty much a baby, too. She’s only three so it’s mostly going to be me helping. But when she gets older. And we’re going to read the baby stories together.”

“My mom doesn’t work,” Jules said.

Mom said women who don’t work are contributing to a stereotype, but I decided not to repeat that to Jules, so I just stared at her. She looked sort of like the picture of

Heidi. I wanted smooth hair like hers.

“Is your mom having a boy or a girl?” Jules asked.

“You can’t tell until it comes out. It’s growing now.”

“Oh. Well, when will it come out?”

“Not until January.”

“My birthday’s in January!”

I said, “You’ll be invited to the baby’s party, don’t worry, and then you can invite me to your birthday, too.”

Later, when Mom picked me up from school, I was the last one at after-school care. I went to after-school on Tuesdays and Thursdays because that’s when Dad taught night classes. “I made friends with the *new* new girl today, but I think this one’s going to be better,” I told Mom in the car.

“Ha! I told you it would pay off to be nice to the new students.”

“Her name’s Jules, and she invited me to come over and play sometime but I don’t know.”

“Why not?”

“She wants to play Barbies. I didn’t tell her I’m not allowed.”

In the rearview mirror, I could see Mom looked confused, then she sighed and laughed, a funny kind of laugh. “Oh, Mia honey. Well, you can play Barbies. And dolls. You have some dolls.”

All of my baby dolls were black and one was Native American. They didn’t look like me, so I pretended I’d adopted them. Mom said adoption was a noble cause.

“But you said Barbies were hard on women,” I said.

She pulled into the driveway but kept the motor running. She sighed. “You can play with them at other people’s houses as long as you know you don’t ever have to try to look like Barbie. I don’t like to have them in our house.”

“But my baby dolls are pretty,” I said. All dolls were prettier than real people. “Especially Elsie.” Elsie had real eyelashes and rosy cheeks.

“Of course they are,” Mom said. “And there’s nothing wrong with being pretty. You’re pretty.”

“You’re pretty, too,” I said generously.

“Thank you,” Mom said. “But there are some people who want girls to be pretty and don’t think they can be smart and helpful and accomplished. You’re smarter than you’re pretty.”

“I am?”

“And you’re a nice person, too, who will make a real difference in the world.” We were in the driveway, and she switched the engine off like we were done talking even though I wasn’t.

“But there’s nothing wrong with being pretty?”

“No,” Mom said firmly. She turned around in her seat to look at me. “But if everybody around you wants to look like Barbie, you can choose not to emulate that.”

“What’s emulate?”

“Emulate is copy,” Mom said. “But you can go over to—what’s her name?”

“Jules,” I said.

“You can go over to Jules’ house to play with Barbies. I’m glad you asked me, honey.” She opened her car door. “Now help me carry these bags in. Where does Jules

come from?”

“She’s from Boston.”

“That’s nice. That’s pretty close to Grandma and Poppy’s house. I think we’ll eat some of that soup Daddy froze, does that sound good?”

I slammed my car door too hard because I still wasn’t sure I understood. I said, “Soup sounds good.”

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She was crying and scrunched up in the corner of the tent, stretching the canvas taut. “I feel like you’re bad!” she screamed.

I saw little M&Ms in her eyes. They grew wings and took flight, and then, as the lights from the playing fields flashed on and then off, her face got dark and she seemed—not evil—but heavy, a heavy dark presence, a burden. I tried to keep the knowledge that I was tripping on shrooms in the forefront. But mostly I thought: my trip was getting fucked courtesy of her freakout. I’d thought I’d be so far gone that I wouldn’t realize I was on drugs. But I was forced to remember reality since Jules was out of it. I couldn’t stop staring at her face crying: her tears were sparkling and they looked like colored crystals dropping from her eyes. She seemed a little nicer then, because the crystals were piling up around her and they shone colors all over her face. I took a second to enjoy them before I pulled my attention—it felt actually like pulling, like a horse or a heavy wagon behind me, leading by force and direction—back to helping Jules. She was pushing at the edges of the tarp, and I was pretty sure the tent was going to come down if she didn’t stop.

I moved as if to take her hands away from the fabric but asked first, “Can I touch you?” Because she looked like a wolf who could claw me apart if I made the wrong move.

Jules looked at me. Man, did her eyes look fucked up. It was easy to tell the whole night was ruined.

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Jules flicked the book over the new beanbag chair. It lay there, its spine almost severed and several pages crumpled, and we both looked at it. “Fuck that book,” she said. “It’s a stereotype, even if it did happen. Everyone’s got to be a southerner. And poor.”

Rage filled me until I might have popped. Rage at the book, the book that was lying there crushed, splayed. At Mrs. DeMarco because who was she to think that she was helping Jules by giving her this book to read, and at Dorothy Allison, the writer of the awful book, but mostly at the book itself. Like all of a sudden I could commit violent acts and not care, a sort of blackening over everything. And safety in that feeling because a book was only a thing.

“Why’d she give it to you?” I hadn’t even known Mrs. DeMarco knew.

Jules shrugged. She was sitting on the floor by her bedside table with the picture of her holding up her learner’s permit. Only a month ago, but she already looked much older—not taller, because she was already so tall, but like her eyes rested on you longer when she looked at you and the expression in them wasn’t so changeable; she seemed sadder. She said, “It was in her book club. She wrote me a note.”

“A note in the book?”

“Yeah. I think it’s because I said something about being worried about being super sexual with my history.”

“You said *that* to Mrs. DeMarco?”

“Just when she asked me about stuff with my dad. I had to help her carry stuff while everybody else was reading. Books from the storage room and from her car, so she was asking me, and I told her that it was kind of scary to me how much I liked thinking about sex, like maybe I’m a more sexual person than other people, and maybe it’s hereditary.”

“Why’d you tell her that?”

“I don’t know, Mia. I’d been talking to Bunny about it, so it was fresh on my mind. I wasn’t thinking about what to say. Anyway, it made her all weird and gushy and giving me books. So I got punished, don’t worry.”

Later that night I read it. Or, I read parts of it. I stayed up almost all night, and I skimmed the whole thing, looking for everything that bothered Jules. Mrs. DeMarco’s inscription bothered me most because it meant Jules had told her without me knowing. I read the violent parts, skipped around to the sex; the words were just black squiggles, but lurid.

The next morning, it seemed important that Jules not know I’d read the book, that she not know I’d picked it up from the floor, unbent its pages, closed its weakened spine, and given it my full attention. As much to hide the fact that I’d rescued it as anything else, I carried the book to Jules before school.

“Let’s burn it,” I said, brandishing the book in her face as soon as she opened the bathroom door. I’d been waiting for her to wake up, then waiting outside the bathroom

for her to finish. Her face was wet around the edges, as was her hair.

“Where would we burn it?” she asked. She showed no surprise at my suggestion.

I hadn’t thought about it. “Here,” I said. “In the sink?”

“That might hurt the sink.”

“I’ll take the risk.”

We lit it on fire, and we had to do it several times. Finally, I picked the burned book up—the flame had died again—and grabbed hold of its covers and ripped it apart. It felt good, like I tore its limbs apart, like it couldn’t scream. Jules took half and continued to burn it in the sink. I burned my half on the edge of the sink, on the tile, which left a long brownish mark on one tile that I couldn’t rub off.

Jules opened the window to let out the smoke. “Your mom’s going to think we had cigarettes.”

I said, “Shit,” and pointed.

“We’ll bleach it,” Jules said.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s my parents who will have to pay for it.”

“I said we could bleach it.”

I said, “I’m the one who will get in trouble for it.”

“It wasn’t my idea to burn it.” Then she said I wouldn’t get into trouble, who was I kidding. I just looked at her and rubbed at the spot and felt really mad at her, even though it had all been my idea. Then she called me a bitch and went to her room to get ready for school. Other than a long strip of the charred cover, which I flushed down the toilet since I was tired of the fire, nothing was left of the book but a lot of ashes which I hid in Jules’ makeup bag. Not the one she used every day, the one under the sink. I figured by the time

she found them, the ashes wouldn't look like ashes anymore. Besides, they were hers.

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Jules stood at the kitchen island in her white angora sweater and her braids and flushed cheeks. I was suddenly very miserable in my old flannel nightgown and said so.

“Go put on pajamas from this century then, please,” Mom said.

But I liked this nightgown, ratty as it was with its brown ragged edges which reminded me of the edges of something toasted; it reminded me of something romantic, with moors and formal, walled gardens and swirling pink skirts. Not like a poodle skirt—more full but close. *The Secret Garden*, and I was Colin, the tragic thought of which made tears come to my eyes. I felt sick, too, although that was certainly becoming secondary to other concerns. I hadn't felt really bad for two days and I was torn between the desire to enjoy the snow day and the desire to wallow in my misery and thus ensure tomorrow's absence from school. One option wasted today, another wasted tomorrow. It was a dilemma, but I chose to keep tomorrow: I chose wasting today.

“I'm too sick to go,” I said. And seeing what Mom was going to say next, I added, “And I'm too sick to help.” But I said it low, like a mumble.

“Well, go back to bed. We're all sick of listening to you wander the house picking fights.” Mom had been stressed all morning because she told Dad she couldn't get anything done with everybody around, plus she just hated snow days on principle since she had to stay home.

I coughed subtly, realizing I hadn't for a while, and, as if in retribution for my faking, I felt a shiver—the fever shiver—course through me.

I coughed again. “I have the fever shiver,” I informed Mom.

“Well, go right to bed and don’t move. What, you expect me to cease all activity every time you shiver?”

“Never mind,” I said pathetically, and turned to go. “I hate you both.”

I could hear Mom say to Jules, “She hates you, too? I swear, I’m taking all those ponies away if—”

“No,” I yelled from my place on the stairs.

Jules called, “We’re not fighting, are we, Mia?”

“No.” Even though I hated her, too. She always took the grown-ups’ side and tried to pacify and I always wanted to fight.

“Mia, are you in bed?” And then Mom was two stairs below me, a wooden spoon in hand. The spoon was covered in pink frosting, and I knew none of us would get any cupcakes, as usual. They were all for Mom’s kids at work. I was sick, wasn’t I? And I started to cry for real. Since I got sick, I hadn’t been allowed to sleep with Jules on the sofa bed in the basement rec room which had the TV and the fireplace. It also had a bar and was the best place in the house to play, plus it was private. Dad said the basement had all the features that told you what was important to people in the 1970s.

Mom asked, “Why are you crying?” But her voice was not sympathetic.

“I do hate you,” I screamed. I hated the way my voice sounded when I was crying. Jules appeared behind Mom, shaking her head *no* at me, like *don’t make it worse*. Which only enraged me and made me want to scream at the top of my lungs. Which, after a few seconds of consideration, I did. Mom just closed her eyes and stood there holding her spoon like a magic wand, but Jules looked horrified. I was gratified by the sharp return of

my sore throat. "I'm going," I said in as nasty a voice as I could manage. I went up the stairs before anyone could yell at me about waking the baby.

In my room, behind my slammed door, I lay down in the corner with my ear to the vent so I could hear the kitchen's conversation.

"Tattling is disloyal," Mom was saying. I must have missed the first part of the conversation. They were washing dishes and making a bunch of noise. But I'd already heard Mom's thesis on tattling: *Tattling means you'll be disloyal later in life, maybe even to your country like Benedict Arnold.* "You should stick together with other kids. Don't team up with adults against each other."

"What if someone's in trouble?" Jules asked.

"Of course, that's different," Mom said. "That's helping, not tattling."

Then Dad came in and asked who was going to brave the blizzard with him and Mom said I was still too sick to go but that maybe Jules would appreciate taking a break from this insane asylum. Then I heard Dad tell Jules she could wear my skis to go to the pharmacy. Even though they were new and I hadn't gotten to try them out yet. I propped myself on my elbow because my face hurt against the vent. I'd invited Jules to sleep over, of course, but I didn't know it would snow a zillion inches and I'd get sick and she would have to practically move in. She'd been here all weekend and she was going to stay tonight, too, because of the snow.

"You OK here with all these sickies, Lida?" Dad asked.

Mom said, "Well, by some miracle, Em and Merrie are still sleeping, and Mia's having more of a temper tantrum than an illness at this point. Although she's probably tired out and could use a nap, too. I'm just going to finish these and then maybe get

started on some of this paperwork.” My feet were getting pretty cold lying on the floor, but I wanted to hear if Dad was really going to let Jules wear my new skis. She was already wearing my pants and socks.

“Jules and I will get the meds—anything else we need? The grocery is open, too.”

“We’ve got toilet paper and chocolate chips,” Mom said. That was her joke about what she needed in a snowstorm.

“OK,” Dad said. “You ever cross country ski, Jules?”

“No,” I could hear Jules say. “Is it hard?”

“Not at all,” Dad said.

“It’s sort of like sliding around in your stocking feet,” Mom said. “It’s fun. You’ll be fine. Mia’s should fit you fine.”

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Emmie said, “Wait, she sent you a letter? Before the one we all got?”

“That’s what I said.”

“Was it the same as ours? How did you react?”

“I don’t know.” When I’d read the letter, I hadn’t been sure how to feel. I’d felt: a space of blank air, stunned.

“Do you think she’s OK? We have an obligation there.”

“She specifically said in the letter that she’d checked in with her doctors.”

Emmie said, “Good. So she’s still in therapy.”

I knew that was all Emmie needed to leave her alone. If people were in therapy, what more could you do?

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I switched my now-sweaty phone to the other ear and missed something Jules said but heard, “Yes, but you have the puritanical streak.”

“That is true,” I agreed, but I felt assaulted by my obviously boring nature, by my inability to have casual sex with one person anymore, much less multiple people. Much less a threesome with people I’d have to see in class all the time. Although I guess the artists don’t have class that much, just hours together in studios, working nearby each other. Which seemed nearly as bad, if not worse. I wanted to ask if anything ever happened in those studios. When I’d visited them they seemed good for all sorts of living—all the grad students in one building and each studio had couches or old squishy chairs smocked in big paint-spattered dropcloths. It looked like a perfect place for people to fuck. I didn’t want to ask, I guess because she would tell me.

“So, see?” Jules continued. “You couldn’t be fully brought over to my way of thinking on this.”

“Did you read your horoscope yet?”

“Not yet,” said Jules. Of course she had life to attend to, she wasn’t reading her horoscope religiously anymore. “Do you remember mine?”

I said, “Yours had *erotic* and *entanglement* together.”

“The two E’s.”

“Ease,” I said.

Jules asked, “What else?”

“Mine said I have to balance security and adventure or something generalist like

that. That's all I ever get. The domesticity/safety versus the creativity thing. Capital-B boring. Tell me if I should quit school, horoscope. Tell me what to do if I quit."

"Mine," Jules said. "What about mine?"

"That's all I remember. You get an erotic entanglement. Good for you. You're always getting one anyway."

I took another bong hit. I thought about getting another Valium even though I'd already had two today. I took them with Red Bull so I didn't fall asleep. I promised myself if the weed didn't bring the return of anything approximating joy in five minutes, then I would get a Valium. I thought of Mom's words from so long ago: *How can you be jealous of Jules?* Mom, I'd thought, you just don't get it. Any misery of hers is active and alive. Stuff happens to her. I'm stewing in inactive misery here, and I'd give anything to have real troubles.

"Two," Jules said smugly.

"Yeah, two. Don't remind me. I'd take one, one nice entanglement that didn't get too tangly. Did you see Bill Maher flirt with Jane Fonda?"

"No, I missed it. I was working. Tell me everything."

I said, "It was pretty gross." Even though it hadn't been. It was just more age-appropriate, but my visceral reaction was disgust. "I guess I'm sexist, but he seems so much less sleazy when I think of him all paternity or palimony or whatever-the-fuck with the tall black transvestite-looking chicks or Playboy Mansion—"

Jules interrupts, "Oooh, I'm always so happy for those kind of guys in the bunny-on-either-side pictures. They're all smiling, like NASCAR chick pictures on the wall in a diner."

I was beginning to feel better, although I couldn't tell if it was the weed or the change in conversation.

"Or even how he talks to Ann Coulter," I continued.

"Cunt," Jules said.

"Yeah." Since I felt better, I took a little insurance. I loaded another bowl. "Are you smoking?"

"No, but I don't know why. Janelle gave me her new pipe. It's so pretty."

"What's it look like?"

"I sort of want to smoke out of the bong though. I haven't smoked since last week."

"Good for you," I said. But I thought: There goes my last smoking buddy. Now she's just recreational.

"I know, right? I was proud."

"You're good," I said, and meant it. I wished I could quit smoking all day long.

"I'm proud, too."

"So the bong would get me high faster and be so nice," Jules continued. "Oooh, I ordered one of those German things."

"Oh my God."

"Yes ma'am. From *High Times*."

I was shocked. "You bought *High Times*?"

"No, whatshisfuck left it in my studio and I got to looking. It was super expensive, but I don't care."

"I'm coming to visit," I said. "Then it's not bad for you at all."

"Some people would disagree with that."

“Parade pissar. You know what I mean.”

“It’s OK,” Jules said. “I ordered one, and you can use it anytime you visit.”

“So are you trying to get him to come over more with your new purchase?”

“Of course,” Jules said. “He will be totally and completely unable to resist the siren call of the vaporizer.”

Sometimes I get nervous about my high dwindling and petering out and me not being able to get it calibrated right again. I took another hit. “So I know it’s wrong that I think it’s kind of cute or something that Bill has a lot of sleazy sex—”

“Puritan again.”

“Fuck off. I’m talking about the image he projects, his stamped and approved public self. The weird thing—this is why I appreciate Bill Maher. You ready? I appreciate Bill Maher because he wants to be, like, I’m an average-looking kinda ugly guy on the short side who gets to fuck and be friends with—and therefore appeal to—intelligent kind of heavyhitters and also dumbass, like, pieces of snatch girls.”

“Pieces of snatch girls. Am I high or is that funny?” Jules said.

“That’s true though?” Now I was really and truly high, and talking was easy again.

“How much money would you make if you had a casino that had a weed bar?” Jules asked. “Maybe we could start one. Shouldn’t the reservation be exempt from the white man’s laws? It’d be a goldmine. People would get all philosophical and take the other wrong-way decisions from drinking.”

I said, “But we should have liquor, too. To maximize ways of wrongness.”

“Yes! And ways of profit.”

“Yes,” I said. “I didn’t explain very well about Bill Maher. I mean a feminist appeal

thing that isn't broad because it's un-PC because he's clearly a dick and a little man-whore, but that is appealing to some, like me, in its very premeditatedness."

"Of course," Jules said. "I know exactly what you mean."

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Jules said, "I like cheesy bagel better. But I'm not a Jew."

I said, "Honorary," with my mouth full of lox.

"Huh?"

I swallowed. "Honorary."

She said, "Thanks. Since I like to be a part of all manner of suffering classes, I'll take it. Speaking of, do you think we'll have a woman president or a black president first? I'm taking a poll."

"You're about as Jewish as I am. You saw me fake it at all those Passovers with Grandma," I said. The only part of the Jewish experience I wanted was the food. "We'll have an Asian or Hispanic president long before that. I think, anyway. Probably Asian."

"I don't think so though. Americans want their presidents sexy. We don't think Asians are sexy."

I said, "Too small?"

"Maybe," Jules said. "Just—not swarthy."

It was like Jules to use a word like swarthy. I repeated, "Swarthy." Felt the word on my tongue. I said, "What *is* swarthy?"

"Swashbuckling. The swarthy pirate."

"Not all the presidents have been swarthy."

“True. But all have larger-than-life affects which is a kind of swarthinness.”

“Carter?” I said.

Jules said, “Sure, Carter has a southern gentleman thing going. Like, *here’s a box of candy.*” She drew *candy* out in a southern drawl.

“Please don’t talk like Forrest Gump again.”

“Sorry.”

“Anyway, Carter would bring peanuts.”

Jules said, “Yes, some peanuts. Boiled peanuts!”

“OK, Clinton, Clinton is easy,” I said. “The devil-may-care grin. The playboy genius.” I waved my Dr. Brown’s black cherry at her. “The excessive appetite. What about Reagan?”

Jules said, “Um, are you kidding?”

“OK, Reagan I get. Movie star, also courtly. Nixon?”

“Again, are you kidding? Nixon has a monkey-ish swarthinness, a really icky Richard III vibe. Nixon is sex on a stick.”

I said, “No one puts sex with Nixon but you.”

“What about Bush, Sr.?” Jules said.

I said, “Like the evil Jr., he has a twinkle. Twinkles make the girls’ legs go weak. And weak legs make for spread knees.”

Jules said, “You’re the one with the expressions.”

I said, “But which came first, the power or the desire? Like, did these men become desirable because of their power or did they become powerful because so many people wanted to have sex with them?”

Jules said, “The last one. The latter. That’s *how* they get elected.”

I said, “So that’s it.”

Jules said, “Their arrogance is overwhelming. It’s like musk. It fills the air.”

“How come there are no perfumes named Arrogance?”

“A celebrity fragrance! Arrogance by—who?”

“Heather Locklear.”

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Gross. I said, “*Not* Psychology.”

“You’d be good at it, you’re always interested in why people do things. You liked taking Psych. You were always talking about it.”

“Mom, just the fact that you’re calling it Psych. It was the easiest class I could take, he doesn’t give a shit about where you are and everybody does their homework in class.”

Mom asked, “What do you do in class then?” Dad rolled his eyes at her, and Mom made a little protesting sound. Like, *I’m allowed to ask what they do in class.*

I said, “I don’t know. Jules, you know girls who say *I’m a Psych major* or *my Psych prof?*”

Jules said, “Yeah, yeah. You should be Sociology, Mia. Those are the smart girls. Or Anthropology.”

I said, “They’re not all *Anthro.*”

Mom said, “You two make yourselves feel better by laughing at everybody else.”

I said, “Mom, were you a Psych major?”

Jules laughed, Mom teared up, Dad said, “Girls, your mother is going through a

rough time,” Mom left the table, Dad meant the early menopause, that made Jules laugh harder, there was a half-gallon of milk on the table because Jules had been eating cookies while looking through her college application packets, and it was sweating. It left a half-ring of itself on the edge of the table by my seat that I immediately saw was going to damage the table forever; I thought about how Dad did that with Jules and me so much: “your mother” with the plural you.

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“So?” Jules said, drawing the word out. “How’s it going with Ben?” She’d wanted to help with tomorrow’s prep since I’d closed early to pick her up, and so I tried to find a task she wouldn’t screw up. I’d told her to work on scraping the seeds out of the squash, and when I watched her, it was all I could do not to grab the spoon from her. She managed to both waste bits of squash and miss the stringy bits.

I said, “He’s just so nice. Nicer than me.”

“He *is* nice. I knew you’d like him. I can’t wait to see you guys all together and in love tonight.”

“I guess I owe you for the introduction.”

“You owe me nothing, darling. We basically lost touch after grad school, so it’s not even a real bequeathal. But once I heard he was moving to Vermont, I just had a feeling.”

I said, “He doesn’t pick people apart, he’s not a picker-aparter, he’s not always judging people. He’s observing but not apart from them, he’s right in there.”

“And you are a picker-aparter.”

“But he’s friendly to everyone. He genuinely likes people, he’s,” I whispered,

“*social.*”

“So you’d have mixed babies,” Jules said. “You need to name whatever baby Jules, as payment for my finding both of you love.”

I said, “No babies.”

“I don’t know, you sound smitten. Lots of ladies change their baby-game upon smitten-ness.”

“My teenage self is very disappointed in this well-adjusted pick. But let’s not read too much into it. I could hate him tomorrow.”

Jules said, “He’s not that well-adjusted.” Her tone was maddening and I stabbed the squash I was working on. She laughed a horrible, knowing laugh. “He has plenty of problems.”

“Yeah?” I said. And waited.

Jules kept her eyes on my squash she was mangling. “Just, like, artist problems.”

A rush of the worst feeling ever, like I was stuck on a long waterslide and my immovable back was bruised by the feet of millions of artists, a herd of them, bumping me briefly and then surging by, the terrible spray of the water hitting my still head. I asked, “What problems are indigenous to artists?” I tried to sound jocular.

“You know,” Jules said vaguely. “Depression and stuff.”

The tide receded and my butt got slipping on the slide. “I think I’ve heard of that one,” I said. “Plus, he doesn’t seem too unhappy.”

Jules said, “That’s cause he’s in love. It’ll make him happy for a while. It always does.”

I landed with a crash—not splashed in the pool with the artists, but alone on

burning asphalt. I reached across the counter and took her squash.

She said, "I'm not done with that one!"

I said, "Maybe you don't know him as well as you think you do." But I didn't say it out loud.

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"I got the boobs in middle school. Or maybe end of elementary. In high school, I definitely thought they were too big." I plucked at his collar because it seemed appropriate. Flirty conversation to him, and I liked seeing him happy. He liked the collar plucking. I liked that he wanted to hear about me. My body was not that interesting a topic to most people. I liked that he asked. I was going to have to ask him some things, too, but I wanted to know about him. I wasn't just asking because of next steps or politeness. It was kind of like talking to Jules, and I could see why they'd been friends.

He said, "But why were you embarrassed? Wasn't it good to have boobs? It seems like it'd be good."

We were hanging out in my apartment again. I made him dinner and then we'd just started talking, and the last time I'd gotten up to pee and had checked the clock it was three in the morning, and that was probably an hour ago.

"I was embarrassed by them because my family was always saying your boobs are so big and being all up in the business of my breasts," I said. "People stare. Made me feel creeped out and also vaguely whorey. So I hid them."

"Hid them! How long was that terrible period?"

"I started wearing stuff with cleavage in late high school, I guess. For special

occasions, not every day. Definitely college when I was away from my family. It made me mad when people would look too much at them but Emmie and Merrie—those are my little sisters—”

“I remember,” Ben said.

“They were always all, *don't put them on display then*. Which I can see now is very you-were-asking-for-it. They're both bad feminists.”

Ben said, “But in that picture of you three with your mom, all of you look like you have boobs.”

“I know! Well, Em only does because she's overweight but Mer has real boobs. Not as big as mine, like maybe C cup. But yeah, only I got shit for them.”

“You're a D?” Just an awful grin grew on his face.

I laughed and Ben said, “Come on, Emmie would be curvy even if she were skinny.”

“Maybe,” I said to Ben. To his grin, I said, “I made fourteen-year old Ben pretty happy, huh?” Then, “I haven't been a D cup since the fourth grade.”

“Really?”

I gave him a look. “It's not even worth it, you're so easy. Anyway, it got so I started to think of it as a test with boys. If someone didn't look too much, maybe he was OK. Then I just started wearing stuff that showed them off. Like, fuck it. But it's true I don't like people looking all the time no matter what I wear.”

“I look.”

“You're allowed.”

“How the TV at a bar compels you to stare at it. They're just pretty.”

“It’s impossible to wear certain things. And then I have the short problem. And the hairy problem. A dress seems great on the hanger and then I zip and it gets to the boobs. I take them off right away now. No more convincing myself it’s OK and buying a bunch of shit I can’t wear.”

“I wouldn’t want you any other way. I like short hairy girls with great tits.”

“Awww.” I’d moved from collar plucking to my hand unbuttoning his shirt without even realizing it. I gave his chest a brisk pat before I took my hand away.

“What are you doing?” Ben said and put my hand back on his chest. “I got nowhere to be.”

“It makes me worried how much you get me going.”

Ben said, “Why? Isn’t that a good thing?”

I said, “I’m not used to it.”

“To being turned on? That’s cause I’m especially awesome at it.”

He was touching me more aggressively now, running his warm hand over my knee and up my thigh, so I stood up. I put the coffee table between us and stayed standing.

Ben said, “Mia?”

I said, “Let’s just talk.”

“We were just talking.”

“Let’s talk about *you*. You can tell me about the awkward years, hiding erections behind your bookbag, covering pimples without access to makeup.”

Ben said, “Ah, the really sexy stuff. But I thought you just wanted to talk, and my pimple stories are bound to drive you into a frenzy. You might come just from me talking. In fact, let’s see if I can manage that.” I was still standing with my arms crossed

and he crawled over to me and knelt in front of me and buried his head in my crotch. He squeezed my ass. “I guess it all began in sixth grade with the first wee sprouting of hair,” he said, talking into me with his hot mouth.

I laughed. “Stop,” I said. “You make me feel insane.” I pushed his head away. He was grinning like crazy. I said, “I want to get to know you.”

Ben said, “I am *always* trying to get to know you. Please make no mistake about that.” He settled on the floor in front of me, his skinny legs stretched out. “More than one way to skin a cat.”

“Yes, but I feel like we spend more time fuck-skinning than talk-skinning. Jesus, that grin of yours. You’ve got to stop doing that.”

“I call it my cocksure grin. I’m a dude, this is a lot of talking for me. You’re a hyper-verbal kind of chick.”

I said, “I know.”

“The rabbit fucking will pass as we become old and gray together. We should enjoy it now,” Ben said. “Mia, I know of what I speak. Please, come here to me. Sit on my lap while I regale you with pimple stories.” He rocked up onto his heels in one nimble movement and extended his arms to me. “Or you can sit on my face and I’ll tell you after.”

I said, “But what if I might love you? I want some talking.” I could feel my face and my chest had gotten hot. I hadn’t even known I was feeling this way until I heard myself say it.

Ben smiled at me, this sweet sort of smile that reminded me of the way Nuttie cocked his head at me, just a giantness to the way he saw me.

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Standing in the front door, Nori told Mom, “I’m moving to Anchorage.” She was picking Jules up to go to lunch.

“As in Alaska?” Mom asked. “Do you want to come in?”

“No, we’ve got to get going. I’m sure Jules will fill you in on my plans.”

When they left Mom said, “I guess you knew about this.”

“Yes,” I said. Jules had told me. “It’s not like anything will really change. She already lives here full-time.”

“Huh,” was all Mom said.

Nori had told Jules that since she’d made it clear she wanted to stay with me for her senior year and not move with her, that she was just going to get going. She’d found a great opportunity to learn how to mint medallions with Alaskan gold. She’d be an apprentice at a jewelry shop.

Apparently Nori had heard there were tons more men than women in Alaska and that she needed to start over romantically. Jules said, “She wants to be far away from anything that reminds her of her mistakes.”

I said, “She doesn’t think *you’re* a mistake,” even though maybe she did. Maybe, for Nori, she was. Who was I to say.

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I answered the phone. “Hi,” like a normal person, and Mer just sighed deeply in response. I said, “I only have a few minutes left on my phone card, Merrie, but I wanted to make sure everything was OK.” That wasn’t true, I had just bought more minutes, but these were fucking expensive minutes to talk to people in the States, and I didn’t really want to waste them on Merrie. Even though she was clearly so miserable, which did make me feel bad.

“I can’t take it much longer, Mia. Mom keeps moping and weeping and talking about her situation through talking about other things, like TV, which you know I *hate*.”

“Talking through the TV?”

“Like, pretending to talk about the people on *Ally McBeal* but instead it’s clear we’re not really talking about Ally and Billy, we’re obviously talking about Mom.”

“Give me an example.” I’d never heard of *Ally McBeal*.

“Ally’s in love with Billy and they have this history but he’s married, and so Mom’s talking about that, totally normally at first, and then somehow it becomes a discussion of whether it’s horribly selfish to cut loose a man who is the father of your children and who you love but just aren’t sure you want to be with anymore. All pretend theoretical.”

“That’s how she feels?”

“She actually said to me, it’s not like you have to find somebody better in bed, or that you have some more passionate connection with, you don’t need to find a better lover for sex to help you get out of a relationship. And the relationship you’re in might be a great sexual partnership blah blah blah. I want to scream at her that I know she’s having an affair but then she’d want to talk to me about it. And I can’t take it.”

“She did not say *better lover*. That is so hilarious.”

“It’s not funny, Mia. How would you like Mom to interrupt your TV with news of her sex life with Dad? And basically be asking *me* if she’s allowed to get a divorce.”

“They’re really getting divorced?”

“I have no idea! Mom goes back and forth every hour. She keeps talking about how do people find clarity about things. Like we all have this talk, it’s the most uncomfortable thing you can imagine, in the dining room, we’re eating dinner, and Mom gets Dad on this esoteric how do people in different cultures and through the ages find clarity, what do they think constitutes wisdom, and what kind of medicinal plants and herbs might they have used to seek transformation or guidance, so you know Dad got all crazy exercised about that and had this list of plants he was basically *recommending* to Mom. So she can smoke them or smell their aroma or something and decide whether or not to divorce him. He *knows* that’s why she’s asking. It’s not funny. It’s like I’m the only mature one in the house. The only regular kind of person left. I hate living here. I cannot wait to go so far away for college.”

“You’re almost there. Aren’t you happy you skipped a grade now?”

“You’re in Prague, and you and Jules get to travel all over. You don’t know how awful it is here alone with them. And Em is in love with some girl in her dorm, and she gets to go into Boston all the time and do fun stuff.”

“I know. Dora.”

“She’s black.”

“She is?”

“That’s Em’s latest drama. Dora’s parents just got comfortable having a lesbian daughter and then here comes pasty Em as the new girlfriend and on top of everything else they have to deal with interracial love. They’re rooming together next semester.”

“Emmie *would* have a politically correct love story.”

“They’ll totally end up adopting some kid with Downs Syndrome. From the Third World.”

“I guess I need to call her.”

“Good luck getting her. She finally called me back today and didn’t even ask me anything. It was like talking to Mom. Everything came back to her situation. When she goes over for dinner, should she say something to Dora’s parents acknowledging being white, or would it be best to just *be white* at dinner?”

“So you haven’t told Em about Mom?”

“I tell her as much as she’ll listen. I get that you have other stuff to do.” Now she was sulking.

I said, “I have to go, Mer, but hang in there. I’m here taking care of crazy pants, so we all have stuff going on.”

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I said, “I think we should turn around.” There was a lot of traffic, and I couldn’t really pat her or anything, and it seemed beyond mean to turn on the radio, but my nerves were frayed.

“No!”

“You’ve been crying through most of Virginia. Virginia is *big*, JuJu. You don’t have to see him.”

“I *want* to see him. I’m trying to exhaust my crying, I already told you that. I will not cry in front of him.”

“I thought that meant you’d cry for like twenty minutes. I didn’t know I’d be driving to this, like, steady accompaniment.”

“I told you I could drive! It’s slowing down, right?”

“You can’t drive, are you crazy?” She was practically choking herself with crying. “All I’m saying is, this is a thirteen-hour drive. One way. And you might cry on the way back, too.”

“I won’t. I’ll be too tired.”

“I would have thought you’d be too tired hours ago.” But I didn’t say it mean.

Jules said, “I’ll be tired soon. I’m sorry to be so difficult.”

“Don’t apologize. I wish there was something I could do for you.” It had to be my least favorite feeling in the world, sitting helpless with Jules while she sobbed.

“Are you crazy? You’re driving me. You’re doing everything.”

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I was crying and Ben said, “She’ll get over it. You’re best friends. She’s like a part of your family.”

I knew he was trying to make me feel better, but it just made him seem stupid.

I said, “She won’t. She won’t want to go back on such a big deal, asking everyone not to contact her.” I put my head on the table so I could cry harder since Ben didn’t like

to see tears. The table was Poppy's table that he'd had in his garage shop, and the idea that Ben would never meet Poppy could make me cry forever. Ben would have loved Poppy's shop.

Ben said, "You could get high."

I lifted my head for a minute so I could talk. I said, "I'm not into it. I don't want it anymore." When I put my head back down, the wood was wet.

"Well, have a drink."

"I don't like to drink when I'm upset. It makes me—"

"I know, I know. It makes you act out of control. Which might be good for you."

"It's just like there's this huge gaping hole, this need that is rushing towards something, like there's nothing for it."

"Don't you even feel happy about Obama? Everyone's happy about Obama."

I said, "Ugh. Stop trying to make me feel better."

"You have to do something."

"I *want* to feel better," I said. I was aware that I was whining.

Ben said, "Mia. You keep saying that. What can I do? I'll do whatever."

"I want someone who can make me feel better, who knows what to do. I don't know, or I'd tell you."

"Really, you want a vessel, someone to fill with all of your bad feelings."

As soon as he said it, I could tell it was true. Someone to deposit everything in, that would be perfect. I said, "I just miss my best friend. She was the main person I talked to. Besides you."

"You could call your sister."

“Merrie?”

“Obviously, I meant Emmie.”

I said, “You pick people carefully to talk to when you’re a girl. You’re a boy—you pick any girl to talk and you’re good. I need a certain temperament, certain life experiences, certain history with me. That’s why girls have lots of girlfriends. Like different tools for different tasks. Does the tool simile help you understand better?”

Ben grinned at me. “Emmie is a Phillips head and you need a flathead.”

“Or Merrie is a flathead, and I never need one of those.”

“What if you wanted to talk shit about your mom?”

“I guess that’s true.”

Ben said, “That’s where Merrie’s helpfulness ends. Although both of them have been really supportive. You have that plane ticket to California she sent you.”

“Don’t remind me. It’s just another obligation.”

He leaned across the table and took my hand. “I want to help. You should let me help.”

“I want you to help,” I said. Because I did. “It’s just this empty yearning thing, like there’s a salve and the wound wants to careen towards it but I can’t find it.”

“I humbly suggest a drink. Again. Do you want to go to the VPB?”

I didn’t, but there didn’t seem to be another solution, and I could see the value in some numbing. I said, “OK.”

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I walked how I wanted since Ben had Radiohead loud enough to obscure the

loudest stomping. He was facing away from the door, staring at his easel with his head cocked and brush held. Considering.

“Hi Norman Rockwell.”

Without turning around, he said, “When will you stop finding that funny?”

“I like that girl’s sense of humor.” I propped my chin as high on his arm as I could.

The canvas was blank white. “Looking good. Loving those colors.”

“You have to live with that girl forever so I’m glad she doesn’t get on your nerves.”

“I’m teasing. I know art takes time, my love.”

We kissed. A drop of paint from the held brush fell on my arm. Orange. I held it out to Ben with my mock sad face, which I considered a special offering. It was cute.

“Mia, I love you, but I’m working. What do you need?”

I sat down on the floor. Smiled. I needed to just get this over with. Ben shook his head at my you-sit-down-too gesture. He was fucking towering over me. You’ve been short forever, Mia, I said to myself. You are not an ant. You *chose* to sit. I said, “You have to be careful with your drinking.”

“Jesus. Does alcoholism run in your family or something?”

“Yes.” I said it before I thought. “Nori.”

“Nori is Jules’ mother, so she is not related to you, Mia.”

“Well, not technically. It’s a nature/nurture thing. It’s hereditary by nurture.”

“Why are you stuck on this right now?” He turned toward the canvas again.

“You already drank that whole handle.”

“If memory serves, not entirely alone did I drink that.”

“Are you kidding? I had, like, two shots.”

“Weren’t they delicious?”

“I hate that you don’t get mad. Here I am butting into your life, like I’m your mom, nagging you while you’re painting.” I jumped into the attack position from self-defense class. “Fight me!”

“Not into drama. How many times can I say it. You’re not gonna drag me in.”

“It’s not drama. It’s our life.”

“Whatever you call it, I’m not getting dragged in.”

Not getting dragged into our life—did we even have a life? If he couldn’t be bothered to get dragged into it?

“Fine. Despite appearances and whatever you think up there in your tall person brain, I didn’t come in to be fucking witty. That’s too fast to drink a handle and you know it.”

“I’ll watch my step, ma’am.”

“See that you do.” I left the studio as if I’d made my point, but I hadn’t stepped out from the routine. Something right under my skin was about to crack. I held it intact but I was also bouncing on all the weak joints.

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I tried to sit extra straight-backed. When we’d first been seated, after the waiter left, I whispered, “You’re so tall.”

“I’m the same height I was Tuesday when we hung out.”

“I was a little drunk Tuesday. Everybody was the same height.”

“Is that what being drunk is like?”

“It is for me.”

Ben said, “I hated being an only child. Tell me about your sisters.”

“Date talk. OK. Em is four years younger. I like her best.”

“Short for Emma?”

“I guess her name is Emily, but I’ve never heard anyone call her that ever. She’s Em or Emmie.”

“OK.”

“She’s a lesbian.”

“What kind? Like a bulldyke?”

“Very demure and kind of dry bookish. Very politically correct.”

“So she’s not like you.”

I said, “No. But I like her pretty well. She’s way easier to deal with than Merrie. Short for Meredith.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“What makes Merrie hard to deal with?”

“Merrie is a super Jew, also a spoiled baby. Like the baby of the family princess type. But it’s the super Jew bullshit that’s most annoying. And she married a Republican dude named *Joel*. Well, we think he’s Republican. He calls himself a libertarian, or independent or something.”

“Is Merrie Republican?”

I shook my head no. “But she’s planning to be a corporate evil lawyer. She’s super smart, college in two and a half years, skipped a grade in high school, but she doesn’t use

her power for good. She's just—into money. With her smug husband. They keep kosher. It's just not how we grew up so it's hard not to see it as an act."

"You're non-practicing," he said. "It's fine with me! I don't practice either, and my parents don't care."

"I'm secular," I corrected. "Culturally Jewish. Maybe not even. How ridiculous for the spat-upon-by-the-world Jews to kick a people off their land and act like it's our right and anyone who disagrees is an anti-Semite. My ten Yiddish words are all straight from my grandma. My bat mitzvah was a joke, I basically cheated. I'll never eat gefilte fish. Have you seen that shit? It shimmies in its jar."

"I see it all the time. It's gross when you're a kid, but I eat it now."

"Disgusting," I said. "You can go down on me and kiss me after, but no kissing after gefilte fish eating."

"Just don't talk like this around my parents. They won't think it's cute."

"My parents either," I said, even though they'd probably be fine with it. At least Mom would be. But I didn't want Ben to assume we were self-hating Jews.

"Isn't your mom anti-religious?"

"Yeah, but Mer can do no wrong with either of my parents. The pass she gets is pretty fucking amazing. She's a pretty girl." I thought a minute. "And the baby."

"Do either of them have kids?"

I said, "No Aunt Mia yet. I'd bet on Em over Merrie. Merrie is pretty focused on the lawyer thing."

"What's Emmie do?"

"Therapist. She specializes in GLBT issues."

Ben said, “Ah.”

“And she and her partner, who’s also a therapist—Dora, I love her, she’s funny and good at family get-togethers—they live in this book-lined house on a tree-lined street in Boringsville, Massachusetts with all the other gay assholes. They got together their first year of college and they’ll be together forever. Both of them are just like that.”

“You’re the only one without a pedigreed job.”

I said, “I like it that way. My heart was never in school. I went for one semester of a grad program in Psychology, but I couldn’t get into the idea of writing a dissertation and then being in that world forever. It seemed very separate from real life.”

“I can see that about you.”

I said, “I’m the only one in my family who can cook. Em won’t cook on, like, principle or something, although Dora is a decent cook. Merrie is too greedy to cook.”

“Too greedy to cook.”

“You need love to cook. It’s sharing.”

“So I take it that everyone fights with Merrie at family gatherings.”

“Oh no. You’d be wrong. Em and Mer get along great. They have their moments, but they’re so close in age. She’s the baby, and Mom is her bitch.”

“Your mom’s a public defender?”

“Legal aid—spousal abuse cases, domestic stuff, family law. But she’s kind of a warrior for the people. Merrie takes good care of Merrie.”

“Your dad’s a teacher?”

“Professor at UD. Plant science.”

I fell back on the bed. “I hate this kind of shit,” I said.

Ben agreed, “Obligation sucks.”

“Obligatory, conciliatory, polite. Dinner with my boyfriend’s distant cousin.

What’s his name again?”

“You don’t like being polite, do you? His name is Arthur. How can you keep forgetting that? I mean, *Arthur*.”

“I don’t know. Arthur is surprising. Is he as much of a tool as his name suggests?”

I picked at the fringe of the afghan Ben’s dead grandma made him. Even though I had just washed it, it already looked moldy. I told Ben once that the afghan looked like a million babies had vomited on it and he seemed so genuinely hurt that we slept with the afghan every night now.

Ben came with so little decorative stuff. When he’d moved in, besides his studio, he had just a couple boxes. I was, as he’d said to me about the afghan, getting off easy.

Ben pulled a bowling shirt out of the closet. “How about this?” I scrunched up my nose. “Like I was being serious, Mia. Or this.” He held out a tuxedo shirt and a fedora.

“Why don’t you look as crazy as possible?”

Ben said, “That’s what I’m thinking. Maybe my mechanic shirt with Ben on it, a tux jacket, bowling shoes, my best fedora.”

I said, “Feather boa.” I sat up. “How should I look?”

Ben said, “I don’t think you matter as much. It’s me who will be gossiped about across the country after dinner.”

“Arthur’s a gossip? Why won’t I be gossiped about? I want to be discussed.

Maybe if I look crazy, too.”

“You should *act* crazy. You’re just the girlfriend. It’s me who’s famous in my family. The straight side of the family wants to know how the crazy side acts. And to a lesser extent, vice versa.”

“You’re not answering my questions.”

“What questions.” Ben put down his fedora and sat beside me on the moldy afghan. He was shirtless, and I wanted to land my hands flat on his chest, but I knew if I touched him we’d be late for dinner. And it wasn’t like Ben to care about dinner, but he’d been nervous all day. “I’m here to answer all your questions. Commence.”

“What’s Arthur like?”

“I told you, I don’t know. But he’s a married stockbroker. I think that’s all the pre-game analysis we need.”

“Let’s get through the evening by lying,” I said. “We’ll have three types of lies, no, four: one, personal confession; two, malicious rumor; three, inaccurate information; four, lies about specific famous people. Whoever does all four first wins.”

Ben said, “You can’t be caught lying, and we have to make the lies things that won’t come back to disrupt or haunt anyone ever.”

“Right. No harm can come from these lies, just a night of victimless crime, I’m in. And I can beat the pants off you lying. We could play strip lying. One piece of your crazy clothing per lie.”

“So we’ll be dominating the conversation,” Ben said. The way he said it, I couldn’t tell if that was a good thing.

I said, “I probably would be anyway.”

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We made our old west saloon in the basement, of course, and Jules had a sheet over her head and a bottle of whiskey from the bar as the gun and she sang, “Bang, bang, you’re dead, fifty bullets in your head.”

And Mom walked straight through our game to the old blanket chest to get something. “Jeez, what a horrible thing to sing to one another, girls.”

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After saying hi to us, George asked, “Where’s your mom, Mia? Is she coming to class tonight? It’s her night to glaze her fired pieces.”

I was already at the tea station. “She’s sick with the flu,” I said. I chose a green tea bag because green tea made me feel like I was swallowing water goldfish had already used for swimming. I liked how otherworldly it was.

“Yeah, it’s pretty gross,” Jules said. She grabbed the mug I always used, the first mug I’d ever made. She did it to piss me off because for whatever reason, she’d been trying to piss me off all day. She knew anything I could say about the mug would sound unreasonable and childish. I cared that much about which mug I drank out of? Pathetic. So I took an old one Mom had messed up and left at the tea station. The handle was lumpy and too big to be pleasant to hold.

“She can’t help it,” I said, even though I’d said it was gross in the car on the way over. I caught Mom blowing her nose on her nightgown while she drove us. I asked her if

she wanted a tissue and she said she was too miserable to care about tissues.

“Of course she can’t help it, Mia,” Jules said, “and of course it’s gross.” She said it nasty, like I’d contradicted her in front of George. I wanted to sling her across the room in a splatter of broken pottery and clay. But I carefully dunked my tea bag, precise dunks up and down, up and then back down.

George put his hand on my shoulder. “Tell her I say feel better,” he said before he walked over to the shelves by the kiln.

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“We don’t *have* to have regular seats,” Mom said. She looked around and then plunked down in Emmie’s chair. Jules was already in Dad’s chair since it was next to mine. She’d stood up when Em started talking.

Emmie looked shocked. “Yes, we do,” she said.

It seemed a little bit different for a minute. I immediately blamed Jules. Why did she have to make a case out of the seating? Before, she’d always just sat. Before, she acted like less of a guest than she was acting now. It made me mad at her for being uncomfortable, and it made me mad at my family for making her feel uncomfortable somehow, or for being made uncomfortable by Jules. It ended up making me feel angry and upset with everyone at the table. Like, I was the joiner, it was me who’d brought us all together, and any discomfort was going to be my responsibility and my burden.

“Just sit down,” I said and shoved Jules with my hip as I pushed past her to sit in Dad’s chair. She sat in my chair, obviously retaliatory. My view of the dining room altered, and all I could concentrate on was how pissed off I felt, how my head felt light

with it.

Since nobody had moved, Em finally sat in Mom's chair, and nobody said anything for a few minutes.

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We were sitting around the kitchen island.

Emmie said, "Mom, I think I like girls."

"What, you're a lesbian?" Mom asked. She didn't sound upset.

Emmie nodded. "I think so."

Mom said, "That's great! I knew it." She turned to Dad. "Didn't I tell you?"

Dad didn't say anything. He reached over and patted Emmie on the shoulder. She was wearing this sweater that had red deer knitted into it. It was a totally uncool sweater.

I was shocked, but I tried to hide it since everyone was so calm and acted like they already knew. "That's a weird reaction, Mom," I tried.

"What weird?"

"You're all, that's great!" I employed a super bright fake voice. "Have you been sitting around waiting for all of us to come out of the closet?"

"You and Merrie aren't gay."

"I might be gay," I said. "You don't know."

Mom said, "I do know." She got up and gave Emmie a hug. The hug was weird because Mom is so short and Emmie was sitting on a stool and Mom's hug was almost defiantly awkward. Like, I will hug my daughter even though I'm a girl and she's a lesbian. I couldn't help thinking, *That's Em's first gay hug*. Even though I guess she was

gay before.

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Dad was usually quiet with strangers, especially women. Mom called it typical academic behavior. But with Nori, he was talking: answering rhetorical questions, interjecting if not outright interrupting, even starting conversations. He told me later it was a survival technique he used when faced with a talkative person. Nori's conversational style—best described as constant and enthusiastic—required some kind of intervention.

There was a politics to being in the backseat of a car. Jules and I mostly listened, although we carried our own silent conversation without the front seat's knowledge, oversight, or interference.

Nori was talking about her favorite foods, her favorites in a list and then her first memories of them. This was typical of Nori in that the topic, while having the possibility of universal appeal, concerned only Nori. She might ask if you'd had her experience, but the question and answer both were perfunctory; I always got the feeling she didn't care about—or even listen to—my answer.

She talked about French dips. "Do you remember your first?" she asked Dad.

"I can't say that I do," Dad said. "I don't care for red meat all that much."

Nori said, "I wonder if they're really French. Like, French fries aren't. Did you know that? And spaghetti is really Chinese. Funny."

Dad said, "I like brie cheese, though." But Nori continued talking, talking right

through Dad. All the way to Rehoboth.

“And those petit fours,” said Nori. “Little French cakes. With a waxy kind of icing. It doesn’t sound good but it’s addicting. They have those at the Safeway bakery. Not the best, but good. You like those right, honey?”

Nori turned back to glance at Jules’ nod, and then kept talking. “I wonder what they’ll have to eat at this thing. Probably just the usual cookout stuff. I’m more of a dessert person most times. I could just live on sugar!”

It was funny, Nori was skinny, not slender like Jules, and I hardly ever saw her eat anything but sweets and cigarettes. And wine; she drank pink wine out of little cups.

Later, on the way home from the reunion—without Nori—we stopped at a diner just outside of Rehoboth. I was charmed to see a French dip on the menu, and I promptly ordered it. Dad grinned at me, even though we were all exhausted and a little raw from the day. The French dip and my delight in it were a welcome distraction. We all focused on my reaction to the sandwich and overlooked the origin of the conversation. I asked for my French dip with lettuce, tomato, and pickle, and I told the waitress it was my first French dip ever.

“That’s why you ordered it that way then,” she said. “You won’t like it with all that stuff on it, promise.”

Sensing my forthcoming objection, she said, “I’ll bring it on the side.”

The French dip was sad: meat, bread, and broth. I said, “What a dumb sandwich,” while feeling like I could kill Nori.

As if she knew what I was thinking, Jules said her mom got nervous around us. I knew she meant Nori was afraid we would judge her, afraid of why Jules stayed with us

so much, afraid of Dad's job, and Mom's, too, and of our house, which was much nicer than the apartment Nori and Jules had moved to after her dad left. She didn't say anything about her grandma, or about Nori getting drunk, or us leaving the reunion early, or about any of the day's drama.

Dad said, "Don't worry about it, honey. It was probably a bad idea to go, but we had to try, right?"

Jules, who never seemed to deny Dad anything when he was trying to make her feel better, predictably smiled at this. She said, "Right. I'm glad we tried."

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"You two need to be nicer to other girls," Mom said.

Emmie said, "They only like boys."

"What other girls?" I said. "Cheerleaders?"

Jules said, "She wants us to befriend the Jesus freaks, the prayer girls."

"There's nothing inherently negative about the way those girls practice their religion," Mom said. "It might be nice to have friends who believe in something."

Emmie said, "That's not what I've heard you say in the past. How come we don't ever go to temple anymore now that Grandma died?"

"They're all sluts," Jules said.

I said, "Virgin sluts."

Mom said, "Isn't that a little oxymoronic?"

"What's oxymoronic?" Merrie asked.

Emmie said, "It means you're stupid."

“What if one of them gets knocked up? No abortions for these girls. Then I’d make friends, with a knocked up one,” Jules said.

“Knocked up is pregnancy,” Emmie said to Merrie before she could ask.

Dad had been silently listening to us talk. Now he said, “How do they know that?”

Mom said, “Would you rather they didn’t understand the facts of life and the relevant vernacular?”

Jules said, “Whatever. Mia and I are plenty nice to everybody who deserves it at school.”

Mom said, “I just don’t think writing a paper—”

“An oral report and a paper,” I said.

“Fine,” Mom said. “I don’t think whatever you’re doing should directly be about other girls at school. It’s so—aggressive.”

Jules said, “But they’re a fascinating subculture. Girls who will suck dick but won’t let you put it in.”

I said, “How can you top fake whores who come to school with the most gigantic hickeys down their backs but pray loudly and talk about being married to Jesus?”

Dad said, “Does your teacher know your topic?”

“Yes,” Jules said.

“Then it’s OK, Lida. Let them do their thing.”

Emmie said, “It’s not like they’re in danger of being popular, Mom.”

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After I took my test, I walked back to my dorm. I put a towel under the door,

opened my window slightly and lit a cigarette. I flicked the ash off my cigarette. I thought about how being alone in my room felt so much better than having Merrie sleep on my floor. It was a relief to walk in and find the room empty and mine again. I thought, She's going to tell Dad about the cigarettes.

Since the room was emptied of Merrie's crap, it looked smaller, but as I surveyed its contents, it looked more adult. My coffeemaker, balanced on a milk crate covered in fabric, filled me with a sort of pride whose very existence also shamed me. Did it negate the grown-up feeling to be so proud of it? The phone rang. I said, "Hi, Mom."

"Mia, honey. I have some serious news."

I said, "Merrie didn't call me." I knew immediately Merrie was dead, that her plane hadn't landed, and I felt so sorry we'd had such a shitty weekend together.

"Merrie is right here, honey," Mom said. And to Merrie, "You didn't call your sister when you got home? I specifically reminded you to call her."

I heard Merrie in the background: "Sorry." But she didn't sound sorry. She sounded sullen, like her usual self, and I felt no relief to hear her voice, only an increasing panic rise to my throat, like a hand around it.

"Who's dead then?" I said. And my voice was calm but also thundering in my ears.

Mom said, "No one's dead, sweetheart. But I need you to stay calm while I talk to you."

My cigarette was burning, so I ashed in my caterpillar ashtray, covered the mouthpiece while I took a drag. No one was dead. I said, "I'm always calm."

"It's about Jules," Mom said.

I felt panic rising again. "What? Just tell me."

“She’s had some kind of a breakdown. She’s OK, she’s at the hospital. But we’d like you to come home.”

“What do you mean, breakdown?”

Mom said, “I’m going to tell you the whole story, but I need you to stay calm. This afternoon, I came home early from work and Samson and Nuttie were gone. It was just by chance, I had to get something I’d forgotten, it was luck I came home. I looked for them all over, but they were gone. So I called your father, but he didn’t know. There was no sign of robbery or anything.”

I interrupted her, “Are they OK?”

Mom said, “Who, honey?”

“Sam and Nuttie.”

“They’re fine.”

“OK, keep going.” I covered the mouthpiece and lit another cigarette. I felt I sounded calm.

Mom said, “But as I was looking around, I noticed the fish were gone, too. They’re not OK, though, honey.”

“Who gives a shit about the fish? Can’t you just tell me the story?”

“They were your sister’s fish,” Mom said. “OK, so I noticed all the shoes in my closet were gone, too, and I checked your dad’s closet and all of his shoes were gone as well. It was really weird, but I had a strong intuitive feeling that no one strange had been in the house. I didn’t have that funny creepy feeling. I called your father, and he started for home right away. I called Gauger-Cobbs and Emmie and Merrie were both in class. I had them check.”

“So everyone’s accounted for,” I said. And thought, *Get on with it*. And willed myself to keep the impatience out of my voice.

“And then I thought: Jules. And so I called her. And she answered on her car phone and I could tell right away something was wrong.”

“How?”

Mom said, “Her voice. Her voice was funny. And I knew right away, so I said, ‘Jules, where are Nuttie and Sam?’ And she said everybody was with her. She said, ‘I didn’t have time to find all of you, but you should be here.’ And I asked her where and she said at the airport. At that point I asked her if she would answer if I called her back on my car phone and she said yes. So I called her back and got in the car and drove to the airport.”

“To Philly?”

“She actually went to BWI,” Mom said.

“How was her voice funny?”

“She sounded calm and also sort of high pitched,” Mom said. “Calm and not calm all at once. It was a spooky voice.”

I said, “Did she take all of your shoes?”

“Yes, honey.”

“So you went to the airport.” I’d let my cigarette burn down again, but I didn’t light a new one.

“She told me where she was, she was in the parking lot, the top part with no roof and she was waiting,” Mom said. She paused and I was about to scream at her and then she started talking again. “Are you calm, honey?”

I said, "Just tell me. You're making me feel crazy."

"She was waiting for God," Mom said. "She said she needed to gather the animals and wait for God and everyone was going to need shoes, even dogs and even fish, so she took ours because she knew we wouldn't mind. At this point that she's telling me this, I'm driving, I'm almost there, and I'm saying to her that of course we don't mind, that we're always going to be there for her, and she said, 'I know you are, Lida.' In this voice that just sent chills up my spine."

I said, "Where is she now?"

"She's at Johns Hopkins. We decided to just take her there since we were already at BWI. She's in the psychiatric ward. They gave her something to sleep. She's OK," Mom said.

"Where's everybody else right now?"

"Everybody's here. We're all in the kitchen."

"Everybody's listening to you tell me?"

"Yes," Mom said. "We all felt bad after the hospital so we stopped and got Chik-Fil-A and we're just eating that."

I said, "Should I fly home?"

"We've got you a ticket," Mom said. "You leave at nine, so you need to get going."

I said, "What about class?"

"We called the Dean. Whatshisface. He's going to call your professors. Everyone will understand this is an emergency."

"OK." I had a paper due in a week, but I guessed I'd just pack it. I didn't want to ask how long I was staying because I was going to stay until Jules was OK.

“Has Jules seemed funny to you lately?” Mom said.

I said, “She hasn’t seemed crazy.”

“She’s getting really good care. We called Bunny. I know how you feel about Bunny, Mia, but she’s been Jules’ therapist for a long time and she knows her history and she wants the best for her. She helped us decide to just go to Johns Hopkins.”

I could hear Dad say, “We still need to go get her car, Lida.”

I said, “Did you call Nori?”

“No. Jules said she wanted to call her mom herself, on her own timeline, and I think she knows better than anyone how to handle Nori, so we’re just going to let her do that.”

“Why the airport?”

Mom said, “She felt like God had called her to the airport.”

“Like an apocalypse thing?”

“That’s what it seemed like,” Mom said. “But I didn’t get to talk to her extensively. We were wondering about Alejandro.”

I said, “You can’t be serious.” Mom didn’t say anything, so I said, “Don’t call him.”

Mom said, “Not call him, but I was thinking I wonder if being distraught about him—I don’t know.”

“She doesn’t even care about him anymore. That was just a stupid thing.”

“I know you don’t like him, but that doesn’t mean—”

“And he cheated on her,” I said.

“I was just thinking the stress of that may have, I don’t know,” Mom said, “*contributed.*”

“I’m sure that’s not it. How could it be just stress? This is, like, crazy. Like an insane person.” And I started to feel scared.

“We’re going to go meet with the doctors in the morning. We’ll know more then,” Mom said.

“OK,” I said. “So my flight’s at nine.”

Mom said, “Your dad was wondering about drugs. Do you think there’s a possibility somebody gave Jules something?”

I loved the way Mom said that: *somebody gave her something*, as if she couldn’t take something on her own.

“She doesn’t do drugs,” I said. “Sometimes she maybe smokes a little.”

“OK, that’s what we needed to know,” Mom said. “I emailed you the information. The ticket will be waiting at the gate. Just leave your car; we’ll pay for you to park.”

I said, “I feel weird about the airport parking lot.”

But even as I said it, I knew I didn’t feel weird. I more felt like I *should* feel weird, that I should be connecting my airport visit with Jules’s airport. Like when I was a kid, staying up late with Mom, talking about Jules’s dad and all of Mom’s kids that got raped or beaten, just experiences that seemed like they ought to be troubling me. If I seemed upset about them, they could garner me sympathy effortlessly. Things that would maybe force someone to help me feel better. Something disconnected I was trying to connect.

As usual, Mom was oblivious to the subtext. She said, “You could take the bus. Or a cab. Put it on the emergency credit card. Whatever you want.”

I said, “OK, I might call you again before I leave. I have to go get ready.”

Mom said, “I’ll be here. Your dad will get you at the airport. Or your sister might.

She really wants to practice driving the car to the airport. We'll see you tonight."

I hung up, and I thought about packing. I decided I should consciously avoid thinking about Jules since I wasn't going to find anything more out tonight and I was going to drive myself crazy if I kept thinking. Plus, the plane was always a good place for thinking, especially a night flight

I was glad I'd finished my test. I thought I'd done well. Maybe I should bring Merrie the sweater I'd stolen from her. It was already five. I figured I should get to the airport an hour early, but that still left three hours. Suddenly I was starving. I decided I'd get a Chick-Fil-A sandwich, too. And waffle fries. It was a good idea.

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"Jules is not your problem," Mom said. "Try to have fun—you're in the mother country! Do you know how much Poppy would have loved to hear about you visiting Petrin Hill?"

Whose problem was Jules? I felt confused by that question, how can it not be my problem? I dropped out of motherfucking school to take care of that problem.

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When Jules told me, it was after she'd told her mom, my mom, and after my mom had told my dad and Nori had told her sister and her psychologist.

I was one of the very first to know.

"Mom made me go to the gynecologist," Jules said. I felt shock—the gynecologist

visit was something we'd discussed in sex ed—and even through my shock I felt something else, too: a kind of widening between us, between our experiences, that I knew would be the defining characteristic of our friendship from that moment on. If that widening was a water with current, every developed muscle I have owes its existence to my constant rowing.

She continued, “She says there’s some stuff ripped up, inside, but it’s going to be healed soon.” She said it with this kind of ribald ferocity, an I-dare-you-to-feel-sorry-for-me matter of factness, her eyes as hard-shiny as candy in its wrapper.

I couldn't think what to say. We were in the basement, me on the sofa, her at the bar. She had to stop talking now, it couldn't be good for her to keep talking. That's what I thought, what I'd been thinking since she began. I searched for a distraction. I wasn't trying to distract Jules. Jules was taking care of herself, and I wasn't her first or hardest audience. It was me who couldn't hear it, I couldn't hear any more. It occurred to me I was wrong. Maybe Jules was exhausted from her telling; maybe there was no fierceness there. The fierceness, again, might be for me.

“Do you want a drink?” I asked.

“Like alcohol?”

I'd surprised her. I wondered if this was a weird time in our relationship to practice drinking together. I knew my parents knew what we were discussing, knew that we wouldn't be interrupted all night. We played bar all the time, it was one of our favorites, but usually I just hooked up the coke and tonic squirter hose and we got out the little box of maraschino cherries.

A pleased smile. “OK.”

I made us rum and cokes because that's what Dad called a girlie drink. "Sweet," he would offer by way of decline, wrinkling his nose and making a face like something smelled bad. It wasn't the right face to match "sweet."

"I don't know," she said. Tasting. "You have to drink, too."

I choked on my sip and kept going. I tried a gin and tonic next. Mom said they were refreshing. I stood behind the bar while Jules sat on the stool by the wood wall. She swiveled her stool halfway away from me and walked her bare feet up the paneling. I asked her which should I use, holding up gin in a blue bottle or gin in a green bottle.

"Blue gin, blue gin," Jules said, hanging her upside-down head over the back of her stool. She panted at me like an upside-down dog and laughed before she righted herself and gulped the last of her rum and coke and didn't cough. Earlier, without knowing what was happening, I'd heard Dad tell Mom he should have his sorry ass kicked and Mom giving him her look: glance at me first, warning stare at Dad second. Jules' face looked different to me now. How many times had her dad hugged me?

I couldn't believe I hadn't known, that's what stood out to me, my not having any idea. And just thinking, I don't know, that she couldn't have had that happen or she wouldn't have seemed so fine, she must have made it up. That was in the back part of my mind, a nearly unconscious disloyalty. We clinked our gin and tonics together and she smiled at me, almost the same known muscles moving. What had changed was my own breadth of eye. I'd coughed more than Jules had, and the coughing sparked a fire in my throat that spread downward. I could already feel the fire catch, bold, my swallow lighting a previously undiscovered path inside of me.

“I’m freaking out, Mia. I’m still freaking out, I’m *freaking out*.”

“OK,” I said. We were still in the tent. My attempts to get her to take a walk were met with tears, so I decided to just stick to neutral phrases. I didn’t touch her. She’d been crying on and off for almost two hours now. I didn’t even feel fucked up anymore, I was so focused on getting her through this. I was also holding Nuttie on my lap because Jules had squeezed him too tightly when he went to sit with her, and now they were both scared.

“Do you want to try playing cards?” I’d brought a pack of cards because I’d thought that could be fun while camping. They were in the car, but I figured it would be good to get out of the tent for a minute.

“I can’t play cards.”

“Do you want to talk about what you’re thinking about?”

“I know we’re supposed to have a good-bye trip before you go to Vermont, but maybe *this* is the good-bye. That’s what I’m thinking.”

“Well, it is,” I said because this was our good-bye, that was just true. “But I’ll be home for another day after we get back.” Because I thought she meant it was a shame this was how we were saying good-bye.

“What if this means something about our relationship?”

I said, “Please remember you took mushrooms, JuJu. I think we ate too many. What you’re feeling isn’t real.”

“I keep remembering all the horrible things anyone’s ever said to me. My dad saying I shouldn’t have come to Georgia, that it was like we weren’t father and daughter

anymore so why was I trying to squeeze water from a stone. I don't even know what that means but stones are so hard."

So that was what he'd said. I knew he must have said something more to upset her. Before I could help myself I said, "I told you it was a bad idea to visit him."

"You never support me! You have no idea what it's like to be me!"

"Sorry. I'm sorry. OK? I'm sorry." I used the quietest, most soothing voice I could muster and Jules resumed her sobbing.

The top of the tent was like a wave and Nuttie's fur was like a series of waves, too. I kept holding on to him as I sank back onto my sleeping bag and watched the undulating roof. I was never going to take mushrooms again.

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At the garden store, I said, "I also need this basket."

"For what?"

"Dad, for harvesting. For carrying my vegetables to the kitchen after I wash them with the hose."

I held the basket out and I saw a whole life in it where I was a real gardener.

"Carrots with their tops on. And corn would look so pretty in this."

"You're growing corn? We're going to need to clear a bigger spot than I was picturing."

"Yes, corn." I put the basket in the cart. It looked like someone had made it of split trees; I was going to carry it in the crook of my arm.

Dad picked it up. "This is \$29.95, Mia."

“But look how pretty.”

“Ridiculous. What about carrying your stuff in a colander? That’s got a country girl appeal, too.” He handed me back the basket.

“Our colander is so plain.”

“This is about you learning how to grow food. That’s what I’m financing. It’s supposed to be plain. I don’t get this obsession of you girls with how things look.”

“It’s not looks, I’m learning about a whole life I want,” I said. “The basket is part of my new life.” I returned the basket to the cart. Dad never said no for long.

He sighed. “Fine, we’ll get the basket. But I’d better see you using it. Often.”

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Nuttie farted. Ben grimaced. “Maybe we should get a puppy.” He grinned. “A fresh one.”

“He does stink, huh?”

Ben said, “Really, what do you think?”

“Nuttie hates other dogs. We have to wait until he’s dead.”

“How old is he?”

“Fifteen?”

“How long will he live?”

“As long as he wants, OK?”

Ben leaned down and scratched Nuttie behind his ears. “How’s your quality of life, buddy? Ready for a long rest?”

“Shut up,” I said. “Leave Nuttie alone.”

Ben said, “All the things you and Jules did to this dog to fuck him up.”

I said, “It wasn’t just us. Merrie decided he ought to be afraid of heights so she used to drop him from the monkey bars to her friend below.”

Ben said, “Seriously?”

“Yes.” Just thinking of that made tears spring to my eyes, made my nose hot. I went to Nuttie and sat on the floor with him. “Poor baby.”

“How old was Merrie when she did that?”

“I don’t know, the age when you’re around monkey bars. It came from a good place, she didn’t want Nuttie to get hurt. They were just weird little kids.”

“That’s pretty fucked up, still.”

“The worst was when she and Emmie made him afraid of the bath by holding him under water.”

Ben said, “You’re lying.”

“No, they wanted him to have—and I quote—‘a healthy fear of drowning.’ They just did it for a second.”

“They tried to drown him?” Ben made a sad face and patted Nuttie on the head.

“That’s why he stinks. It’s kind of hard to get him in the bath.”

“Plus he’s just old. Old dogs smell. New dogs, different story.”

“Puppies smell nice,” I agreed.

“So we can get one, when, you know?”

I said, “Sure.”

Merrie said, “Why can’t I?”

“The smell bothers Daddy,” Mom said, shifting slightly in the seat to look at Mer. Em and I were facing backwards in the third row of seats but had turned around to watch the drama. Em was mad at Mer about something, so Merrie was on her own in the middle seats. And as usual, Merrie was being combative, smearing some nasty Tinkerbell perfume on herself before a long ride and causing all sorts of problems.

Dad said, “If you want to rub some mint leaves, or sage, or lemon verbena, or even some dirt on your temples, be my guest. Something natural. Not a chemical smell.” I was growing all of those in my herb plot, and I started to say Merrie couldn’t use them, but Em started giggling, so I just listened instead.

“Dirt?” Merrie asked.

“Dirt smells wonderful.”

Mom turned all the way around to include me and Em in her opinion. “Dad is a tiny bit crazy, girls. He really does love the smell of dirt.” This was Mom’s way of playing peacemaker—get us to think of Dad as weird, turn so her glance included all three of us.

Dad said, “We in the know call it earth. Delicious smell.”

Emmie started to giggle like a maniac and so did I, but Merrie was still angry.

“Jules wears perfume,” she said. That was true, Jules did have a bottle of perfume.

“I am not Jules’ father,” Dad said. “I can’t tell her what to do, but as your father, I can and will exercise that right.”

When he said it, Mom turned around to look at me, and I looked at her for a second to acknowledge how weird it was for Dad to say something about Jules’ father that was offhand and normal. But I looked away quickly, because I didn’t want it to be too weird.

“When I’m a grown-up,” Merrie said, “I’m wearing the smelliest perfume I can find.”

Mom said, “That will be your choice, Mer.”

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I picked up on the first ring because I thought it would be Adam calling back to apologize. “Hello?”

“Mia.”

I knew I should have gotten Caller I.D. “Hi, Merrie. What’s up?” Merrie doesn’t call for no reason.

Merrie said, “Mom’s having an affair.”

I didn’t say anything.

“Mia? Did you hear me?”

“I heard you.”

“Well, are you gonna *say* anything?”

I said, “Did you call Emmie?”

“I’m mad at her. I called you.”

“What makes you think this?”

Merrie said, “No reaction. Oh my God. I have the worst family ever. I saw them, OK?”

“Saw what?”

Merrie let out one of her trademark, seething sighs. “Saw Mom kissing another guy.”

“You don’t know him?”

Merrie said, “Yeah, I know him. It was Dr. Dennis.”

I thought of Dr. Dennis, white-bearded and likely pushing ninety. “That’s a lie. Be serious.”

“Duh. No, I have no idea who he is,” Merrie said. “But I saw them.”

“Well, what do you want me to do about it?”

“Um, be supportive, maybe? I have to live here another two years before I get to go to college.”

I said, “I already knew about this.” Even though I’d had no idea. I had a policy with Merrie of not letting her know how I really felt. It’s nice to be close with people, but there are costs with Merrie.

“You did? Who is he then? Are Mom and Dad getting divorced? Does Dad know?”

I said, “Merrie. Ever thought about letting Mom and Dad have their own business?”

“Does Dad know, too?”

I was quickly feeling in over my head. “Merrie. Just don’t do anything, OK?”

“Why should I listen to you? Does everybody know but me?”

I decided to try another approach. “Why are you mad at Em?”

“She’s a bitch. None of you care that I’m stuck here in boring Newark with Mom and Dad’s broken marriage while you’re off at college falling in love and being disgustingly happy about everything. Can we stick to the subject, Mia? I’m upset.”

She did sound upset. Em must have met some girl to make her forget about Rebecca and her baby. I started to feel bad. “How have Mom and Dad been getting along lately?”

“Shitty.” And then silence. She was sulking. “Maybe I’ll call Jules. Or visit her at her dorm to tell her. Even though she’s not technically my family, maybe she’ll pay more attention to this very serious family problem than my blood relatives.”

“Don’t you dare. What if you upset her?” I sighed. “Tell me what you want me to do, and I’ll do it.”

“Good,” Merrie said. “I want you to come home so we can confront Mom.”

“That’s a horrible idea.”

“Fine, I’ll call Jules.”

“Jesus. Fine. Can you wait two weeks until my break?”

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Jules said, “Want to take bets on how long until they get divorced?”

I was glad she said it. Because if I’d said it, she might think I was passive-aggressively referencing Alejandro.

I said, “They won’t. If there’s anyone in the world I’d bet on to hold that mess together, it’d be Merrie.”

“At least you get to be in the wedding,” Jules said, eyeing my horrible Pepto Bismol pink dress.

I said, “There’s a ruffle over my boobs.” I knew she meant, thank God I don’t have to wear that.

“So I see.”

“There’s ruffles everywhere!” I said.

“It’s a pretty ugly dress. I thought that was a myth that the bride made the dresses

ugly so she'd look better."

"Honestly, Mer's dress is the ugliest frooifiest thing I've ever seen. And Joel's tuxedo is gross."

Jules said, "I haven't seen it."

"It's prone to being pulled askew," I said, indicating the chest ruffle.

"Just emphasizes your rack."

"I guess."

"Any hot groomsmen for you? Speaking of your rack."

"If you like yuppie boys."

"There's an open bar, right?"

"Duh."

"Well, I for one am glad we got high first. And that we rode separately from the fray."

I said, "I know you're, like, totally fine with Mom and Dad, but I cannot stand hanging out with them together during all this. You saw them at the rehearsal last night."

Jules said, "You mean the canoodling?"

"It's weird, right?"

"I don't know. I think it's kind of sweet. I bet you think that, too, after some time has passed."

"Is that more of your wisdom?"

Jules said, "Ha ha. They won't canoodle together with their dates there today."

I said, "Who knows. Whoever their dates are, they've got to be putting up with a lot. I know Mom and Dad talk on the phone all the time."

Jules said, “Yeah, your mom is always mentioning your dad. And vice versa. They’re best buds.”

I made a gagging face.

“But it’s sweet, right? Better than the alternative.”

I said, “I guess.” Although I could think of alternatives that might be less weird. But to say that to Jules would just be mean.

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Mom said, “We can afford it. In so many ways, we can afford it. You’re the go-to parent, which will be good for her. To have someone like you.”

We were in the dining room, where they made me come for a serious talk, but then nobody talked to me.

Dad said, “Hey, that’s a heavy load.”

I asked, “If Jules comes to live with us, can we make the den into our bedroom? Or can we live in the basement?” Nobody answered me.

Mom said, “No one’s asking you to right wrongs here, Dan.”

“I’m not her father.”

“No one’s asking you to be her father. But think how that girl is going to grow up without any positive male role model. I think you could make a huge difference.”

This was Mom’s mantra in her convincing attempts. *You could make a huge difference.* As if what will convince her would convince anyone else. Although Mom’s strength in life is in convincing. That’s what lawyers do.

Dad said, “What about hugging her, or being alone with her? I’m scared, to be

perfectly honest.”

Mom said, “You’ll be fine. Just trust your instincts. These are not your problems, Dan.”

Dad said, “If she comes to live with us, those will be all of our problems and it’s no good pretending otherwise.”

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“That’s what I want,” Jules said. “I don’t want to be extreme. What did you say? *Ruined.*”

I felt deeply relieved. “OK, so how to be *normal* normal? We have to figure out when girls usually do things and give you a schedule of normal experiences to have and then, like, *make sure* you have them. Then you can go on to be in love and enjoy sex and all that.”

I asked Dad what he thought we should do as normal girls. I said, “All of this stuff has changed us.” I hoped he wouldn’t laugh, and he didn’t. “We’re different now in a way that will last forever.”

He said, “You’re probably right.”

“So what should we do?”

“To be normal?”

“Yeah.”

“Quit doing everything together,” Dad said. “You’re not the Bobbsey twins. Do some things apart, miss each other. You’ll have a better time when you get together.”

I said, “That’s not what I’m asking about.”

“It’s what I’m telling you.”

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Jules said, “I don’t want to be one of these girls who can’t say the word *rape*. I don’t want to look down at the ground or cry when I talk about my dad. I want to be able to talk about stuff normally.”

I said, “Then that’s what we’ll do. We’ll talk about it until it’s normal.”

“I don’t just want to talk about it until it’s normal. I want to talk about it until it’s a fucking *joke*.”

I nodded even though I had no idea what she was asking of me.

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I walked to Mom’s office after school, hoping she’d be there and not at court.

“Honey!” Mom said. She looked totally surprised to see me and neither glad nor upset. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m worried about something.” I took off my jacket and put it on the bookshelf, balancing the jacket on top of a bunch of wrapped toys Mom kept for her clients’ kids—good stuff, too; we helped wrap them. I sat in the chair across from Mom’s desk, the one with the duct tape holding the seam together. Her desk was messier than usual.

Mom said, “Well?”

“We have to do a family tree in Social Studies and in art—it’s like a joint project.” I considered the problem self-evident and waited for Mom to come up with a solution.

Maybe she could call the principal.

She did understand right away. “It’s like Father’s Day last year, honey. We can’t cancel it, and maybe it’s good for Jules to have to publicly deal with these kinds of structures, help her develop some strategies. Because they’re not going away.”

“You actually think she should have to do it for a grade,” I said. “That’s, like, horrible.”

“How does Jules feel about it?”

“I don’t know. I came right to you.”

“Well,” Mom said. “What do you have to do, exactly?”

“You have to do genealogical research and find out names and dates for a family tree and then we all have to choose trees from the trees we studied in science class and then draw the trees in art class and label them with the dates in social studies because it’s like your personal history is supposed to correlate in your mind with ancient history or whatever. It’s retarded. And Mrs. Arnold always says that, too, this is supposed to help you correlate, like she reads from some prepared speech from the Board of Education. It’s like personal history meets science meets art. None of us should have to do it, but especially not Jules.”

“What about the kids who are adopted?”

I said, “I don’t know. That’s a good point, see, we shouldn’t have to do this. How are those adopted kids or kids with dead parents or whatever going to feel?”

Mom said, “Hmmm.”

“Please, Mom, call the school. This is going to really mess with some people. You’d really be helping if you called.”

“OK, I’ll call. Go home.”

“I’ll start dinner,” I said. “I’ll make you such a nice dinner. I’ll use stuff from the garden, I’ll make it so good.”

Mom said, “Mia, go home.” She sounded strict like she was mad but I could tell I’d convinced her and she would take care of it. My teachers always listened to Mom because she made a big fuss if you didn’t. They hated her, but I think they were scared of her so nobody took it out on me.

The family trees we ended up making were like parodies of the regular family trees; we had to make them but were insulated from getting into trouble for it because of Mom’s fuss. “It could be that these girls are smart-asses, but do we really want to get into all of that?” was how Jules characterized the way adults were scared to confront her. “Nobody wants to talk about it; they know I’ll make them uncomfortable.”

She would, too; she wouldn’t hesitate to make a grown-up uncomfortable. It was other kids we were scared of.

Jules decided to ask about what to do at therapy, and so Bunny suggested the word *estranged*, which we both liked. It’s from the Latin word *extraneous* meaning *not belonging to the family*. Both of us liked that there was a sense of “the family” and that the term was ours to define. So her dad was on her tree, on a gnarled limb clearly struck by lightning, a dead limb, with the word *estranged* in exactly the same place as the word *deceased* on others. She also used the word *disgraced*, as in Fredrich Burgdorf, *estranged* (disgraced October 28, 1988, in Newark, DE).

My tree was more subversive. Jules’ tree was pretty dark. It looked like a haunted house. We both came up with the design for the trees, but we had to give Jules the dark

tree so that I could get away with mine. Mine was funnier, Jules' was just for us to get away with mine, just insurance. Mine was a blossoming apple tree in springtime and the members of my extended family climbed among its branches. The posterboard was pink, and everybody was made to look like one of Nori's Precious Moments figurines, but the dead ones had their injuries highlighted. Grandma Cohen had pulled down her nightgown to reveal a darkly cancerous breast, Uncle Marcus bent his tumored brain toward you. All of them were smiling these loopy ceramic angel smiles. And the feuds were detailed with the relationships, Mom and Uncle Bobby hated each other from this date to this date, the words winding pink, like a garland of blossoms all over the branches.

It was hilarious to us, and since Jules did most of the artwork, both were really good. We ended up getting As, which we also found hilarious. Mrs. Arnold said ours were very creative when she returned them, and Jules laughed out loud when she said it.

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My haircut was pretty short, but it wasn't bushy now. Mom said she thought cutting it would help. Even though she used a lot of hair gel, hers still got bushy sometimes, so I wasn't sure if I trusted her opinion, but I felt pretty pleased as I found her at the food court to show her my hair.

"Turn around," Mom said. "Very nice, I told you it would calm down if it was shorter."

"They thinned it. I think I like it." I could see my reflection in the Orange Julius sign. I looked different for sure.

Mom said, "Are you hungry?" She had a half-eaten cookie next to her on the table.

I said, “No, let’s just finish shopping.”

“Where do you want to look for bras?”

“I don’t care.” Then I said, “Not a cheap bra, I want a nice one.”

“Let’s go to Macy’s. We’ll get you several nice ones. You’re going to need to wear a bra all the time soon, just like me.” Mom was short and pretty tiny, but she was chesty. She called them her knockers.

I said, “Mine might not get huge like yours.”

Mom laughed. She said, “Yours will be gigantic, too.”

“How can you tell?”

“We’re built the same, you and me. You’re going to have knockers, too. But it’s not so bad.”

I didn’t feel bad or good about the prospect of impending knockers, just surprised that Mom knew I would get them.

I said, “When will the other girls get them?”

“All different times. Some won’t get very much, some will get a lot, some will get them soon. I saw another girl in your class who wears a bra, that girl Amanda, you’re not the only one.”

I said, “Jules is getting a training bra.”

Mom said, “Well, that’s sweet.”

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When Jules came to live with us permanently, Nori announced she was going to use her time alone to blossom. She had a faerie calendar, and a women’s support group, she

went to tribal dancing and sweat lodges, she read self-help books. And of course she'd started AA for real this time.

To Jules, she said, "This is what is right for you, baby, I can feel it," but I felt she had a sort of relief, pushing her off onto us, so she could explore. Incest as pathway to a new life. Incest as new beginning. Incest as awakening. She thought Jules could have it, too, that fresh start.

It was an amazingly selfish attitude, and it made me so angry when I thought about it that I felt dizzy.

When Jules moved her stuff in, Nori kept saying, "I thought it would be nice for her to have her stuff here since she sleeps over so much." She said it to me, to Mom, to Dad, to Jules. She said it as if the whole thing had been her idea. There was something pleading in the way she kept repeating it: *I thought it would be nice for her*. As if anything were nice for Jules anymore.

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I could tell Mom was serious about what she was asking because of the way she kept threading and unthreading her fingers, looking down at them the whole time and twisting her rings. An uncharacteristically demure posture. Also, Dad was doing most of the talking.

"We don't want to force any ideas on her," Dad said, "but it's equally important that she understands she has options. Lots of different options."

"And that we'll support," Mom said, "*her* choice, whatever that is."

"Right. That we are here to support her. We don't care what she chooses, as long as

she makes a decision that's best for her."

I said, "Can he go to jail?"

"It's a possibility," Dad said. "But this kind of thing is tricky. There are lots of things to consider."

"That's what she should choose."

I wasn't sure why, but saying that, and feeling how strongly I felt it, made tears come. I didn't want Dad, but especially Mom, to see, so I yawned as widely as I could and then coughed. I dug my nails into the pads of my palms, I tried to make them bleed. It's interesting how one pain makes another abate. I heard the car horn of one of Emmie's friends beep in the driveway, and the headlights shone through the window and lit up Mom and then Dad at their places across the table from me. I sat alone on the other side of the table. Like I was being interrogated.

Em called hello, and the front door slammed. She ran into the dining room with her coat halfway off and one boot on. "I think I might get a solo in the graduation concert! I'd be the only third grader to have a solo."

She was close to me, leaning over the table, and I resisted my urge to pinch her. She was always interrupting. I said, "Nobody cares about your stupid elementary school concert."

Dad said, "Shut up, Mia. Em, that's great. But your mom and I are having a serious talk with Mia, so can we have a more lengthy congratulatory chat in a few minutes? I want to hear all about this solo."

"What did you do, Mia? Did Mom and Dad find out about your detention?"

I did pinch her then, and it was through the layers of her red corduroy coat, but I

think I still twisted some skin. She screamed like I did, anyway. “No, stupid. We’re having an important talk. One you’re too young for.”

“Mia, we don’t solve arguments by pinching,” Dad said. “Jesus, I expected more grown-up behavior from you, considering. Emmie, go watch TV with your sister.”

“She has cake,” Mom said.

“I didn’t eat dinner yet.”

“That’s OK,” Dad said. “Just get some cake and watch TV with Mer. We’ll heat up some of the chicken for you in a few minutes.”

Emmie walked backwards out of the room, and I laughed when she almost hit her head on the lamp. Dad sighed. He looked at Mom.

Mom said, “Jail.”

“Right. Well, it’s a possibility. There’s a lot of options she can take, and your mom and I want Jules to understand that we are here to help protect her.”

“Like if he comes after her?”

“No, honey,” Mom said. “He’s not going to come after her.”

“How do you know? Do you even know all the stuff he did to her? He might want to come after her.” I looked down at the tablecloth now, too, and picked at it, at its embroidery, which normally might have earned me some reprimand since Grandma made it, but I could tell that the looks I was avoiding across the table were full of sympathy. Big cow-eyed sadness for all that I was having to think about at such a young age. No reprimand would be forthcoming. I balled the tablecloth in my fist and thought about how I could tear out this one little daisy and still maybe no one would say anything. The silence would stick until I raised my eyes, which I didn’t want to do since they were,

again, inexplicably teary. I didn't tear up because of Jules—it made me angry, not sad, that no one understood her dad was scary and worth getting mad about—I teared up when I thought of Grandma embroidering this tablecloth. When I was little, I thought it was the most gorgeous thing I'd ever seen, so different from any other tablecloth with its shoots of orange and gold thread, its winding, cheerful flowers. It sat on the table only because we never ate in the dining room. It was too precious to use and that did make me sad. It also made me sad that I could hurt it, especially since Grandma couldn't ever make another with her eyesight.

I released the tablecloth from my grip and rubbed my sweating hand on my jeans. Still, no one said anything. We could all hear the TV's canned laughter.

“You should know that I've talked with him,” Dad said finally. He rubbed his hair like the head underneath it hurt. “He's not coming back to Delaware even, I don't think, sweetheart. He closed up his practice, he took his stuff, he's gone. And he knows Jules has a lot of people taking care of her.”

I said, “Did you threaten him or something?” He was a lot bigger and stronger looking than Dad. I doubted a threat from Dad would mean much.

“I didn't threaten him,” Dad said, “physically, no. But he knows we are looking out for Jules and that's all you need to know, Mia.”

“Sorry. You're the ones who said you wanted to talk to me.”

“No one is mad at you, sweetheart,” Mom said. “But the conversation Daddy had with Fred is nothing for you to worry about.”

“Whatever. What do you want me to do again?”

Dad said, “We want you to talk to Jules, or, if you'd rather, be with Jules while we

talk to her about her options.”

“What are they again?”

“Well, at one end, you have her staying at home with Nori,” Dad said, “and she’ll be safe but it won’t be that disruptive.”

“And she could file,” Mom said. “File criminal charges.”

I said, “That social worker didn’t say anything about the police. I asked Jules and she said nobody has said anything about the police. Which is horrible if you think about it.”

Mom said, “Since her dad left the state right away and she isn’t in a home with him, no one is going to push for anything. But she does have that option to go to the police if she wants. There’d be a lot to think about with that though.”

“Or she could come stay with us, just get away for a while,” Dad said. “Do you have a sense of how she and her mom are getting along?”

“Live here?”

“It’s a possibility.”

“Do you have some idea,” Mom asked, “what Jules would want?”

“We thought you might know, that she might have talked to you about what she wants to happen,” Dad said.

So they didn’t know what to do. This talk across the table from me was just a way to find out what to do, not any kind of authority-flexing. Again, I felt tears come to my eyes.

“You’re supposed to tell me what to do, not the other way around. You’re the grown-ups. This is—not right.”

I got up, and no one told me to sit back down, so I went to see what Em and Merrie were watching. They were lying on the living room floor watching *Dear John* and eating chocolate Entenmann's. Merrie was basically asleep and she had cake all over the neck of her nightgown. I sat on the couch behind them and waited for a commercial. I heard Mom and Dad come in and I could see, out of the very corner of my eye, Dad sit on the cushion farthest from me.

Merrie turned over onto her back, knocking over her glass of milk. Em made a yelp of protest and righted the glass but Merrie continued squirming on the floor, oblivious to what she'd done. She said, "This show is funny."

"Do you want some dinner, Em?" Mom asked. "We have chicken and rice."

Em said, "Like a casserole?"

"Separate dishes," Dad said.

"I guess," Em said. "I can microwave it after the show though."

"This show isn't really appropriate for them," I said.

"It's appropriate," Em said, giving me a look of deep disgust before turning back to the TV.

"Whatever."

Dad said, "That's the guy from *Taxi*. It looks OK to me. Do you know the show, Lida?"

"No."

I said, "You two are clueless."

"What's wrong with the show?"

"It's all about sex."

Mom said, “Sex isn’t bad, Mia. They can watch sex.” She crossed the room and ruffled my hair in a way that made me want to hit her. “I’ll bring you a plate, Emmie.”

The woman on TV asked, “And were there any...*sexual* problems?” which was the show’s trademark joke.

Nobody laughed, and I said, “See? Inappropriate.”

“That’s a shame,” Dad said. “*Taxi* was actually a pretty funny show.”

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I came in from my garden with a bunch of radishes. “Look!” I said to Mom.

“Very pretty,” Mom said. She was setting the table and barely glanced at the harvest in my basket.

“Do you even see all the colors,” I asked. “See how they’re purple and white and pink—these aren’t like radishes from the store.”

“Do they still taste like radishes?” Mom said.

“Yes,” I said. “Do you want me to cut them for dinner?”

“I don’t think for tonight, but we can eat them tomorrow,” Mom said. “Or anyone who likes radishes can.”

It wasn’t about if you liked them, it was about that I grew them. From seed. Dad would understand. I said, “Where’s Dad?”

Mom said, “Can you get Jules for dinner, Mia? She’s in the basement.”

“Where’s Dad?”

“He’s still in class. Get Jules, please, and wash your hands and I’ll get your sisters and we can eat.”

I knew Jules had gone to therapy this afternoon, so I figured she'd be doing her therapy homework, which I hated interrupting. I knocked on her bedroom door.

"Come in," she said. She was on the floor with another book. She covered its title with her hand when she saw it was me.

"Another book?" I said. I tried to keep my voice enthusiastic.

"Yeah," Jules said. "This one's pretty good."

"What's it called?"

She held it up: *The Courage to Heal*.

"Oh," I said. Of course, it was impossible to say, but I didn't think if I were Jules that I'd like all these self-help books the way she and Bunny did. "What's this one about?"

"Just about having a normal life," Jules said. "It's not New Age-y."

"What do you have to do to have a normal life?" I sat down next to her.

"Well, like it has this stuff about language. It's not a stupid book. Like, don't say victim because victims are people who've died, or are in the hospital."

"What are you supposed to say instead?" I asked. I realized I was still holding my basket of radishes.

"Survivor," Jules said.

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I turned my graphing calculator so that Jules could see it behind me. As soon as I got to class, I angled my desk so that this move was possible. If we kept the rows as they

were, she wouldn't be able to see my calculator. And it was my calculator that we input all the formulas into.

There was a series of steps I took on quiz days. I always arrived before Jules, subtly moved the desk, pulled out a bunch of books, pretending I was looking for my homework but really building a stand for the calculator so that the glare of the fluorescent lights overhead didn't hinder Jules' ability to pass her test. I could pass without cheating, but Jules couldn't.

Jules arrived right before the bell, falling into her seat in a rush so that she pushed her desk out a bit, further enabling her to see my calculator. The thing is, we were probably using a lot of geometry to set all of this up, but when I told Jules that, she didn't laugh. She really didn't understand math.

Jules sat next to Sonya Murray, and I sat next to no one—on purpose. We used the empty desk for me to pile my backpack and jacket so that Ms. Weaver was less able to see what we were doing. It's possible Sonya had caught on, but Jules said she thought Sonya was too stupid to even understand the benefit of cheating. Sonya was a track star, and her boyfriend was this other track star Matt, but Sonya was a solid D student.

Jules said, "Hey, Mia."

I said, "Hey." The bell rang, and Sonya walked in. She always walked in at the last possible second because she and Matt stood in the hall and kissed until the bell.

"I have cramps," Jules said.

"Sex helps cramps," Sonya said. This was a typical Sonya-type remark. "Are you still going out with that college guy?"

"Michael," Jules said.

“He doesn’t go to college,” I said. “He works at the sub shop.”

Sonya said, “He’s graduated though,” and I couldn’t argue with that.

I said, “He lives with his mom.”

Sonya ignored me. “So do you still go out with him?”

“Sometimes,” Jules said.

“What do you mean, sometimes?” I knew she was going out with him tonight.

Jules shrugged.

I changed the subject. “I have cramps, too,” I said. “Perfect excuse to skip gym.

You in?”

Sonya said, “Skipping with some boy so you can, um, cure your cramps?”

Jules said, “Mia’s still a virgin. She can’t understand that kind of talk.”

She and Sonya giggled. I smiled like I didn’t care, but Jules knew I wouldn’t be a virgin if all of my energy weren’t diverted towards helping Jules be normal. I considered moving my calculator back but I didn’t.

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“You know what Nori said when I went over there yesterday?”

“What?” I was ready to be pissed. Every time Jules went to have dinner with her mom, Nori said something that upset her. If she really wanted Jules to move back home, which I doubted, she was doing a horrible job of it.

“She said, you’re not sleeping with Michael so if he cheats on you it’s understandable.”

I said, “No she didn’t.” We’d decided not to tell Nori the plan of when she was

having sex with him.

“Yes! She did. She said he loves me and if I’m not ready to go out with a boy who’s already had sex, I could expect him to look elsewhere, that that’s just how boys are.”

I said, “Oh, Nori. You can be such a bitch.” I criticized Nori only when Jules started it, and even then, I was cautious. “He’s not cheating on you, you know.”

Jules said, “My own mother. She is really, truly never on my side.” Her voice quavered when she said that, and she looked carefully away.

“You know he’s not cheating, right? He is, like, crazy for you.”

“I guess. He could be cheating though—how would I know?”

“Did you go to therapy today?”

“Bunny said she was totally categorically unequivocally wrong and that it all had to do with her own guilt. The usual.”

“Well, of course.”

“What do I do?”

“About Michael? Or Nori?”

“Michael. We can’t control Mom. She’s too fucked up. Until she gets sober, Bunny said it’s pretty useless to pay attention to her. I’m going to cut back to dinner every other week. I already told your mom.”

“We don’t know for sure what he’s doing, but I think he’s good.”

“We could speed up the plan.”

I said, “You can’t sleep with your first boyfriend until you’ve been going out, like, six months.”

Jules said, "I hate that, sleep."

"Who's sleeping?" I laughed, but I felt uncomfortable. The euphemism was for my protection since I hadn't even kissed anybody. I was busy party planning for Jules, and when Trevor from my science class asked me to Homecoming, I laughed at him. "Sleeping with him is a big step you're obviously not ready for. Now sex is a different story."

"Obviously."

"But, you know. The plan. He's your first love. The sweet one."

"The sexless one."

"No, you just have, like, two more months. Unless you want to speed it up."

"No," Jules said. "I definitely don't *want* to speed it up."

I said, "Maybe we should have gotten you someone from school." It was getting harder to hold Michael off. I had to keep interrupting their make-outs with urgent phone calls.

"No, this is better. I don't want kids from school all up in my business."

"Do you still like him?" I asked, hoping she would say no. I was so nervous about the sex.

"Yes. I don't know how to break up with him. I really like him."

"It's not cool to be with one guy forever. Like Barbara Bush who said George was her first kiss. Gross."

Jules said, "I could just keep Michael a pure love and then fuck the next one's brains out."

I said, "You could." Then, "But it makes sense to follow the plan. You have sex

and you get over all the other stuff but you have a sweet relationship before that so not everything is about sex. It's just healthy."

"I remember the plan."

"It's a good plan."

"Then what? After the next one?"

"You get married?"

"God. I hope not."

"It was a joke. Don't get married."

"I won't get married for a long time, I promise."

"Yeah, you want to get married so you can get divorced."

"Just to split the work of a kid."

"Nori got a bum deal on that one."

Jules laughed. She said, "Nori did OK. Your parents took over all the slack."

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I sat in the armchair while Mom, Dad, Em, and Mer squeezed together on the couch. It seemed right to be separate because didn't I deserve a pretty separate apology. I was the one who'd taken on the most in so many ways.

Nori had pulled a chair in from the dining room, as if its extra severity, that straight tall back, could help support her.

Mom had told me earlier to "behave myself." I'd said I didn't have any idea what she meant by that, and she said, "Neither do I. But, just do it please."

How I was going to respond to Nori was going to depend on what she had to say.

I'd been cataloguing all her wrongs toward me in case she forgot any.

Nori said, "Well, I'd like to start by saying thank you and sorry at the same time, because I'm so grateful you took care of Jules when I wasn't able to, and I'm sorry I couldn't do more for her before she left for college." She was talking really fast, like she'd memorized the words, and Mom was leaning forward, like Nori was at the opening night of the school play and Mom had been practicing with her all along.

Mom's little encouraging noises were getting on my nerves, so I looked at Dad, but he didn't look back.

Nori continued, "I know a lot of the reason I couldn't take care of her was because of my drinking, and part of my sobriety is asking what I can do to make amends for that."

Mom said, "We were happy to help, Nori, you know that. You had a heavy load."

Nori said, "And the financial part. I want to repay you what I can."

Mom said, "That won't be necessary."

Nori made a protest sound, and Mom said, "We don't want that. What, we're not going to help out where we can? People who need it? We were glad to do it."

Nori said, "I want to apologize particularly to you, Dan. Driving me places and not making me feel bad about it. Especially in front of Jules. And for listening to me. And I'm sorry I took you away from your family so much."

Mom said, "He was happy to do it."

I rolled my eyes at this and tried to catch the eye of anyone, but it was like Nori was on stage and only the sofa was in the audience. Even Em and Merrie were transfixed.

"I was happy," Dad said. "To do it."

Nori said, "OK. If there's anything else you want to say, or anything I did to hurt

you that you want me to hear, I'm ready to listen. It's part of my sobriety."

Nobody said anything, and I felt like I had to break through whatever bullshit bubble was surrounding everyone else in the room.

I said, "That's it? That's your apology."

Nori said, "You can say whatever you want to say, Mia."

I knew Mom was about to start talking, but the way Nori said it made the rest of the room and all the people in it go out of focus, as if the theatre production had swerved and it all came down to me and Nori. And as if we both knew that it came down to the two of us.

But then I didn't know what to say. There were so many things she'd done wrong, but what I said was, "Are you apologizing to Jules?"

Mom said, "Mia!" in her warning tone, but Nori said, "Yes." Quietly. As if to say, *of course*. Which was a show for my parents since I knew about her half-assed amends to Jules.

I said, "That's all I need to know," even though I didn't just need that. I needed her to apologize to me for all of the fucked up shit I was exposed to.

Mom said, "Mia, we wanted to help, we didn't mind helping," as if telling me over and over would make me not mind. I felt tears coming to my eyes because I *did* mind.

Nori had *known* what was happening and instead of stopping it she drank in her bedroom until she passed out because she was that much of a weak coward. I was forced to know that was a possibility in the world when I was eleven. People would apologize to Jules for the rest of her life for what happened to her, and they'd apologize to my parents because they spent some money, but no one was going to tell me they were sorry they'd

ruined my view of the world.

I said, “This is bullshit, and I’m done listening to it.” Because if I acted angry, nobody would comfort me and I was sick of comfort. And I got out of the room before I started crying and I locked the basement bathroom door behind me and turned on the shower to cover the sound of my crying but as far as I could tell, nobody followed me.

I sat on the floor, listening to the water waste itself and liking the way the floor seating allowed me to still feel clammy-chilled while the room heated up with steam.

I heard Mom repeating in my head, “We didn’t mind, we didn’t mind, we didn’t mind.”

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Jules came in without knocking.

“How was it?” I asked. I knew it was weird, but I’d been thinking about her and Michael having sex all afternoon.

“You mean the movie?” She was smiling, so I figured it hadn’t been too traumatizing. She was still here, anyway, coming to report.

“Yeah, how was that movie? R-rated?”

“X-rated! Mia, it was actually really good.”

“Seriously?” I said. “That’s great!” The best we’d been hoping was that it wouldn’t be awful. So many of her books talked about flashbacks. I asked, “Did you have anything weird?”

“No flashbacks. Just something, but it was a good something. You know.”

“Oh,” I said. She meant an orgasm. I said, “That’s really lucky for your first time.”

We'd already decided we were going to call it her first time.

"I know!" Jules said. "I think Michael might know what he's doing and stuff."

I felt proud. Because I'd picked him, and I'd been right.

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"How is Jules liking being Art Professor Burgdorf?" Mom asked. "I keep playing phone tag with her so I haven't heard."

"She loves it," I told her. "She's joining all these committees."

"What kind of committees?" Mom asked.

"Oh, she said she's writing up new majors and catalogue copy and everybody is fighting over the wording, and she loves it. She's supposed to do some committee work but she's asked for extra."

"Well good for her," said Mom. "So she likes it OK there? Better than that other school?"

"I'm like, you asked for extra committee work? It's very hard when you first get an academic appointment. You're under a lot of scrutiny. But you know Jules. She thinks they're lucky to get her in the first place and so she thinks the committee meetings are hilarious so she's just going to laugh at everybody." Arrogance always paid off for Jules though. People thought she was charming when she was obviously making fun of them.

"She's doing so well," said Mom, obviously referring to Jules' shows and write-ups, "that she's probably right. This is her in-demand time. This is her moment."

"She said everybody thinks she's trying to build her vita up, that she's just ambitious, but in reality she totally enjoys the meetings. She says she's getting a lot of

thinking about life done during the meetings.” I added, “A vita is a resume for academics.”

“I was married to an academic for more than twenty years, honey. And I’m a lawyer. I know all about vitas.”

I was losing my grip on Mom. Her attention just wasn’t there sometimes. “I guess the meetings are probably good examples of human behavior.”

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Mom said, “What are you doing right now? And what are you doing for lunch?”

“Right now, I’m walking home. Lunch, I don’t know. Probably making a sandwich at home.” It was a gorgeous day, and in Vermont, we didn’t stay inside on those spring days that felt like spring. “It’s nice out. Maybe I’ll take Nuttie to the park.”

“You’re done with classes today, right?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I’m 45 minutes away.”

“What?”

“I’m right outside of Middlebury.”

“OK. That’s weird.”

“I’m ambushing you!”

“Yeah. Why?”

“To talk about family things.”

“I’m really OK, Mom. I’m not going to be like Merrie.”

“Well, I assume you talked to Em.”

“No.”

“She came down last weekend, and after we talked I decided I needed to talk to you in person, too. I know Friday you only have morning classes, so I just got up at four and decided to drive up to see you.”

“OK,” I was home now, so I sat on the front steps. “I have stuff to do later.”

“I’m not staying, and I know you don’t need tons of reassurance. We’ll just go to lunch. Where do you want to go? I’ll meet you there. My treat, of course.”

I said, “There’s a new place on College. Stone Soup. You’ll see it.”

When I walked up, she was already there, sitting on the curb in shorts and a tank top, hugging her knees like a kid. She jumped up when she saw me. Indicating the restaurant, Mom said, “I love this place.”

“I knew you’d like it. They have salmon matzo.”

“Totally your kind of place, all these gorgeous plants. We can sit outside?”

“Absolutely,” I said. “I always sit outside.”

“Unless it’s snowing, right?” Mom said. “I’ll go in and order. What do you want?”

“Just get us some stuff to share?”

While she went to the counter, I thought about looking through Mom’s purse. A new bag, kind of hippie-ish with big flowers, but still expensive-looking, one I’d never seen before. She shouldn’t be driving up here; she ought to be checking on Jules. Or hanging out with Merrie. I was doing fine.

Mom sat across from me and said, “I’m going to get right to it. You know everybody still loves each other, but I want you to hear that your father and I are just

better friends when we don't share space. We both realized that getting married so young might have, I don't know, sort of cemented our personalities. Like I always thought I hated to travel, but it turns out I just hate traveling with your father! *He* hates travel, I don't. And there are just some aspects of ourselves, and of our sexuality, that we want to explore—”

“OK, enough, Mom.”

“Sorry. I really want you to understand it's friendly. And mutually agreed upon.”

“Friendly as in divorce.”

“Your father and I are best friends! We can stay friends if we split up but maybe not if we stay together.”

“I'm not upset. But I don't understand what's changed.” What I didn't say: Except that you've been having an affair.

“It comes down to what we want. I want to take dance lessons and go to music festivals and build a screened-in porch and sleep in it all summer. And maybe start working on cars.”

“Working on cars? Are you joking?”

“No. Oh, I mean, I likely won't really start working on cars,” Mom said, “but you know I love *Car Talk* and I wouldn't mind being able to change my own oil.”

“Changing the oil doesn't sound like you.”

“Just the *idea* of it, Mia. I think it's supposed to be very dirty and uncomfortable to actually do. But I want the chance to live the second half of my life in a different way than I lived the first half.”

I nodded. I imagined telling all of this to Jules later: *It was so awkward. Mom wanted me to say, "You go, girl."*

Mom said, "I might not choose anything much different. But I might."

"So Dad doesn't support you taking car maintenance at Delaware Tech? Is that what's going on?"

"Your father is, as he put it, less interested in the kind of ostentatious joy that I'm seeking. Which made me laugh, of course. That's exactly it. It's not that he's *not* joyful, he's so happy puttering between home and campus, and expanding the botanical gardens, and teaching. He's tied to the university and that makes him happy. But he isn't going to go off and have a different life."

"Which you might not even want either."

"Right," Mom said.

"OK," I said. "Are you selling the house?"

"I love having one practical daughter. Em kept asking me how I'm sleeping and if I have an appetite. She wanted to nurture me through my depression. Except I'm not depressed now that we've decided."

"I bet that's not what Merrie said."

"Mer is furious with me," Mom said. "I don't know what to do about that. Give it time, I guess."

I said, "Yeah."

"I'm keeping the house, and Dad is getting an apartment right by campus. Very swanky, actually, with a tiny garden space off the patio. He doesn't want the house, but

we thought it'd be good to keep since it's paid for, and we can all have holidays together there."

Holidays together. That was going to be so weird. I wanted to ask Mom about Jules, but I didn't want to betray Jules' confidence. She was trying to act OK with the divorce.

"I think that's our food. I'll get it. This place is awesome, sweetheart. I see you really fitting in here. You're going to stay here forever, aren't you? A true Vermonter."

"I'm here next year anyway." I wasn't excited about grad school, but I didn't want to tell anybody else that yet. It wasn't like I had a better plan.

"I want to hear all about your new program. Dad and I are so proud of you. I'll get our food and then we'll talk all about you."

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It was after ten when they came in. I'd been in the back, watching the front door for their arrival. "Good morning, sleepyheads," I said. "Sit anywhere." They both looked like hell. "I must have been asleep when you got in. Did you have fun?" That was a lie. I'd heard them at 3:30, Jules giggling and Ben shushing her. They were almost immediately quiet though, so I figured they were sleepy-drunk, and when I looked in on them as I left around five, they were both snoring.

"God," Ben said. "Too much fun." He had an insanely charming grin. "This place is fantastic, Mia. I love the garden outside and all the plants in here. And the green walls. It's beautiful."

“Thank you. We’ve only been open a year, so it’s still new for me. Sorry I couldn’t join you. Breakfast hours don’t allow for drinking nights, you know?”

Jules said, “It looks great in here, Mia.” To Ben, she said, “The last time I was here she was still painting and buying tables and stuff.”

“You told me that,” he said. “Jules has been bragging about your entrepreneurial prowess. She said you’re already making money, which I take it is unheard of in the restaurant business.”

I said, “Well, this was a popular restaurant before I took it over. So I was able to take advantage of an existing customer base. Plus that office complex across the square is new, and they’re the bulk of my lunch business.”

“Plus she had a bunch of money to buy the building outright and renovate.”

“True,” I said. Jules loved to bring up my inheritance, as if I’d cheated by using it. I hoped Ben didn’t think I was a spoiled brat. “There was a lot of luck.”

“Modesty,” Jules said. Then, “I need coffee, Mia. And, like, eggs, or something bland.”

“Not me,” Ben said. “I want whatever you recommend, Mia. Specialty of the house.”

“You still have stomach of steel then,” Jules said.

I wanted to say I was the specialty of the house. Pick me! Instead I said, “I’ll bring menus.”

“And coffee!”

“And coffee.”

I asked Mom, “How are you holding up?” It was her mother who’d died, after all. I felt like I was sadder than anybody else, but I knew Mom was actually even sadder than I was.

“I hate all this bullshit,” Mom said.

I knew she was talking about all of it: the talking to people in her family who she didn’t like, the mourning, Grandma’s rabbi taking over, everything. I nodded sympathetically. I’d been hiding in the rest room for about ten minutes, applying make-up. I couldn’t stop crying, and that made it a slow process. As soon as I put the eyeliner on, it smudged. It was soothing me, to take it off and put it back on again.

“It’s weird to see Grandma without any, huh?” Mom said, indicating my eyeliner. She plopped in one of the armchairs across from the mirror. “Big fancy bathroom. I hate funeral homes.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I didn’t know you weren’t allowed to put make-up on dead people.”

Mom shrugged. She’d sat up all night with Grandma and the rabbi and Uncle Bobby. I knew she thought all these rules were stupid, but she didn’t even have the energy to get going about them. Which told me Mom must be really exhausted. Ever since we’d got here, she’d done everything the rabbi suggested without arguing.

Mom said, “When your Poppy died, Grandma said the weirdest thing to me. I said something about how strange it would be for her now, since they’d known each other since they were children, and had been through so much together. Not just coming to America, but losing their families, establishing themselves here, running the business,

they went through a lot together. I meant it to be commiserating with Grandma.”

I thought maybe Mom needed reassurance because she sounded unsure, like she was defending herself. “That sounds like an OK thing to say, Mom,” I said.

“I was thinking about how I’d met my husband when I was an adult.”

“You were twenty-five,” I said.

“Right. And to have been children together, I couldn’t imagine the loss, the person who had known you be so many things, and because my parents were always such a unit to me. Like they were the same person. And your grandma said, ‘It’s bittersweet.’ About Poppy dying. And I thought, oh no, Mom’s finally losing it, she had the wrong word, because you know Grandma never had the wrong word.”

I said, “She was so proud of her English.”

Mom said, “So I asked her. And she said she’d meant bittersweet. She explained the word and everything.”

“So why was it bittersweet?”

“She knew their whole story now,” Mom said. “It was kind of a beautiful thing to say. I’ve been trying to think about that, today and yesterday, but I just get bogged down in how angry I am. Just like when Poppy died—I feel mad.”

“You were mad?” I said. “I didn’t know that, I couldn’t tell.”

“You were a lot younger then,” Mom said. “What, I would have had you take on the grown-ups’ grieving? Like my parents talking about the Holocaust, they always made me feel so bad, like I had to take care of them. Or heal them. I couldn’t stand hearing about it, like it was the only thing that had ever mattered. When I was a kid, I was so jealous of other kids who didn’t have to hear about escaping the Holocaust.”

I said, “Grandma hardly ever talked about it to me. Just sometimes, when we would work in the garden, she would say something. But she didn’t get upset.”

Mom said, “You had a special relationship with her. I’m really glad about that.”

I said, “When can Dad shave again?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Mom said. “A week? He loves this religious shit. His parents died so young, you know? He always wanted my relationship with mine to be less complicated.”

I said, “Yeah, I was three when they died.” If I was three, then Dad must have been in his early thirties. It made me wonder how old I would be when Mom and Dad died. A feeling of sadness slammed into me, and I hugged Mom suddenly.

“It’s OK, honey,” she said. “We know Grandma’s whole story now, let’s try to think of that.”

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Ben came in the bedroom. He was covered in paint. He said, “What are you doing?”

I said, “Making mischief online.”

Ben bounced the bed so that my laptop almost flew off my lap. I said, “Watch it.” Then, “Are you going to get paint on the bed?”

He said, “It’s all dry.” He pushed his head over my shoulder. “Show me the mischief.”

I said, “I’m just fucking around.”

“Facebook, huh?”

“I’m making a club.”

“Oh, yeah?” His hand was down my shirt, tracing the top of my breast.

“Did I give you permission?”

He said, “Do I need permission?” He squeezed my nipple.

I swatted his hand away and said, “I’m doing something serious here.”

He took his hand back but stayed close, leaning over my shoulder. “What?”

“OK, I’m making a fan club for my Uncle Bobby.”

“I thought you hated him.”

I said, “More like dislike.”

“But he’s old. He’s not on Facebook, is he?”

“Yeah, but my cousin has the same name. And I’m sure he’s on Facebook because I saw his profile.”

Ben pushed me again. “I want to see his profile.”

“You can’t see it unless you’re his friend.”

“That’s stupid.”

“Mine is set that way, too.”

“You have a Facebook page?”

“I had to do it to make mischief. I don’t use it.”

“Do you have a Myspace page?”

“Of course. I also have about fifty email addresses. And Friendster! And eHarmony, all that shit.”

“Seriously? Fifty?”

“More like ten, twenty.”

Ben said, "Why?"

I pushed him over on the bed so that I could more comfortably lay my head against him. He said, "Do you have me like you like me?"

I grabbed his dick through his pants and gave it a squeeze. "I do."

"So tell about the mischief."

"Um, I just like to fuck with people."

"The fan club?"

"Just a weird thing. Imagine seeing your dad has a fan club on Facebook and your cousin who you never talk to and who you know doesn't like your dad is its administrator. Wouldn't that weird you out?"

"How will he know?" Ben said.

I said, "I link it to things like his school, and I invite his friends. He'll find out."

"And the point of all of this?"

I said, "Oh no point. No point whatsoever. Just mischief making. Just fucking around."

Ben said, "I like you."

I said, "I like you, too."

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Mom said, "The absent-minded professor isn't just a river in Egypt."

"What does that even mean?" I asked Mom.

"That's one of those annoying things about your father. It's a joke he made at a cocktail party once. He was probably drinking too much. And it went over well and he

decided it should be the new catch-phrase sweeping the nation.”

“But what’s the joke?”

“It doesn’t mean anything, that’s the joke.”

I said, “I don’t get it.”

Mom said, “Yeah, well,” as if to indicate that she couldn’t do any better explaining it to me.

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Mom said, “You know your sister. Merrie was actually comforted by the type of sex offenders in the neighborhood. So she liked reading the list.”

I said, “The thing is, those listings are just so incomplete. And there are so many people never caught or never convicted. And it’s wrong to have your whole life ruined by it. Not to mention, most people plead way down. Which of course you know.”

Mom said, “Merrie said there were more child molesters in the area than adult rapists. Her idea was that since she didn’t have kids, that was OK by her, that she’d at least be safe since she was out of childhood.”

I said, “Well, that’s fucked up.” I laughed. I couldn’t help it. “But funny.”

Mom said “You know your sister” again, in that same tone that indicated Merrie, as the baby, could do whatever she wanted and never fall out of favor.

I said, “It must be nice to spew hate and not ever have any consequences.” I could hear Merrie in my head: “Let them go after kids,” she would say. “All of us grown-ups are safer.”

Mom said, “Well, your sister didn’t mean anything by it. She’s never been so close

to Jules, and by the time she understood what had gone on, Jules was in a very different place with it all.”

“Oh my God, Mom,” I said. “I wasn’t even thinking of Jules. I can think about sex offenders and not automatically think of Jules.” Which was true.

“OK,” Mom said. “I didn’t know what you meant.”

□ □ □

I told Ben, “You drink too much.”

He grinned at me, like I was pesky but benign.

I said, “You do.”

He said, “I don’t.” He said it firmly. He said, “Drinking is good for you.”

I said, “You passed out in your studio again last night.”

“So what? It was night. I fell asleep. It’s not like I’m lighting fires and then falling asleep and burning down the house.”

“You don’t fall asleep,” I said. “You *pass out*. You pass out, and you do have fumes and stuff up there.” I felt myself getting upset, felt myself pass the point—click!—where the conversation could have stayed fine, felt it move into a definite negative conversation. It was amazing how quickly he and I could escalate things.

“Fumes,” he said. “Please.” He made to leave.

I said, “This is not OK with me.” I started to cry.

“Jesus, the tears.” Ben subscribed to a sexist line of thought that women’s tears unfairly weighted any argument. Culturally, he had a point, but I’d never tell him that. Part of why I’d never tell him that is that he has no right to restrict my healthy outlet with

his he-man no-crying rules. But he sat down again. He blurred in front of me, and looking at him made me feel more like crying, so I focused on the brown outer shell of my daffodils. Only yesterday, my daffodils had made me so happy.

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In my daydream, he left something on—Ben was always forgetting to turn things off—something burning, a candle or something, an open flame by a dry bundle and then poof. The fire destroyed everything. I practiced saying, “It’s only stuff,” but even as I practiced, I had to force back tears and an overwhelming anger. That was stuff I *loved*.

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I said, “It’s good for me for you not to be all things to me.”

Ben said, “You always have to get a dig in there.”

“A dig?”

“Yeah. I’ve failed you, you have to look elsewhere, but in this *empowered* sort of way.”

“You say empowered like you just swallowed maggots,” I said.

He gave me a look.

I said, “I just mean I shouldn’t rely on you solely.”

He mocked, “I can’t rely on you, you’ve let me down.”

I told him to go fuck himself before I left the room.

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Emmie's friend Rebecca was pregnant at fourteen and she called Em all the time. We all listened to their conversations. Em was supportive but once she got off the phone, she talked a steady stream of shit. "She's crazy if she thinks she can go to college and get a job and have a baby, all she talks about if you ask her for options is what if she puts it up for adoption because she thinks it's wrong to get an abortion."

When I saw her name on the Caller I.D., I answered, and once I heard Rebecca's annoying voice, I decided not to respond to her. She knew how I felt about her. I went downstairs with the phone balanced on my shoulder. Rebecca kept saying, "Mia? It's weird I can hear you breathing but can you hear me? Mia?" I held the phone out to Emmie. "Here," I said, loud enough. "It's your retarded friend who's bringing another retarded person into the world."

"You are such a bitch," Em said, holding her hand over the receiver. "Becky? No, she's just an unhappy person and misery loves company, you know?" She left the kitchen, murmuring uh-huh into the phone. Obviously another pregnancy crisis that only Em could be properly sympathetic to.

"Why would you do that?" Dad asked. He'd been sitting at the kitchen island, listening to me.

I sat down next to him and picked a slice of turkey off his plate.

"Don't take my turkey."

I shrugged. "She's a stupid twat. I don't suffer fools with gladness."

Dad said, "Why does it concern you?"

"It bugs me that Em pours everything into her. She's not appreciative."

“All of you have that problem,” Dad said, obviously drawing a parallel between Jules and Rebecca which was ridiculous. So ridiculous I let it slide.

“Not Merrie. Merrie takes good care of—wait for it, Dad—of Merrie.”

Em returned, furious and without the phone. “Well?” she asked.

It was unclear if she was talking to me or to Dad, but I said, “I don’t like her.”

Then, “I don’t have to.”

“She has a hard decision! Just because you don’t agree with doesn’t mean her decision isn’t OK.”

“How do you know it’s an OK decision? It’s not like you’re ever going to get pregnant.”

“What are you talking about? I might get pregnant.”

“Um, how? You’re never even going to have sex.”

“Lesbians have sex, Mia. You’re so stupid.”

I could tell we both felt a little self-conscious about the word. The Lesbian Word. I said, “You know what I mean. Are you hoping to raise Rebecca’s baby with her?”

“I’m in high school, OK?”

“I know you’re in love with Rebecca.” It was the nastiest thing I could say, but I wasn’t sure why it was nasty. It was obviously true.

“Enough, Mia,” Dad said, and I shut up. Emmie looked like I’d stabbed her, and it made me feel worse, but it didn’t make me feel less angry.

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I reported, “It’s definitely a fire.” I started looking for some shoes, the dog leash.

Ben didn't want to get up. The fire was all the way across the street. He claimed they'd let him know if they needed him to evacuate.

"Who they?" I asked.

"Well, you would, anyway. Isn't that the fire department's job." He half smiled, sleepy and unbothered by my different take on things.

"The fire department might be busy," I said. And I felt the same kind of rush of anger I felt with him so often, even though I love him more than I've loved any boy. Just, fine: burn up in a fire. The rush of anger I recognized as a letting go, it's a wiping clean, eviscerating sort: just burn up. *Burn up, you fucker, see if I care.*

I left him sleeping and went with Nutter to watch across the street. If it were me, by the time I'd finished articulating my argument, I'd have been so awake that I would have gotten up, fueled by my displeasure at having to do so, at having been convinced. But he's relaxed about nearly everything, laconic and non-anxious and it makes my whole body curl up with impatience sometimes.

Everyone in the neighborhood was out, and most people's night outfits were indistinguishable from their outer things; it's five below with the wind chill, which is another reason to be angry at Ben snuggled in bed. I tried to look busy with Nuttie who was sniffing a dirty snow drift with incredible interest: old as Nuttie is, he wakes up right away, too. I wasn't sure if I could handle talking to Tom from next door anymore. He'd filled me in on all the action I'd missed, but his middle-of-the-night breath smelled actually like shit, as close to shit as to anything else, a steaming mouth of poo and even though I tried to breathe the cold air and the strangely pleasant smoke of the fire, he put his old man claw hand on my arm and breathed on me. Tom came in to the restaurant

every so often and he got my mail when I was gone and I didn't want to be unfriendly, so I pretended to be busy with Nuttie, who was also old. And also smelly, but Nuttie's little spaniel mouth and little spaniel asshole were far away from me.

According to Tom, the fire probably started because of a cigarette. I'd missed a lot of the action trying to get Ben up. I missed young pregnant Rosa running out of the burning house in a nightgown and a pair of unlaced boots. She went to the Evans' next door. I wondered at the logic of this. Of course, it's not good for pregnant women to remain in burning buildings, or to be out, half-naked, in the cold night, but the Evans are both teeny stick figure people, and I wondered how they would cover her bulk. Maybe being inside would be enough, or maybe they'd just give her a blanket.

Nuttie sniffed a dirty snow bank, and we drifted away for a bit. When we returned, Tom was talking to Bob of Bob and Stephanie next door to Tom, two doors down from me, consultants of some kind, although she kept extending her maternity leave. She probably had business cards that said Mommy, she was that type. Their toddlers' names eluded me although I heard them all the time, they both ran around naked or half-naked and they were always yelling at them to get in the house. Tom had told me many times he found it unseemly for a girl to not wear her shirt and said he didn't know how they could afford to live here. It was true they had pieces of shit cars. Stephanie was OK, just a rich-bitch Mommy-type, but Bob was one of those people who never discussed anything real, I pegged him as a sports person, although I had no idea if he was. Just a guy who trafficked in some kind of inane universal language, sports, real estate, something. Now, despite the technicolor reality that illuminated the street before us, he asked me how old Nuttie was.

“He’s, wow, sixteen now,” I said. “But he’s only beginning to slow down.” Nuttie raised his dirty little head at this.

“Well, he’s a fine dog,” said Bob in a fake-hearty way and he gave Nutter a scratch. Nuttie, to his credit, had Bob’s number and continued his investigation of the snowbank. Stephanie was across the street talking to a firefighter. The toddlers were playing in the gutter, actually playing in the gutter in the middle of the night. Lots of the neighborhood was out, actually, and now the fire seemed under control, but nobody seemed particularly cognizant of the cold or the hour. We were all just out surveying the newly changed landscape of the neighborhood.

It was weirdly festive during the fire, like after 9/11 when my neighbors all got together and had drinks and just sat around. Inconveniences like being stuck at the airport or waiting under the awning at the grocery store, all of our carts full, trying to decide if the downpour will let up in a minute. I’d always liked that shit. After 9/11, everybody felt sort of pseudo-tragic, like a barely-there acquaintance had just committed suicide and everybody was skipping class to cry to the special counselors the school brought in. Maybe some of my neighbors actually felt tragic, who knows.

The fire trucks left, no one was talking to me anymore, and Nuttie was clearly shivering. As I walked back inside to the sleeping Ben, I felt strangely hot, and I tested some tears so I could receive comfort. If the tears were emotion from watching a fire, maybe he would comfort me. It’s a gift to us both when I’m able to do that; it was the style of arguing that worked best for us. I couldn’t do it.

I washed the dishes, did a load of laundry to strengthen my anger and resolve, to have been able to be injured and up all night alone. But he kept sleeping, so I finally went

back to bed, too.

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Mom said, “But what if that’s the tragedy of your life, that you cherish anger, that, you know, you don’t forgive?”

I said, “It’s weird how peace and love you are now you’re divorced. Besides, it’s got to be something, right? The tragedy of my life. I’d rather have cherished anger than a car accident or a botched nose job.”

Mom said, “I’m always peace and love. I’ve always been.”

“Aren’t you angry at how your life turned out?”

“What are you talking about? I love my life.”

I said, “That’s right, you cheated on Dad. What’s weird is his forgiveness, not yours.”

“You can be such a little bitch sometimes,” Mom said.

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“I thought,” I said, “you’d be more interested. Or something.”

Adam looked stricken. I busied myself stacking the papers on his desk and shuffling and straightening the edges. He’d gotten As on all his Chem labs. He was staring at me—I could see his gaze out of the corner of my eye—but I couldn’t look back at him. He said, “I am. Why would you say that?”

“You seem like it’s a matter of course, like every girl would say this.”

“I don’t.”

“Well, you seem like that.” His room smelled like cloves, spicy but clean-spicy. I knew his mom must still wash his clothes—his family lived in town and his head of curls was too soft for housework. He just wasn’t that kind of boy. His sheets were clean. His bed was unmade, but there was a top sheet and a fitted sheet, unheard of for a college boy, there was a fuzzy blanket, and a down comforter, striped and deeply blue. His room wasn’t pristine: a bunch of clothes were heaped on the chair I was sitting on but the room didn’t smell like a college boy. It smelled like what home should smell like: baking bread and a detergent that my family didn’t buy and that I couldn’t locate at the store even after smelling all the bottles, some mythical clean, a smell I envied in other families. It had always seemed like my family didn’t have a smell, or, if we had a smell it was paper, something dry and dull.

Adam said, “Jeffrey told me.” He looked down at the blue comforter and his voice was low and sounded like he might cry. “Are you mad? I’m interested, I just always knew.”

I didn’t say anything so he said, “Are you mad?”

I was mad. “That’s gross,” I said, by way of evasion. “Was it a turn-on or something?” And I felt scared, too—like this lie I was telling wasn’t contained, it could melt and drip and change and cover and spread beyond my purview.

“I’m still interested in what you have to say! He was just—warning me.”

“So it’s not a turn-on.”

Adam said, “*No.*”

“How’d it even come up? Like you and Jeffrey were sitting around, talking about

what it'd be like to fuck Mia, and Jeff was all, *Yeah, I already fucked her, but be careful Adam, bro, because she's damaged goods, because somebody fucked her when she was eleven.*"

Adam said, "Your problem is you think all guys are assholes." Then his face messed up again and he said, "I mean, it makes sense you'd think that, Mia, of *course* you think that."

But it didn't make sense and I felt crazy like my stomach was zooming up into my throat, like I didn't know what I was doing or why I was doing any of it.

Adam said, "I'm not an asshole, Mia." Then, "I don't think of it that way. It's awful and I'm sorry it happened to you."

"OK," I said. That was the worst thing he could have said, it happened to me, when really I happened all of it. Somehow I moved to sit on his bed next to him and he was holding my hand and pleading with me and I was high above the bed watching the scene, a trauma victim of my own making, watching myself figure out how to get out of this moment.

He said, "I'm shocked, too! That you told me. Even though I knew. God, I messed up. Don't look like that."

"Like what?"

"Like you're not there."

"Obviously I'm here," I said, although I was thinking furiously. I'd adapted Jules' story to reflect more upon a weirdness about sex, my weirdness, to cover when I'd be *too there*, my eyes taking everything in, when my head wouldn't stop churning, when my body was just going through some motions that were obviously not immediate, that were

obviously dictated by my head, when feelings were filtered through thoughts rather than felt. When my body was moving with his and when I came—and he made me come so hard—and yet my body was there against my will and was enjoying itself against my will and the real me wasn't anywhere near where we were. I knew it made things bad, whether Adam knew what was wrong or not, and I knew this story excused me perfectly. I needed so badly to be excused. I needed to be excused before anyone could accuse me of anything.

“So are you still in touch with him? I mean, with your dad?”

“He told you it was my dad?”

“Yes.”

Before I could even think, I said, “It wasn't my dad.”

He looked confused. He said, “Oh.”

“He said it was my dad?” I allowed my voice to spiral upwards into hysteria. The hysteria was to cover as I thought frantically about what to do. I decided to punish Jeffrey, to exact some price for his indiscretion.

I said, “My poor dad. He's a professor.”

“I'm sorry,” Adam said.

I said, “A nice man.”

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“I think it might help *you* not to have her as your friend anymore.”

I didn't say anything because what a horrible thing to say.

Emmie continued, “Because I think Jules caused you to be more careworn, like a

world-weary little girl, old before your time.”

“Careworn?” The word itself was amusing, but maybe it was just because I was drunk. The empty bottle of wine fell off the couch and rolled under. My arm swiped at it, but I missed and I was way too drunk to try again. I’d already bruised my shin trying to pour Nuttie his food. I was officially falling-down drunk.

“Well,” Emmie said, “not carefree.”

I guess that was true. Association with Jules was certainly not carefree, although it was discomfiting that Em to have perceived me this way.

I said, “Yeah.” I affected what I believed to be a careworn tone. “I learned early—earlier than I would have had to because of our family situation being so nice, and so relatively normal and unhateful—that a grandma could be a fucking bitch and that a mom could be a confused loser, a person who was in trouble herself and couldn’t be bothered to help you.” The tone of careworn had merged a bit with the tone of bitter, which just crept in whenever I thought of Nori, but I figured they went well together. Bitter and careworn: it sounded like an old-fashioned bouquet. A bouquet for a witches brew, tied with twine, thrown into a gleaming iron cauldron seasoned with the fat of dead newborns. *A bit of bitter, dearie, and careworn—careworn will cure what ails you.*

Emmie ignored my tone. She said, “And, of course, her dad.”

“Yeah,” I said. “There’s definitely that. A dad who has sex with you.” The buttons on the pillow were boring into my cheek, so I picked my head up but then I dropped the phone. I yelled to Em that I’d dropped her, but when I got the phone to my ear again, she was already talking.

“Well, and it’s true that Jules constituted a sort of loss of innocence for the whole

family. I think we all saw everything from the outside, if that makes sense. Because she entered our family at this totally conscious point in her life, and she reflected us back to ourselves, and we were like stageplayers when she came to live with us.”

I said, “We cleaned before the maid came, we showed the exchange student American family customs.” It sounded stupid to say so, but I hadn’t thought about this before, how Jules was something big to Emmie, too. I said, “Like we were filming reality TV.”

“Yeah. Exactly,” Emmie said. “And I think that fucked us up. As a unit.”

“A fucked up unit,” I said. A laughing jag was around the corner, I could feel it. I was at that final nice point of being drunk, the edge right before the cliff of tears.

“Mia, can I tell you something? At that barbecue thing years ago, Leslie was kind of drunk and she told me and Dora you’d been molested by a family member. She told me not to tell you. Is that true?”

I hesitated. Oh what the hell. I didn’t give a fuck anymore. I’d had this thin protecting membrane, my piñata, and I knew Em would whack it energetically if I didn’t answer honestly. I’d usually only been able to talk to men, and cry to men, but here was Emmie, asking directly, and here I was, too drunk to be careful anymore. Besides that, there was the phone, and all the miles between Burlington and Boston separating us.

“Well,” I began. “I’ve definitely told people that.”

Emmie said, “You’ve told people that? So it’s not true.”

“Well, it’s not literally true.”

“What do you mean?”

“I guess I mean it felt true.”

“But Dad never, I mean, never did anything, or Poppy—”

“No! I sort of, um, borrowed Jules’ dad.”

“Why would you lie about that?”

I said, “This is something I try to figure out all the time. Maybe I felt so disconnected from Jules when I went to college that I co-opted some of her life? She was always hanging out with you guys and not with me. It was so weird to me that she stayed in Newark and I moved away. She sort of took my place. I don’t know. I missed her? I wanted her attention or to actually be her? I don’t know. These are all just theories, Em.”

“So you lied to multiple people?”

“I wasn’t really thinking about it that way.” It was more than that, and I searched for a way to understand. “There’s no way to explain this to you. I just wanted to connect with people.” My words sounded unbearably lame even to my own ears. But there just wasn’t a more accurate answer. If there were, I’d tell Em.

“Does Jules know?”

“No,” I said. “And she’ll never find out because I’m forbidden to ever contact her again.”

“I think she’ll change her mind on that,” Emmie said.

“I don’t.”

“I guess Mom and Dad don’t know?”

I said, “No.” I wanted to tell Em how even though I’d told Jeff and Leslie it was my dad, I never actually thought of Dad when I said it, that it had nothing to do with him or Mom. Instead I said, “Don’t tell Merrie.”

“I wouldn’t. We all know Merrie is Daddy’s favorite, so this would just upset her.

She's never been so close to Jules."

I said, "I know. She would hate me." Then, "But I'm Daddy's favorite. Mer is Mom's favorite."

Emmie didn't say anything.

I said, "So you think I'm awful now." This desperate sort of pressure in my stomach mounted up through my chest. I felt lightheaded, and also like I might throw up. That's the thing about lying, it felt bad, but then to give up the lie was a physical wrenching. It hurt to disconnect from it, like losing an organ you needed.

"No," Emmie said. "I think you're interesting. How come I never knew that?"

I laughed because it was such a nice fucking thing to say to me right then. "Emmie takes the pressure off the conversation." My body had dropped back to normal, as if it had taken a dive from a tall building and landed in a recliner.

"Somebody had to; this level of intensity is not sustainable, even for me. And I'm a therapist!" She laughed, and I was struck by her laugh. It was Mom's laugh. I'd have to tell Mom that when I wasn't so drunk.

She said, "Well. It makes sense that any conversation about Jules would be intense since Jules is one of the most intense people I've ever met. And we can talk about this more later, if you want." She continued, "If I call her, do you think she'll talk to me?"

"Didn't she tell you not to contact her?"

"You already know she did. But my question is, do you think she'd take my call?"

"No. She wouldn't take Mom's call. Mom said she keeps getting her voicemail."

"Mom told me. But," Emmie said, "I'm not Mom."

"That is true."

Emmie continued, “So she might talk to me, I might be less threatening.”

“You might be the only one who could do it. I don’t see Mer calling. Mom couldn’t. I can’t imagine Dad *would* call her. I obviously can’t since I was specifically instructed not to by formal request. Parcel post and shit.”

“That’s what I mean. I’m the least charged presence,” Emmie said. “Would it make you, um, feel better if I called her? To check on her?”

I’d betrayed Jules over and over again, I let my own inadequate ability to deal intimately with others take over and use her. I told Emmie that.

She said, “But you were pretty much a kid. Everybody knows you love Jules. I wouldn’t be so hard on myself.”

I wanted to say: I was a kid, yes, and I know the line of argument. I won’t argue against it. Kids don’t have responsibility, yada yada. But these arguments fall apart. Kids may not know, but they sometimes *know*. When a stranger in an alley rapes an eleven year-old violently and she screams and tries to get away, it’s different than when her gymnastics coach pressures her to have sex with him on his desk and coerces her and she’s scared of him but loves him too.

Daddy’s little girl, sitting on his lap, curious and doe-eyed and white-panty innocent with a bold streak. Wants Daddy to love her best. Why is this a common fantasy? If you think men made this up, are solely responsible for its endurance and creation, you don’t respect women. And you don’t respect kids.

But I didn’t say any of this out loud to Emmie. She would have just argued the way I know she would. She would have said I needed Jules not be a victim, she’d say some therapist thing to me about why I needed to twist things from the acceptable perspective.

She'd tell me I was drunk.

"Yeah, don't call her, Em," I said. "She'll call us if she needs us. She always does."

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Bored, the day off winding around my legs and up, practically choking. I called Jules. No preamble; amuse me. I said, "Let's get high and talk. Tell me something you do. Like, I smell the crotch of my underwear every time I go to the bathroom."

Jules said, "You do?"

"Sure."

"I do sometimes," Jules said. "Why I wonder."

I said, "I don't like or dislike the smell, even if I'm kinda dirty. It's not like your own farts which are always more permissible—less gag-inducing than other people's farts—it's sort of like that but not really."

Jules offered, "I smell my hands if I eat something good."

"Boring."

Jules' voice acknowledged this fact. "But sort of white trashy nonetheless."

"Um, more?" I needed something, some kind of revelation. Sometimes I felt greedy for other people's stuff.

"I clean my fingernails in public," Jules said. "I pick at skin. I love scabs."

"Especially boring because I know those already." But I felt better.

"So something you don't talk about that's weird and bodily?" she asked.

I could hear her take a hit. Thank God for her schedule. Every time I want her practically, she can talk. "No criteria have been set," I said. "Just something."

“But you’ve shot me down,” she said.

“I have,” I agreed. I took a hit. I couldn’t bear the hours of my day alone and unmedicated.

“OK,” said Jules. I could hear she’d thought of something to amuse me. There’s nothing on TV, nothing on the Internet, I’d already read the paper, I didn’t want to leave the house and wander around. Days off don’t suit me.

“OK, I had my pubes glued together by stuff one time and breaking it apart was sort of good pain.”

“Good pain *is* good,” I agreed.

Jules asked, “So is that enough?”

“If you want to stop playing,” I said, “stop.”

“It’s a game. OK. I’ve been constipated and pulled my own poop out with my finger.”

This is what I’m talking about. I’m actually slightly—ever so slightly—shocked.

“Ew,” I said.

“You asked,” Jules said.

“Never did I ask you about your poo.”

“OK, here’s one,” Jules said. “You know the gap between my teeth?”

“Lauren Hutton, uh huh.”

“I have to maintain constant vigilance about food being stuck. And I don’t always have floss handy.”

I said, “Constant v.” Like *constantly* but with a drunk old socialite slurring quality: *constantvee*.

“Huh?”

“Vigilance. Constant v.”

“Sorry?” I heard Jules take another hit. I wondered what she was going to do today, and what she’d been doing, but I’d rather talk about nothing.

“I have to maintain constant vigilance? V?”

“Oh,” Jules said.

“So you have to maintain the constant v. What do you do?”

Jules said, “I tear off ribbons of plastic bags and use them to floss.”

“That’s the kind of info I’m after,” I said

Jules said, “Constantvee, dahling.” And my heart—I can’t explain it any better—sort of swelled up with love for her. I wondered if anything got communicated this way, anything of substance, but the ability to easily make little jokes together, understand them nearly effortlessly, it was rare. I knew it was.

Jules continued, “And the bags are, like, from the floor and shit. Or from the trash, the ground. Yesterday I used a piece of an old Taco Bell bag from the floor of the car.”

“Exactly what I’m after,” I said. “Even better than your poo.”

“Well, you started out with your vagina.” Jules laughed. “As usual.”

“That I did.”

Jules asked, “So am I going to be in some sociology paper now? Gross habits of formerly psychotic incest survivor artists: Case Studies?”

“I’m quitting. I can’t even think of anything I’d want to research,” I said. “I’m going to find something else to do after this semester. I’m done with school.” I felt very sure and strong as I said this, but still, I took another hit. There’s a little quiver or

misgiving, something in me that feels like I don't want to do it, I know for certain that I don't want to do it, but, still, I *am* giving up. "Maybe I'll open a garden store. Or a landscaping business. Or a restaurant. I'd be a good business owner."

"OK," Jules said. I blessed her for not saying I should finish. But then she said, "I'd be in it. You could interview *me*."

"I am interviewing you," I pointed out.

"I'm not making you want to stay in school?" she asked. She laughed, and it was the laugh of someone who understood what she wanted to do with her time. She wanted to make art, and talk about art. And teach pretentious poser college kids about art. And that's all she'd ever wanted to do.

"You have so much stupid clarity," I said.

"Yeah," Jules said. "Don't get too jealous. That's only how it looks from the outside."

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"Perfect timing," I said into the phone. "I was about to call you to check on when you're getting here."

"Yes, about that. I have a little change of plans."

"You're not coming," I said.

"Just not this weekend," Jules said. "I'll come soon, I promise."

"You keep saying that," I said.

"I'm sorry, it's just been crazy busy."

"But we've been planning this weekend for forever."

“I know, but I’ll come soon. Don’t be mad at me. Are you mad at me?”

I said, “Not mad, but you promised. I have all this stuff to show you.”

“You can show me when I come in a couple weeks. Or a month? We’ll have to look at our calendars.”

I held the phone away from my face so she wouldn’t hear me crying. I’d just closed on the perfect building, and I had the contractor all set up to renovate the first floor for my restaurant. I’d be able to open in less than a year. I hadn’t told Jules I’d found the building because I wanted it to be a surprise for her visit. I figured she’d help me plan out how to use the second and third floor living space. They could be apartments that I’d rent, but I could also just live there, above my own restaurant.

I remembered what Mom had said to me in high school: *It’s hard to love someone more than they love you.* At the time I’d nodded assent, like yes, it’s hard, but even then I’d thought, that’s not what’s happening. She loves me as much as I love her.

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Jules said, “This is an awesome living space. I would totally make the third floor a studio.” The third floor was pretty much one big room, lined with windows, with a small bathroom.

“I was thinking I’d get a roommate. Help offset some of the initial restaurant opening costs.”

“Why? You’ve got plenty of money. You said the restaurant didn’t have to make money for two years and you’d still be OK.”

“Yeah, but then my money might be pretty much gone.” Depending on how I

invested, I might still have money even if my restaurant failed, but I didn't like how she acted so cavalier about it. It was a big deal to have this money, and I didn't want to just run through it. I knew Grandma would have loved this building, though, and the idea of my restaurant.

Jules said, "So you've got the business space downstairs, and it doesn't need that much renovating. What are you going to do with this up here?"

"It could be my bedroom, and then I'd have more privacy, but I'd have to walk through the roommate's space on the second floor."

"Do you want to be the intruder or do you want to be intruded upon?"

"It seems like I'd have more space if I were on the floor with the living room and the kitchen," I said. "I guess I'd rather be intruded upon."

"Interesting," Jules said. "I'd have to be the intruder and pick the third floor since it's so huge and has this amazing light."

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I said, "Here's a perfect example. As an aside I say something about hating to wash out the dairy product recycling. To be friendly. This was last night. Because she's washing out the dairy recycling, like a sour cream container."

"Right," Jules said.

"And she's all, *I don't hate washing out any recyclable or reusable product—*"

Jules said, "Oh God."

I said, "Exactly. And we're so *blessed* to be allowed to have the choice to pick out sour cream randomly year-round 24/7 and at the store we're *able* to decide upon organic,

to decide upon the reduced fat—as opposed to the fat free, which she doesn’t care for—”

Jules said, “And her tone was like, the audacity of me to not care for fat-free when people in the third world don’t have the fat-free choice.”

“You know? And also as opposed to the full fat which she avoids because she’s been given the dubious privilege of having that kind of narcissism about her weight and her appearance and her health be central to her concerns.”

“So, more a sanctimonious home-schooled girl than a shy Dungeons and Dragons one?”

“Melanie is an interesting one because she has the whole gamut of the home-schooled thing going for her: that sort of bucktoothed, colt-legged smart girl with this kind of homely Ivory girl country-living glow and the too-quick answers. The wit that doesn’t quite match normal people, like she’s a stand-up act for the Amish.”

Jules laughed.

I said, “But she has the whole ski-granola Vermont thing, too.”

“That sounds too horrible for words,” Jules said. “Off with her head.”

“Six-month lease.”

Jules said, “So what? You’re the landlord. And clearly I’m the only roommate you can tolerate.”

“It’s a contract,” I said. What I didn’t say: At least I don’t have to take care of Melanie.

“So get rid of her in six months. Chop down the wall and spread out.”

I said, “You know? Fuck living reasonably. I’ve got the money.”

“Also your home office-y area will need to expand a lot soon,” Jules said. “Have

you ever seen a non-cluttered, non-crazy restaurant office?”

I said, “Katja’s.”

“Not really, it was bulimic. In and then out.”

I said, “It was schizo.”

“Just like Katja.”

“But the messy thing may have less to do with space restaurants afford their offices and more to do with common personality traits of restaurant managers overall. Because I’ve seen pretty spacious offices, big enough, for sure.”

“You would know better than I would. I defer.”

“I’ve definitely hung out in restaurants more than you,” I said.

“Hey, I eat in them.”

“Maybe I’m just not used to having a roommate?”

“That’s a good point,” Jules said. “You haven’t had one in years.”

I said, “Get rid of Melanie when I can, I guess.”

“Besides,” Jules said, “what a dumb name. Melanie.”

I said, “Maybe she’ll grow on me.”

Jules said, “Let’s not kid ourselves. It is true you get stuck with the crazy ones. Not everything is your fault.”

“Thank you.”

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Jules began, “I read that the handwriting analysis can’t discount Burke.”

I said, “But what’s his motive?”

“He’s sick,” she said. “He’s a sick fuck.” We were eating leftovers from Thanksgiving, and we were all on TV trays in the living room.

Dad said, “Isn’t it enough we are discussing this salacious case at the dinner table.” But Dad wasn’t stupid. He understood what we were all doing; no one was ever going to be able to mention any murdered little abused girls until Jules did it first. She was just trying to make things less awkward for all of us.

Emmie said, “We’re not at the dinner table.”

“That’s another thing,” Dad said. “It’s your TV show we’re watching, girls, and I’d think the slender window of opportunity for discussion that the commercials afford us could be spent more productively. And with less foul language.” He said it mildly, though, and he looked at each of us in turn, even though Emmie and I hadn’t said a word, and of course Merrie didn’t even know what *fuck* was since she was against cursing and learning the curse word meaning. Of course, the only one totally immune from reproof was Jules.

When she’d first moved in, Jules had been worried about getting in trouble with my parents, or getting me in trouble, or making my parents feel like she was a bad influence. I’d had to convince her that any indication she was damaged or angry would just increase Mom and Dad’s devotion. I knew logically that it wasn’t reasonable for me to be unhappy about the outcome I’d worked for. It was extra weird since she was at home more than I was. She could come over and do laundry if she wanted, and I knew she did do that every few weeks. When I came home to visit, she was just another one of the people who hadn’t left.

“I didn’t say anything,” I said. Despite my ambivalence, I still liked to show Jules

that it really wouldn't get her in any trouble. She could be implicated separately in something, get off unscathed, and then I didn't get in trouble either.

Dad said, "I didn't say you did."

"You said 'girls.' Plural."

"Habit of speech," Dad said. "Slip of the tongue. I apologize for offending you." He turned to Jules. "Where are you reading this?"

Jules said, "*The Enquirer*."

Mom said, "*The National Enquirer*?"

Jules said, "Inquiring minds want to know." She looked at me.

I said, "I want to know."

Dad said, "Those tabloids are what's sick in this case."

"Not whoever raped and strangled that little girl?" Mom said.

Dad said, "They raped her?"

"Maybe," Jules said. "There's conflicting evidence."

"There were abrasions on her vagina and blood in her underwear," I explained.

"But it's inconclusive."

Dad said, "I can't believe I'm having this conversation."

Mom said, "Whoever did it, what's sick are those parents dressing her up like a whore-baby doll and prancing her around. I'm sorry, Merrie, sometimes strong language is called for. Pedophiles go to those pageants, you know. They know about them, they go to those things. And fairs, playgrounds, youth groups, wherever kids hang out."

"I'm sure they had her best interests at heart," Dad said.

I said, "I'm not. How is it in her interests?"

“Girls are different. Some like to dress up. That kid looked pretty girlie to me.”

Mom said, “You are blindingly obtuse sometimes. All of those photos were from pageants.”

“That doesn’t disprove she was an enthusiastic participant,” Dad said.

“It’s called pleasing your parents,” Mom said.

“It’s that sick fuck—sorry, that sick mother stage mom,” I said. “What can I say instead of fuck? Sick fuck is my new signature phrase.”

“Mine, too,” Jules said.

Mom laughed.

Dad said, “You can say sicko. That has the same syllabic count as sick you-know.”

I said, “Sicko doesn’t pack the same punch.”

Dad said, “You shouldn’t waste money and time on those tabloids.”

“It’s my money,” Jules said, “and I earned it. I’ll spend it how I want to.”

“Of course you can spend your money how you want, but do you want to support that stuff is the question,” Mom said.

I said to Dad, “Unless you think she ought to give you that money to pay you back for what you spend on her.” I used a worried tone, like that was what Dad actually thought.

Mom said, “Mia. Nobody thinks that.”

“But saving is good,” Dad said. “Being a college student isn’t too early to start saving. Retirement is expensive, a house is expensive, kids are expensive. You could be saving your money.”

“I could be,” Jules agreed.

“If you want a boat like I do,” Merrie said. “That’s expensive.”

“But you’re not saving,” I said. I said it sing-songy.

“I do save money,” Jules said. “And I never asked anybody to spend money on me.

All of these choices were made over my head.”

She was talking to me, but Mom answered her. “Nobody thinks you did.” Then she announced to everyone she was getting the carrot cake out. “Money is not our issue.”

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“I think I’d like to go to Hebrew school,” Merrie said. “Like with the other kids from temple.”

I kicked Jules under the table. She smiled a smothered smile at me. I worked on carefully stabbing one pea with each tine of my fork. I’d read about creamed peas in one of the *Anne of Green Gables* books when I was little, so we were doing our best to eat them. But they were fairly nasty.

“OK,” Dad said.

At the same moment, Mom said, “So you’re going to be the one.” She sighed, and her tone was so much like Eeyore’s that I laughed.

Dad said, “What one?” But it was obvious he knew what Mom was saying.

“The one who rebels by being religious.”

“Lida please.”

“Please what?”

“Please don’t alienate our daughter who wants to learn about her heritage? For

starters.”

Dad looked like he was planning to say more, but I didn't want them to fight, so I said maybe I might want to stop going to temple even on holidays and that maybe Mom would love me best then. Jules laughed, and that seemed to snap Mom out of it and she hugged Merrie. Merrie, who knew exactly what she was doing with her request, returned Mom's awkward, over the chair/avoiding the dinner plate hug.

“I'll call Rabbi Lapin later and get you signed up.” She started to lift her fork to her mouth, but then she put it down. “Is there a special reason you want to go, Mer?”

Merrie wasn't one to accept the overture of a hug. Not if she had Dad on her side. “Will it make you mad at me, Mommy?”

I pretended to gag, and Jules gave up all pretense of not laughing. We started to giggle really hard, like verge of a laughing gag hard, verge of hysterics hard.

Dad shot me a disgusted look. “You two can go upstairs if you're done.”

I said, “I'm still eating.” I held up my plate for proof, but I was laughing the whole time I was talking. “Look at all I have to finish.”

“Don't spit out your food, Mia,” Jules managed to say. “Even those creamed peas would feed an Ethiopian baby.”

“You know, it's better to participate in your family than to be a peanut gallery,” Dad said.

“What are you talking about?”

Dad said, “You know what I'm talking about. I'm well aware of how teenagers are always critiquing. Sitting off to the side.”

“Maybe you need to change jobs,” I said. I was still giggling, but Jules had sobered

up. "Cause it sounds like you hate teenagers and we're your bread and butter."

Em said, "Merrie. Do your other friends say *Mommy*?"

"Actually, yes. You stop saying Mommy in, like, fourth grade. Dummy."

"I was just asking because we all stopped when we were younger than you. I mean, it's kind of childish sounding."

When Merrie shoved Em, Dad took his plate to the living room. The TV came on, and Peter Jennings said something about Ken Starr, special prosecutor.

Merrie said, "Is Daddy mad at me?"

"Is Daddy mad at me?" Emmie mimicked.

"Girls. Jesus Christ," Mom said. "Of course I won't be mad at you, Mer. You know how Daddy and I feel about religion, so I'm just curious about why you'd want to go. Your sisters hated Hebrew school, so I was just trying to save you from a failed experiment."

Merrie said, "All the other kids go."

Emmie said, "Yeah, I'm glad Mom loved me enough to send me. Maybe she doesn't want you to have the party."

"What other kids?" I said. "There are, like, two Jews in town."

"The other kids at temple, dummy. They all go." Then, "*You* went. Emmie went. It's not fair. I want to go, too."

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Jules said, "Em's news is always, like, there's a tree in my yard with an unusual

number of birds living in it. Like truly boring observations and musings from her little world. At least Merrie always has *news*.”

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“Who do you think is the craziest member of your family?” Jules asked Grandma.

No one looked at anyone. It was all *honey you’re so clever* now. That was what we called it, clever honey for short. Jules could do whatever she wanted now that everyone in my family knew. She was never going to be in trouble again.

I couldn’t wait to hear the answer. It was my question. We were going to start slow and work our way up to the truly offensive and hilarious.

Grandma said, “Honey, do you mean mentally ill or just wild?” We were right: she didn’t miss a beat, didn’t bat an eye. She knew all about Jules, and she was going to dish some dirt, and maybe there’d be a fight.

“Not ill necessarily,” Jules said. “Just crazy.”

“Uncle Bobby,” Dad said. Mom and Grandma immediately glared at him. I was pleased, but surprised. I hadn’t expected Dad to help us out. He usually kept pretty quiet at Grandma and Poppy’s.

Grandma said, “Dan, I’m surprised by that. Bobby’s had a tough time sometimes but he’s not what I’d call crazy.”

“I think it might be me, Jules,” Mom said, clearly looking to diffuse the situation. “I once jumped off the roof of a two-story building for no good reason.”

Grandma said, “That you did.” She seemed happy to have Mom try to keep the

peace. Jules told me later I looked like a cinnamon red hot.

“That’s what you’re calling crazy?” I said. “Everybody knows that story. You were five and Uncle Bobby dared you. How original. How crazy. And Uncle Bobby told us at Poppy’s funeral that he’d never had sex with Aunt Joy and she’s probably a lez and maybe he married her so he wouldn’t have to deal with any of that.” Mom looked murderous and Grandma had shiny eyes because Poppy had just died last year and she was still very sad and Dad looked at Mom like he knew he’d messed everything up and had his sorry face and Jules pinched me, but I was so mad. I said, “Oooh, let’s see, who’s crazier? Just based on that one thing.”

“Honey,” Mom said, not sounding like I was her honey. “Your Uncle Bobby had a lot to drink before the funeral. It was a hard time. He probably didn’t know what he was saying. You haven’t met him enough times when he’s not drinking, but he’s a pretty normal guy.”

Grandma left the room.

“Now you’ve upset your grandma,” Mom said. “You know better than to bring up Poppy’s funeral. What’s wrong with you?”

“Me?” I said. “What about Dad? He’s the one who said Uncle Bobby.” No one said anything about Jules.

“Whose funeral?” Jules asked.

I thought: Oh, bless you Jules.

“Whose what, honey?” Mom asked.

“Funeral,” Jules said. “You said you were at a funeral.”

“That was Poppy Zayda,” Dad said. “You never met him, did you Jules? We’ve got

some great stories about Poppy Zayda. Lida, maybe you should get your mom back here since she tells the best stories.”

Later, after we’d heard some stories about Grandma and Poppy growing up in a tiny village in Czechoslovakia and Jules had again deftly turned the conversation, this time to the food that was all over Merrie’s sleepers, and we were all getting our coats and going to the bathroom and saying goodbye to Grandma, Jules asked me privately, “Why would your uncle not have to deal with anything if your aunt was lesbian?”

I said, “I think he means sex.”

“But men like sex.”

“I don’t know,” I said, thinking. “Not Uncle Bobby. But he’s fat and maybe it’s hard for him to do it.”

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Grandma said, “Your Poppy was smart, of course he was, you can’t get the places he did without that kind of intelligence. But the blacks aren’t lacking in native intelligence, at least no more than any other group. Some Czechs are stupid, just like blacks. It’s more a motivation problem for them. Your Poppy came here with nothing. I mean nothing. No money, no English, no friends. Our families gone. Me to support. And he made it because he wanted to and he worked hard.”

I’m not sure I ever heard my grandmother make a mistake in her English. She had an accent, but her English was perfect. Poppy’s was slightly less so. He’d had the typical problems native Czech speakers have with English: mangling prepositions and use of awkward phrases like “according to my opinion,” which he said all the time. Mom said

that her parents left Czechoslovakia with a feeling of the wind behind them and that their fierce determination was equal to their feeling of luck, of having escaped the Nazis. Their parents, their siblings, their neighbors and friends, many of them dead or missing. She always said not to ask Grandma about it, but of course then I did anyway.

I'd checked out several library books about children who hid in attics and children who left their cities on trains, and I often imagined Grandma in these stories. We were working in the garden, and we were drinking glasses of water. Grandma's water was more elegant than regular water, maybe because she made a ceremony out of even a water break. The tall pitcher on the little table by the butterfly garden. The thin glasses.

I said, "Tell me something about growing up in Czechoslovakia."

"Necessity mothers invention," Grandma said. "Czech food is all about sauces. Make an excellent sauce and you can disguise older or lesser cuts of meat."

I said, "We have good cuts of meat though. Not old."

Grandma said, "But this is good for when you don't."

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On TV, a joke about the Jewish big nose. Jules asked about it. I wasn't aware of this line of humor either, although I must have heard it before. Mom said people often make fun of Jewish noses. She said it sort of dismissively, like it didn't matter much. She was sitting in her winged armchair with the matching overstuffed ottoman that looked like a fat red pincushion for giants. Only Mom never had her feet on the ottoman; it was always filled with some task she was working on. Tonight she was labeling file folders for new clients. I liked to help with that, something about fitting the new sticker over the

old was satisfying to me, but I didn't want to do it when Jules was sleeping over. It didn't seem like something anyone else would think was fun. Mom, who was good about sensing such things, didn't mention it.

Jules said, "But your noses are normal." She looked at each of us. "Maybe a tiny bit bigger than average. Yours has a little bump on it," she said to me. I felt my nose. I knew about the bump already.

Mom laughed. "This is refreshing," she said.

Dad looked less than pleased. "You know these kinds of jokes aren't considered very nice, right Jules?"

"Oh, I can tell," Jules said seriously.

These kinds of jokes, so there must be more. I asked, "What other jokes are there?"

Mom said, "There are a lot of jokes about Jewish people, some of them are very offensive." She said it in a serious voice, but then she looked at Dad and did what was visible to me throughout my childhood, she gathered strength from his disapproval. It was like she took in a big breath of disapproval-flavored air that filled her out all over. "There are even jokes about the Holocaust, which is one of the most recent Jewish tragedies. We joke about old events but new events take time to be OK to find humor in. But it's very important for people to be able to connect with laughter after a tragedy. It's called gallows humor and people in tough circumstances need it to survive."

"Lida," said Dad. He was sitting next to me on the sofa and as usual, he seemed totally relaxed except for his foot, which he jiggled up and down.

"What?"

"You're teaching them that we need to make jokes about the Holocaust to survive?"

“It’s true, look at history.”

“I don’t want to look at history,” Dad said. “I’m at home, relaxing.”

Jules was sitting on the floor watching the back-and-forth of Mom and Dad. I knew they weren’t mad, but I was a little embarrassed anyway. They loved to argue without getting mad. Mom said it was because an academic and a lawyer made a bad pair.

Mom said, “It’s a beautiful thing, coping with humor. It’s inspiring to me, it speaks to the resiliency of people, that fight to regain joy in their lives, and the ability to laugh again, even if it’s a grim laughter. It’s beautiful,” Mom insisted, “whether you’re making fun of the Holocaust or the death of a single person.”

“Girls,” Dad said. “Go upstairs.”

Jules stood immediately, but I remained seated. “Why?” I asked.

“Just go,” Dad said.

“This is life, Dan, whether you like it or not,” Mom said. She had started to raise her voice over the TV. “It’s beautiful to be able to keep going, and I’m trying to pass this good news on to our daughter and her friend.”

Dad said, “Making fun of dead people is not the good news I want passed on to our girls. Mia, take Jules upstairs for a while, OK honey? We’ll go get pizza in a bit when your sisters wake up from their naps.”

We could hear them talking as we climbed the stairs.

“As usual, you’re not listening to what I’m actually saying. I am *not* encouraging them to make these jokes,” Mom said. “I am simply explaining a fundamental and beautiful method humans have used since forever to reclaim joy in the aftermath of unfathomable tragedy.”

Dad said, "Whatever you want to tell yourself so you can sleep at night. I didn't know you hated yourself that much."

"I don't hate myself at all," Mom said. Jules was still standing at the base of the stairs watching my parents as if she were at a ping-pong match, and Mom must have turned around and seen her. "Girls, go upstairs."

"I'm sorry," said Jules. She turned towards me with a stricken look on her face. I started to reassure her that we weren't in trouble, but Mom interrupted.

"Oh, honey," Mom called. "Don't apologize. See what you've done, Dan? Now you've scared her."

"Are they really fighting?" Jules asked me. She did look kind of scared, which made me feel defensive of Mom and Dad and strangely angry at her.

I said, "No." I almost added, "If they fight, you'll know for sure," but I thought better of it. Instead I said, "This is just what they like to do. Mom's a lawyer, so it's her job to argue."

Then I asked Jules a question as we were making our way up the stairs to distract her from Mom and Dad. "What jokes are there about Christians?"

Jules said, "I don't know." She stopped climbing the stairs and thought. Finally she said, "I think I heard that Christians are supposed to like mayonnaise. There was some joke about sandwiches and mustard that I heard."

"I don't like mayonnaise."

"What about tuna salad? That has mayonnaise," said Jules. "You eat that all the time."

I couldn't argue about that. Maybe I had some Christian in me. I said, "Jews are

allowed to eat mayonnaise.”

Jules said, “Everybody’s allowed to eat mayonnaise.”

“Real Jews can’t eat pork.”

“Ever?”

“No, not if you keep kosher.”

“You’re not really Jewish?”

“Anyone whose mom is Jewish is Jewish. But we don’t practice because Mom thinks religion makes people stop thinking for themselves.”

“What do you mean practice?”

“We don’t go to temple and we just eat normally and stuff. We only do holidays at my Grandma and Poppy’s house.”

Jules said, “We don’t go to church either. I guess we don’t practice either.”

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Mer came home from law school for her first Thanksgiving break with a sleek new haircut, a fast-track plan to being a rich corporate lawyer, an almost palpable Jewishness that I figured was bound to annoy Mom, and a bunch of excellent weed. “California,” she said when I raised my eyebrows.

“Want to get high?” Mer said to Em.

“Well I like that idea a lot,” Em said.

“Me, too,” I said.

“You looked all Judge Wapner,” Merrie said. “I figured you wouldn’t want any.”

Em laughed. “Mia smokes, you dope.”

“Not really anymore,” I said. “Now that I’ll be an upstanding member of the business community.”

“But you will, right?” Em said, and I nodded.

“Whatever,” Merrie said. “We have to get Mom, too.”

I said, “Um,” and looked to Em for backup.

“Great idea,” Em said. “I got this.” She ran upstairs calling to Mom. Merrie started breaking up the weed on the counter.

I said, “What if Mom’s not cool with this?” There was probably a quarter on the kitchen counter. Even from far away, I could see dense white-purple crystals and spider limbs of brown curling all over it.

“It’s me,” Merrie said. She was probably right was the annoying part.

Em returned dragging Mom behind her. I was stone cold sober, but the picture of Em with her incredibly ugly purple paisley blouse and her brown wide-wale corduroys eagerly getting Mom, all pink and excited looking and hand-in-hand with Em—I couldn’t help laughing. Really hard.

“You OK there, Mia?” Em asked. “Been pre-gaming?” I guessed since I’d quit that Em was the smoker out of the two of us, even though you wouldn’t know to look at her. Dora loved to get high, and Em loved to do whatever Dora loved to do. Em could be kind of an energetic maniac high though, and I wondered if Mom would be the same. She and Emmie were so alike in certain ways. I’d never gotten high with Mer before, so I had no idea how she’d act.

Merrie just grinned at me until I said, “OK, Mer, I surrender.” It was true, Mom wanted Mer to like her again. An invite to get high was a good sign.

“I’m glad we’re in the kitchen if we get hungry,” Emmie said. “What kind is it Mer?”

“Sativa strain, mostly sativa. It’s called Artic Sun. Very cerebral high, little bit of a body high, very fast-acting, too. Smell it.” She passed the bag to Em, who made an orgasm face.

“I want to smell,” I said. “Oh my God, pine forest.”

Mom said, “How did you carry that on the plane?”

“I never reveal my secrets,” Merrie said.

“Blowjobs for all the baggage inspectors,” I said. Merrie passed me a—I had to admit—beautifully rolled joint and a lighter.

“I’m honored,” I said, lit it, inhaled, and passed to Mom. We all sat around the kitchen island.

“Good thing your father isn’t here,” Mom said, looking at the joint and sniffing it before she hit it. “He hates the smell.”

Mom coughed a bit after her turn and Em practically sprinted to the sink for water. I thought then how Em was an awesome person to get high with because she was such a caretaker. I could relax.

Merrie inhaled deeply and passed it back to me. I said, “How high is this going to get me?”

“Pretty fucking high,” Merrie said.

“Good deal,” I said and took the biggest hit I could and gave it to Mom. “Go easy, Mom,” I said.

Out of nowhere, Mom goes, “What I can’t stand is people calling me cute all the

time. I'm a grown woman. I'm not cute."

"Fantastic," Merrie said. "Keep going with this idea, Mom."

"It's cause you're short," Em said.

"I know why."

I said, "I get it too, Mom."

Mom said, "Well you and I are twins, except mother and daughter."

Merrie nodded vigorously as she took a hit. "And we have no idea where the hell Emmie came from."

"I have a German peasant woman thing going on. I'm sturdy."

None of us wanted to confirm this, I could tell.

Emmie repeated, "I look Germanic. Like a stocky peasant. Housefrau." She stood up and gestured at her body. "Maybe Grandma got raped by a Nazi soldier." This idea sent her into a gale of giggles. I looked at Mom to check how this horrible remark about Grandma had gone over, but Mom was just squinting at Em.

Merrie said, "Are you making anti-Semitic jokes because I've embraced my Jewish heritage?"

"Embraced my—" Em said, through her laughter.

I said, "Kinda rough on Grandma, Em."

Mom said, "It's not even logical—I had you, so how would that even work?"

Em said, "Recessive genes."

I said, "Jesus, Em," but all of us were giggling now, even Merrie.

"Buzz kill," Em said. "Sorry. Besides, I don't self-identify as particularly Jewish—sorry, Mer."

“Doesn’t matter what you identify as. You are particularly Jewish, Mom is Jewish, we’re all Jewish.”

“To me, faith is something you enter into willingly.”

“Shows what you know about faith; it chooses you.”

“Wait until I get cancer,” Emmie said. “If I get faith then, we’ll see.”

Merrie said, “You’re going to feel bad.”

I said, “Hopefully, we’ll all feel bad when you get cancer, Em.”

Mom said, “That’s what my client and I were discussing. She said she shouldn’t even be black since she’s a little bit of everything, but once you look black that’s who you are.” She picked up the roach and tried to light it again, burning her finger and yelping.

“I’ve got tons, Mom,” Merrie said. “Don’t even worry.” She started to roll another, and I was impressed by her dexterity. My joints were always messy little art projects, but Mer could roll them for a living.

Mom said, “You girls are from the Ferraro-for-VP era, you’ll see a woman president, and it won’t surprise you. Hillary has too much baggage, and I never trusted them after all that Juanita Broaddrick stuff came out. But another woman, soon.”

Em said, “I don’t think he raped anyone, he’s just a gross horndog. Major male privilege.”

I wanted to laugh about horndog, but the high was making me focus. I had a thought and I said, “Geraldine Ferraro is a cunt.”

“Well, she’s a poor rhetorician,” Mom said.

“But if you’re not good with rhetoric, that’s a problem for a politician.”

Mom said, “You fail at your job. You need a new gig. It’s like, step off son. Go home.”

Em said, “I love how jive-y Mom gets when she’s high.”

Mom said, “That’s not jive-y.” In this suddenly serious and disapproving tone that made me laugh, as if she were saying Em was being a racist.

I said, “Son.” Mom shrugged.

To Merrie, Em said, “I knew Mom would be fun. She was OK with my Grandma rape joke.”

“There was doubt of my fun-ness?” Mom said. “No, don’t tell me. I’m just glad to be invited.” She squeezed Mer’s shoulder.

I rolled my eyes at Emmie. The last thing I needed was Mom crying about how much she wants to reconnect with Mer.

I said, “Emmie gets retarded when she smokes, Mom.” Mer nodded vigorously and smiled at Mom. Good for Mer; she knows a buzz kill when she sees it coming. I turned back to Em. “Of course Em loved Grandma a ton.”

“Even if a Nazi did rape her,” Mom said.

Em said, “Oh, Mom, or she had a *romance* with a Nazi officer. I didn’t mean rape, I shouldn’t have said it. That was insensitive.”

“Way to go,” Mer said. She was the only one not laughing. “As if that’s the only upsetting element. I tell my friends how much my family talks about sexual violence in this *casual* way and nobody believes me.”

I thought about that. I said, “Because of Jules,” and Em nodded at me.

“It’s not taboo for us,” Em said. “Because it was important to Jules for it not to be.”

“After Dad and I finalized the divorce,” Mom said, “I went to a mass after I signed the papers and took communion but I’m not Catholic. And I thought, you’re not Catholic, this is bizarre. But why not? I wanted the experience. Oh! And I pissed in a fountain.”

Merrie said, “Like where? Where are fountains except at the mall?”

Mom said, “A water fountain,” and we all dissolved in giggles.

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Ben said, “I tried to give the impression I came from a totally different type of family. My parents are the weird artists and my freshman year I sometimes pretended this picture of my aunt and uncle who are a banker and a travel agent were my parents.”

“You wanted to seem more normal.”

“Exactly. It’s a thing. Guys are always lying about getting laid over summer vacation at the family’s beach house. Or I threw a football this far one time.” He shrugged as if my confession weren’t a big deal, which was both the most immense relief and the most immense disappointment. “Everybody makes themselves up in college.”

“That’s bragging. Making yourself sound better. I’m talking about the opposite.”

“It’s not really the opposite. You wanted a story that made you up. Distinguished you.”

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I ended up at McDonald’s anyway since that was the easiest place for her to find me. I’d been too nervous to really enjoy looking around, although I did eat a peach and

ham turnover that I was going to have to try to recreate at home. I sat in the McDonald's Play Garden at a smooth fiberglass table. No kids were around, so I stared at the empty equipment with an untouched cup of horrible coffee. When Jules walked up, she seemed OK. Composed. She wasn't crying, although I couldn't imagine her body had the capacity to make more tears. "What happened?"

She didn't sit down. She jerked her head towards the door, like *let's go*. She walked quickly through the doors, and I followed her. "Nothing," she said. "He didn't recognize me. So nothing happened. Are you ready to go?"

"I'm happy to leave McDonald's, believe me." I stepped off the curb and tripped, fell facedown on the asphalt of the parking lot. "Shit."

Jules pointed. I'd landed next to a band-aid stuck on the ground. "Like the road is hurt. I wish I had my camera."

"What about, *is Mia OK?* Who just fell?"

"Are you OK?"

I inspected my palms. Not even skinned. "Yes."

We got in the car, me in the driver's seat automatically. I wasn't even going to ask her to help drive home. "Did you tell him who you were?"

"I think he was pretending. I look the same, right?"

"You look a lot like you did six years ago, yes."

"I knocked on his door and I thought I was going to throw up. And then he said, *Can I help you?* And I lost my nerve. Or I decided I didn't need to push it."

"Is his house awful?"

“It’s just a little house. He looked the same,” she said. She let out a deep sigh. “I feel much calmer.”

“OK, well, do you want to go home? Or stay around here awhile? Are you hungry?” I was on the highway, but there were plenty of exits with food ahead.

“Let’s eat on the road after we get going. Let’s get the hell out of here.”

“Are you sure you’re OK?”

She said, “I feel so much better. I’m fine.” Her eyes were closed like she might sleep, but when I asked if she wanted to nap she said no.

“Let’s have a pleasant ride back.”

I said, “We can talk about the camping trip. School ends in three weeks. We need to start planning it. Michael can still get us some drugs, right? He said yes when I checked last week.”

“Did you tell him no acid? I feel weird about acid.”

“You could tell him,” I said. “He always asks about you. You know he’s still in love with you.”

“I need to be fancy free for college lads, remember?”

“I know. I told him hippie stuff. Probably he’ll get us mushrooms that are in chocolates.”

Jules nodded and shut her eyes again. I felt like the mother of a toddler: she said no to a nap, but a nap would be good for her. I was hungry again, my turnover was gone hours ago, but I didn’t want to suggest stopping so soon. I kept my eyes steady on the road, but I checked on her every few minutes. I knew she wasn’t napping, even though

her eyes were shut because her back was straight. Without opening her eyes, she said,
“Mia, I lied about what happened.”

“Lied about which part?”

“He knew me.”

“So what did happen?”

“He didn’t want me to visit. He asked why I was there, and he wanted to know if Mom was there, too.”

“In a good way? He wanted to see her, or no?”

“I have no idea.”

“What else did he say? He must have said more. You were gone for hours.”

“That was seriously almost everything. I said I needed to see him because I was graduating and I wanted to feel closure, and he said he didn’t think it was a good idea for us to talk. That was it. Mostly I walked around his neighborhood and tried to imagine his life there. A bunch of dogs barked at me, and there were some people in their houses staring out of their windows.”

“OK,” I said. It felt like more had probably happened, but it didn’t do any good to push Jules for information she didn’t want to give.

“If anybody asks, just say he didn’t recognize me.”

“Nobody even knows we went.”

“Well, if they ever do, I just want it like I saw him but he didn’t see me. Like what I said before, I was just some girl knocking on his door randomly.”

I thought to myself, no one’s going to believe that story, but then I remembered I just had.



Her hair was spiked but she wore Little House on the Prairie skirts with plain white wifebeaters. Riffing on femininity. A bunch of wooden bracelets and a single ornate piece of lace on her upper arm, the band so smooth on her bicep it looked like a tattoo. I coveted this clear and decisive evidence of style. If I wore that stuff, I'd look so stupid. She'd left Jules a note on her shelf: *I have an art crush on you*. Jules showed it to me, crowing.

"Who's this from?" I said.

Jules pointed at Rose. Rose waved and called, "Sorry to be weird! George let me come glaze last night and I thought I'd forget to say how much I like your stuff so I left you a note."

Jules held it up. "Not weird. Thanks." To me, she said, "I wonder if George would let *me* use the studio other nights."

"We already spend every Tuesday and Thursday night here. In George's basement."

"Not you, silly. I know you only come to keep me company. I'm going to see if I can come alone."

I said, "Won't you throw the kiln schedule off?" I didn't want her to come alone.

"I'm just going to ask him."

"Whatever," I said. "I signed up for dishes tonight so I'm done with this clay."

"What is that?" About the vase I'm making.

"Your face."

“Cool.”

George had told me that whenever I got tired of dishes, I could switch to a different chore. Since I was doing dishes for the whole month. But I knew I wouldn't get tired of dishes. It was my favorite chore, the simple satisfaction of making each dish clean, the steady rhythm. I could wash dishes forever. What I didn't say was that I'd rather be washing dishes than making weird sculptures and lumpy vases.

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The kitchen was closed, and there were just a few stragglers left in the dining room watching *The Simpsons*. The episodes were old ones Katja's sister mailed to her, but nobody cared. As a group, expats were big *Simpsons* fans.

I'd come out with a plate of pancakes intending to eat and maybe have a beer with Stepan when I saw him at a table with Jules.

“This is your seat,” he said, getting up.

“You can stay,” I said. Then to Jules, “Unless you need to say private things.”

“No,” Jules said. “I'm just here to hang out.”

“Nah, I'll mop. Good to see you, Jules.”

“I haven't swept yet,” I said.

“No problem. Just relax and hang with Jules.”

Jules said, “He's awesome.”

“Yeah. Why are you here?”

She ignored my question. “And he totally has a crush on you.”

“Shhh.” I turned to see Stepan go through the kitchen doors. “He does not.”

“Um, does too.”

“Whatever, not going to happen.”

“Why? He’s kind of cute. There’s no worries for you about him being too short.”

I made a face at her.

“He *likes* you,” Jules said, indicating the kitchen doors.

I took a giant bite of my pancakes and spoke through my chewing. “He does not. He’s like that with everyone.”

“That is such a lie. Go out with him.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Liar.”

“I can’t exactly,” I said. “I kind of have enough on my plate.”

I’d meant Adam, but Jules immediately assumed I meant her. “I’m not an invalid. I’m fine most of the time. You can go on a date.”

Also he hadn’t asked, and there was Adam, who I still felt like I was with, which Jules didn’t understand. “I’m really not into him,” I said.

“Who cares. Into him, pfft. He likes you. He’s nice. Get laid, have some laughs. You’re always stressed out watching me, but I’m getting better.”

Was she getting better? “How was teaching?”

“Fine, the usual. My students are obsessed with talking about Monica Lewinsky and how stupid Americans are. Even when I tell them I agree that it’s no big deal.” Jules reached over and tore off a piece of my pancake. With her fingers. “But seriously, MiMi, go out with him. You never have any fun.”

I fingered the peeling edges of the map on the wall. The second week we were in Prague, before I'd started working here, we'd come here and we sat at this exact table and we made a list of all the places on the map we wanted to go. We'd been to some of them now. I didn't feel any different in a way, and at the same time everything was different. Back then I'd still felt like Jules was ill in some contained way, she'd had a brief psychotic episode, and we were here to get some air. Change of scene. Make things better. Now all of that thinking seemed stupid, part of the haze of jet lag, that cottony sense of the world. Now Jules seemed like her illness was a part of her and therefore not even an illness anymore. I wanted to ask Jules if she remembered that conversation, but it was weird to feel nostalgic about something that happened eight months ago, so I didn't say anything.

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Ben said, "My parents were artists, it's in my blood. Like Jules. We always had that in common. The family business."

"Her dad was a doctor."

"I meant her mom, of course."

"Nori?" I said. "She's not an artist. She makes crafts."

"Some people would call her an artist," Ben said. "Jules did."

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When Ben was in the bathroom, I came out to check on tables, and Jules said, “You like him. I can tell.”

“You weren’t lying,” I said. “He’s cute.”

“Ha! I knew you’d get along. He likes you, too. He told me last night after you went home.”

“He did?”

She nodded. “You’re perfect for each other. You both hate sports and are joyless during the Olympics.”

“I do hate sports,” Ben said. He’d come back quietly and now he sat again, right next to me, and grinned like he knew exactly what we’d been saying.

“I was talking you up to Mia.”

“Good. How much more convincing does she need?”

Jules said, “I think we’re almost there.”

“Did you tell her how old I am?”

“She didn’t,” I said. “How old are you?”

“Guess.”

He was probably six feet tall, and exactly how Jules had described him, dark and curly-haired with a goofy elasticity to his body. He’s maybe younger than I thought he’d be. “I’m going to have to go with fifty-two,” I said.

“I’m twenty-six. But I heard you had a rule about dating guys in their twenties.”

“It’s more a guideline. And we’re not dating.”

“Yet. I’m going to ask you out as soon as I find out how freaked out the age thing makes you.”

“Moderately,” I said. “Men are younger even if they’re the same age.” Jules kicked me under the table even though it was clear we were flirting.

“Most men, yes. I am an exception. Try to catch me in some emotional immaturity.”

“This,” I said. “Right now, this conversation. You think you can control how I feel about you.”

“Ha! Touché. Fair enough. But notice me accepting your wisdom, taking it in stride.”

“Stop being charming. I’m suspicious of you.”

“I’m telling you, I’m a precocious young man, steady, always have been. My parents are crazy artists! I’ve been a grown-up since birth.”

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Em said, “Did you tell Ben about this?”

“Yeah, he thinks I was just being creative.”

“What does that mean?”

“Trying on identities in college. Like a four-year lesbian.”

“Ugh. I hate those four-year lesbians. Heartbreakers. You think he’s wrong?”

“I think it’s kind to me. He really loves me.”

“You shouldn’t say that like it’s a surprise.”

“Not everybody loves me, Em.”

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I said, “Mom’s going to call you and invite you to dinner, but I wanted to prepare you before she does.”

“For what? Are they going to try to make me go to the doctor again?”

“No. Is something wrong?”

“No!” Jules said. “I’m tired of everyone coddling me. I’m not crazy.”

“I know.”

“Sorry. What does your mom want?”

“They’re getting a divorce.” Silence. “Are you OK, JuJu?”

Jules said, “I’m fine. They’re not my parents. Why would I care?”

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I said, “I’m just going to sleep at home.” Her dorm room was crowded, and I knew Alejandro usually stayed over since her roommate dropped out.

“No!” Jules wailed. She actually wailed. “You can stay here in the dorm. I thought you were going to stay with me.”

“Don’t you want Alejandro to stay with you?”

“He knows you’re visiting. He’s staying in his own room. I want you two to like each other,” Jules said. “It’s important to me. I think he’s going to be very important to me.”

“We do like each other,” I lied.

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“They do have some good boundaries, though,” Em said. “I get what you’re saying, Mer, but the thing about Mom and Dad is they’re not especially interested in our private lives. Like, has either one ever asked you who you’re sleeping with?”

I said, “Mom wanted me to get birth control when Jules did. I didn’t want it though so she made me take a bunch of condoms.”

“Ha! Mom packed a bunch of dental dams in my college stuff.”

Merrie said, “And you don’t think that’s controlling or interfering?”

“I mean, maybe a tiny bit. But she never said anything to me about it. When Dora and I separated for a little while in college, she never said anything.”

“Well, I still think it’s weird how she talks about the divorce. Especially because of how she doesn’t care about us.”

“I appreciate it,” I said. “What if Mom were all up in your business? It’s not like she sits you down and drones for hours about the divorce. And Dad either.”

“It’s totally avoidable,” Em said.

“You two think that because you were at college. I had years here with them splitting up and they were both inappropriately share-y with me.”

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Dad and I sat on the end of a long central table in the pavilion, but no one sat with us because no one knew who we were. We might as well have been crashing the reunion. I busied myself testing the flimsy tines of a plastic fork by bending them against a drumstick of cold fried chicken. It was better than eating it. Every time the drumstick

rolled, it left a greasy trail on the paper plate. Dad had removed the meat of a breast of chicken from its skin and the bone and was carefully transferring the pieces to an anemic sub roll. I watched him in silence.

The pavilion was noisy, but there was a sudden weird silence and so we all heard Jules' grandmother say to her, "I don't even know why you're here. Everyone knows what a nasty little liar you are. You think it's fun to play with people's lives, but there's a judgment coming for you."

I started to get up, but Dad said, "Mia," and so I sat down. Jules and her grandmother, who was a squat harmless-looking woman in a Hawaiian shirt and old-lady slacks, stared at one another. Like they were animals sizing each other up, although Jules told me later it was just that she was trying to process that her grandmother had actually said those words out loud and that she hadn't imagined them. Then Jules turned around and walked quickly out of the pavilion. I looked at Dad, who nodded. "I'll get Nori," he said. "You two meet us at the car."

"What if she wants to stay?"

"Then we'll figure that out," Dad said.

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Mrs. Martinez said that apostrophes were used to show belonging. "That is Mia's book," and she pointed to my book. And she wrote *Mia's book* on the board in her teacher handwriting. "It can be about things like books or toys or desks, things we can touch or hold, and it can also be used for stuff we can't hold, like feelings." And she wrote *Mia's love*, *Mia's anger*, and *Mia's laughter* on the board. "These things belong to

her, too, so we use the apostrophe even though we can't touch love or laughter.”

Mrs. Martinez always used me as the example. Mom said it was because teachers use the smartest kids to help them teach. I raised my hand.

“Yes, Mia?”

I already understood apostrophes. I wasn't writing any of it down, even though Mrs. Martinez was trying to get us to write down everything that she put on the board. Everybody else at my table was writing, but I had already decided—and had informed Mrs. Martinez—that anything I already knew wasn't going in my notes. Mrs. Martinez, who I could tell just did not want to argue with me, said that was OK but if I ever got one of those things wrong on a test or a paper I was going to have to do it her way. That was fine with me, and I told Mrs. Martinez that there was no way I'd ever get that stuff wrong.

“What about how you do Jules or James?” Jules was in Mrs. Candler's class, but James perked up. He sat at my table. No one liked him because he was fat and he sweated a lot. We called him James Townsend-Weighs-a-Thousand.

“Anything that belongs to them uses an apostrophe. Apostrophes show ownership and belonging.”

“But Mrs. Martinez, they already have an s at the end and then would there be another s?”

“I'm glad you asked that question, Mia, and that's what we're going to talk about in L.A. tomorrow.” Even though she didn't look glad. L.A. was Language Arts, and the L.A. bulletin board had pictures of sunshine and sunglasses and was supposed to be a joke about going to sunny L.A., Los Angeles. Mom said Mrs. Martinez should have a

Nazi theme for the Social Studies board. She didn't like Mrs. Martinez much, although she said I had to be polite. I didn't like Mrs. Martinez much either, and I could tell she wasn't so smart. Mom had passed on to me her contempt for elementary school teachers, and she said we needed to supplement elementary school at home.

"She probably needs to look it up in her teacher's manual before she teaches it," Mom said when I reported my question at dinner.

We both laughed at Mrs. Martinez.

"Well, tell her the answer then, Lida," Dad said. "If you really think she's not getting the right stuff at school, what good does it do—"

"Fine. Mia, look," and Mom got a piece of paper and a pen. "You want to talk about the book of Jules, the feelings of Jules?" And she wrote *Jules' book*, and then *Jules's book*. *Jules' feelings*, *Jules's feelings*.

"That's my question," I said. "So which is right?"

"Which do you think looks right?" asked Mom.

I looked. "That one," I said, pointing to *Jules' feelings*.

"That one's right," said Mom. She smiled at me. "And that one's right, too."

"They're both right?" I said.

"Yes. Different magazines and newspapers and books have what they call style guides, and so they might make different decisions about these things."

"So I'll see it both ways? And neither one is wrong?"

"Yes," said Mom.

"But I should choose the way I like, for my own style guide," I said.

Dad said, "Maybe you should decide with Jules, since it's her name."

So I wrote Jules a note to give to her before school showing her both of them and telling her about having a style guide and choosing one. She gave me a note back at recess and then we played jump rope. We tried not to discuss what was in the notes; we had a setup that respected the difference in the types of communication, and didn't mix them. Then I read the note at night in my room with my door shut:

I think Jules', too. But maybe use the other way Jules's , if there's ever a need to send a secret message. Especially a danger message. Like, if one of us needs the other, we'll know something is wrong because we'll use the extra s. Those are Jules' thoughts. love, me

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Emmie said, "If you went to therapy, they'd probably ask you where you felt stuff. Like, if you were sad, or angry, or scared, or whatever."

"What do you mean, where?"

"In your body, where in your body. Like, I tend to feel scared in the pit of my stomach and angry in my whole torso. And sometimes angry in my face."

"It doesn't happen for me like that," I said.

"It does," Em said, "but you're likely disconnected from it. A lot of people are. You can't think your way through it. That's bound to be uncomfortable for you."

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Oprah asked, "And how did you come to understand that?"

The man looked taken aback. "I'm not sure," he said.

Jules said, "What a stupid question."

I said, "Oprah's not a good interviewer."

"You don't think?"

"Look at her. She interrupts. It's all about Oprah."

"All about Oprah. That sounds like a punchline."

"Well, you can come up with the joke. I'm sick of Oprah. Can we turn the channel? Or turn it off."

"I like Oprah, something about her. She's from Baltimore, she talks all about being fat, being abused."

I said, "It doesn't seem like you'd like that. Just the other day, you were talking all about how you hated that victim survivor talk show talk."

Jules said, "Ordinarily I hate that shit, it's true. I don't know what it is about Oprah. She's magical."

"I read some article at the dentist's about how she still shops at KMart."

Jules said, "Well, that I don't believe."

"Of course not," I said. "It was like *Good Housekeeping*. She's a calculating bitch. She knows how that shit sounds."

"I hate on talk shows when they ask people how they know something. Like, how did you know you were gay and totally fucked up your whole family? This guy doesn't know."

I said, "He must know how he knew he was gay."

"But the question wasn't that. It was something like, how did you understand that,

that being the whole fuck up. How do you understand your whole fucked up life and how you fucked up the lives of your whole family? I mean, there's no answering that."

"Let's do something else," I said. Talk shows always pissed Jules off. "This is boring."

Jules said, "I'd punch someone in the face if they ever asked me that."

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When Mom and Dad told Jules her dad had set up an account for her, the first question she asked was whether she could have some of it now before college. Mom said of course and then Jules asked if she could get a puppy. Dad said yes immediately because he loves puppies, but Mom sighed. "Are you sure you want a puppy?" she asked. "They're so much work. Besides you have Sam."

I said, "Mom. Of course everybody loves Sam, but he can't do anything." By the time we'd gotten Sam, he was deaf and arthritic and tired. Maybe he'd been a puppy once, but it was a long time ago. He loved us, sure, but mostly he loved to sleep.

We drove to the pound together. The puppies were in these big bins, crate-like structures. All crawling around on top of each other. Jules ran ahead of me squealing and bent down to pet a crate full of puppies. They were super cute, especially the one who had a brown circle around his eye. The rest of his face was white. But then a cocker spaniel-type with silky curly ears leaped up and grabbed onto Jules' arm with his claws. He clung there like like Spiderman. Jules secured his place and kissed him. "This is him," she said.

"Don't you want to look around?" There were some labs, the pit bulls, some

unidentifiable sleepy puppies, adorable and wrinkly in the corner. “We’ve got a roomful of squirming baby dogs and we’ve been here less than two minutes.”

“Mia. Didn’t you see that? He picked me. This is him. This is my puppy.”

I took him from her. He sighed with his little puppy breath and laid his head on my shoulder like he was so tired. I said, “I guess you’re right. And his color is perfect for a Fluffernutter.”

“I know. Of course, it’s a good name regardless. But he was made for it, weren’t you, Nuttie?”

Now that we had him, I started to notice how awful the room of needy puppies was. It was deafening and I was dizzy from the sound. I said, “We’ve got to get out of here,” and I gave Nuttie to Jules so I could get back to the lobby faster.

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I wasn’t sure how to start so I decided to just say, “I feel weird.”

“I hate that. I keep telling you,” Jules said, “I’m the same.”

I could tell it made her feel bad that everything was different. I tried hard to stay the same, but then she would be different; it just *was* different, and my awkwardness made everything worse.

“Mom and Dad want me to talk to you about what to do about your dad.”

“What does that mean?”

“Well, like, do you want to have him arrested, or—”

“No!”

“I mean, it’s your decision, but he did do something he could go to jail for and all.”

“Are you crazy? That’s a horrible, horrible idea.”

I said, “OK.”

“Everything is already all fucked up—God. No. I just want everything to be normal.”

This made me angry. I said, “Like one big happy family?”

“Like we were ever a happy family. I’m not saying one word to any police and you cannot make me. I’ll deny everything if you try to make me do that.”

“Calm down. I was just trying to make a point.”

“Well, you can quit trying.”

“Do you want to stay here for awhile?”

“I am staying here,” Jules said. “Are you getting ready to kick me out?”

“Can you calm down?” I said. I had done this all wrong. “You know you can stay however long you want.”

“I don’t know. Nobody tells me anything.”

“I’m telling you now, if you’d listen.”

“OK, I’m listening.”

“Mom and Dad want you to know you never have to see him again. The police thing was just one option—nothing you have to do. They just wanted me to tell you that they talked to him or something and he’s not going to try to contact you.”

“They talked to my dad?”

“I guess.”

“Well, thank you but I know that already.”

“You know they talked?”

“I know my dad isn’t going to talk to me ever again. Mom said she’d take his nuts off with a pair of pliers if he tried to come see me again ever.” Then she screamed, one of those groaning, frustrated screams. “God! Everything is fucked up now.”

I said, “It’s not your fault.”

“A lot you know about it.”

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Grandma said, “I hear something wrong in your Poppy’s pronunciation every day. His words, too.”

Grandma was the name she picked, what she wanted us all to call her, but she was ill-suited to its cuddliness. Grandma was gray-haired, a cookie-making beast. But she wasn’t anything like that. Grandmother, perhaps, would have been more suitable. The austere bony elegance of it, that would have suited her better. Grandma the name was like Grandma’s perfect English, it sounded correct but not right, clearly not natural, there was nothing unusual, or outwardly wrong, but she wore it like a coat that was, while neither discernibly too small or too large, just not right on its wearer. Like the coat check attendant made a mistake in a crowded coatroom, but it was such a similar garment she didn’t realize it wasn’t hers until she was already home and hanging it in her own closet.

I said, “You never correct him.”

Grandma said, “No,” as if I had suggested that she frequently spat upon Poppy. “He’s learned so much. It does not come naturally for him. He learned the money and the traffic before I did.”

“How do you learn traffic?” I asked.

“I studied English at night with books we bought with the first extra money we had. Children’s books, those right there,” and she pointed at the children’s shelf, which was immaculate, the wavering line of brightly colored spines, and I couldn’t tell which books she was pointing at, but it didn’t matter. “That was what we learned from. And I worked cleaning houses with a woman, Anna. She helped me by talking to me. She taught me the names of every piece of furniture and every household thing. All the food. And she would correct me every time I said something that sounded funny, not American, and then she’d have me practice it. She should have been a teacher.”

“Why wasn’t she?”

“She had an illegitimate baby.”

Mom told me all babies were legitimate, that there was no such thing as an illegitimate baby, but I didn’t tell Grandma that. I said, “So?”

“It was a different time. And the baby was different looking from her. But she was good at talking. Poppy didn’t have as much talking. But he could drive better because he was doing it so much more. It’s all in practice. Remember that, life is about practice, what you spend time on.”

“Is that like you reap what you sow?”

“Where did you hear that?”

I said, “At school, I think.” But I’d actually heard it from Jules’ dad.

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“There he is,” Jules said. “Piece of shit. He’s in your dad’s class.”

“What class?” I said. “That guy?” I pointed at a guy walking into Rainbow Music.

Jules swatted my hand down. "Jesus, Mia. Yes."

"He just stopped seeing you? For that?"

"I don't know. I guess. It was like I told him I had AIDS."

"He just stopped calling you?"

"Yes. How many times do I have to say it? Yes yes yes."

"What a dick," I said. "Want me to go give him the business?" I put my hands up in fists.

"You'd be a terrible fighter."

I punched at the air. "That's not convincing?"

"I mean, I'm scared. But not of you hitting me."

"Seriously," I said, "I'm going to go give him a piece of my mind. What's his name?"

Jules said, "I already told you. It's Paul. And no, you're not going to talk to him. It's bad enough I still have printmaking with him."

"I thought he was in Dad's class?"

"Most of us take more than one class. Do you not do that in Vermont?"

I said, "He can be on your list of people you erase. Paul. You can pretend like you never did it with Paul. That he never saw you naked."

"He might not have seen me naked. It was all very drunk and rushed."

"And so why did you tell him again?"

Jules said, "I don't know. I'm an idiot. We went to Golden Dove after. Paul wanted fries to soak up the alcohol and to hang out some."

"Jesus. You told him in Golden Dove? So public."

“It seemed appropriate at the time,” Jules said. “It’s just my life, it’s not a movie or something where things have to be all, like, scenically planned.”

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“I guess you go to school here?” We were sitting behind the library smoking cigarettes by one of my favorite trees.

“Yeah, do you? I feel like I’ve seen you around.”

I said, “I go to college in Vermont. But I could have gone here for free because my dad’s a professor.”

Paul said, “So why didn’t you?”

“I wanted to get away from home.”

He said, “I hear that.”

I said, “Thanks for the cigarette.” Since he’d dumped Jules, I hadn’t been able to stop thinking about him. He was cute, but it wasn’t that. He’d left her after he knew, and I was never going to be able to leave her. I wanted him; I didn’t know why.

It was weird, when I followed him I could tell he smoked and I could tell it was going to be so easy to hook up with him. How could I tell? I don’t know; when he smiled at me, I could see he was open to whatever. We were sitting with our backs against the building, and no one was around. When I reached over him for the lighter, I smooshed my boobs against him on purpose. Now our sides were touching. This was going to be so easy.

He said, “What kind of professor is your dad?”

“He’s in plant science, Dan Behrmann.”

“Hey, I took a class with him! He’s a good dude. Gave me a B.”

I said, “Phew. So my dad’s not going to, like, keep us apart or anything?”

“Apart, huh? Are we together?”

At this point, I’d started stroking his hand, moving my fingers slowly toward the base of his arm and then back again. The little hairs on his arm were standing up: driving me crazy.

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Done and he looked at me; he raised himself on an elbow and waited for me to get myself off while he watched and smiled a creepy-private masturbatory smile at me. Way too much eye contact. When he does that, I get the distinct feeling he thinks he’s being nice. Like I’m supposed to be apologetic, or grateful.

“You’re not even going to try?” I asked, turning my backside to him and curling up my body. This was the offended position and it generally made him mad. But my chin had started to wobble and I wanted very much to be able to speak in my normal voice and not have my crying bleating goat voice interrupt my content.

“I do try,” he said. He was mad immediately which made the conversation easier. “What should I be doing? Do you even know?”

“Jules’ boyfriend bought special books on abuse survivors and learned all this stuff.” I was still curled up and away on the bed and I felt a hot tear slide onto the pillowcase but at least my voice was under control.

He sighed. I didn’t know him very well in a lot of ways, but I knew he was going to be right about whatever he was going to say.

“That dude Alejandro?” he said. “That guy’s a tool.”

I agreed, but I couldn’t let him get away with that. “Jealous? I thought you weren’t even into her.”

“You weren’t raped by your father, Mia,” he said. “In fact, your dad is this great guy. He was a great teacher and he seems like the kind of dad a girl can’t blame for not being able to come. You want to have some fucked up shit happen to you, and that’s fucked.”

Then he said, “Plus, most girls can’t come that way. You do OK on top. You just don’t fuck me that way because it’s what we both like. God, you are *messed up*.”

“The counseling center said that all women who’ve come in contact with sexual abuse—so basically *all* women if you count the media’s abuse—feel its effects.” I said this as, partly, an offering, although I was careful to keep my tone injured. I actually hadn’t been to the counseling center, but my women’s studies professor did say that.

“Well,” he said, “I think that’s bullshit.” He got up out of bed, but I didn’t turn over. “If Jules can get over it, you sure can.”

I started, “Over it, she didn’t get over it,” but I stopped because the goat voice was in full effect. And because he knew, even though we’d never officially talked about it, that we weren’t supposed to mention Jules. It was bad enough we were hooking up every time I came home; it was bad enough we were keeping this secret; we didn’t need to acknowledge how wrong it all was.

Paul got up. “Yeah this just isn’t going to work for me anymore, Mia. This is supposed to be fun.”

“You’re breaking up with me?”

“We’re not even dating! Are you having fun? You’re crying. You don’t seem like you’re having fun.”

“No,” I said. I knew what he meant, and as soon as he figured out we both knew Jules, everything got weird and complicated. But if he left, I’d have to start thinking about what we’d done.

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Jules said, “This series has my actual blood sweat and tears in it. And my piss, pus, and shit. It got ugly between us for a while.”

I said, “Your body fluids are literally in it.” But I didn’t believe her. I had gotten used to Jules liking to sound like artistic.

“Literally. I literally shit my, you know, my project.”

“Are you happy with it?”

“No,” Jules said, drawing the word out, which meant maybe. “It’d be a stretch to say I’m happy with it. But I’m proud of it.”

“Well, that’s something.”

“That’s what Dr. Thayer said. He said it’s almost impossible for an artist with integrity to feel happy with your own work. He said when I feel proud enough of it to show off my failure, then I know it’s time to move on.”

I didn’t know why, but it made me feel unreasonable, this slight to happiness in one’s creation. “But you do feel happy, right? I mean, you’ve been working on it all this time and you’re done and you’re happy, right?”

“Well, I feel proud, like I said. And I’m happy you’re coming. I can’t wait for you

to meet Bev. I told her all about you.”

I said, “It just seems a shame that you’re closing the door to ever being happy. And to call your work a failure seems—”

Jules said, “I know it sounds funny to you, but I feel exultant in my failure. Honest. I’m happy that I can move on. I know it sounds weird. But don’t worry about me just because my language is different than yours.”

“No, I get it,” I said, even though I didn’t at all.

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“Your phone is always going to be better than mine,” Jules said. “You have all the money. This is the new iphone, huh? What is it, like four hundred dollars?”

I put my hand out so she would return my phone. It was actually more like \$500. I said, “But you’re an artist. What do you care about phones.”

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Jules said, “Yeah, but your family is weird about money. Like, you’ll spend a ton on certain things no problem, but then you’re all miserly in other ways.”

I asked, “Like how?” and then thought of a dozen examples.

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“I had a dream about him.”

“Dickhead,” I said. I’d been trying to read in bed, but I closed the book when Jules called. I walked my feet up the cinderblock walls. “I’m thinking of getting an apartment. Might be time to move out of the dorm.”

Jules said, “Yeah. The name may have outlived its usefulness for me. I still love him.”

I said, “That’s gross. I’m still calling him Dickhead. Don’t you have any self-respect?”

“This is why it’s hard to talk to you. I can’t make any decisions without you weighing in. Not just weighing in. Extreme weighing in.”

I said, “I’m sorry. I’m mad at him.”

Jules said, “I’m mad at him, too. *He’s* mad at him. Have you never fucked anything up?”

“So what was the dream?”

“I was horny. I wanted to have sex, and I was still living with him in the bread box. But I didn’t want to touch him, or have him touch me. So we set up this whole rule and we both kept all of our clothes on, and he was wearing like a crazy Abominable Snowman suit thing and we just cut out a hole and I sat on his dick. But we didn’t touch.”

“That’s the dream?”

“That’s the dream.”

“Jesus.”

“What’s it mean?” She laughed, a rueful kind of sad, heartbroken laugh that made me feel totally guilty. But talk about being hard to talk to, she was maddeningly blind about the whole thing.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart.”

“You know, I know you didn’t like him, and I know you thought it was stupid to get married.”

I said, “Obviously, it wasn’t the best idea.”

“I guess not, but it’s no fun to talk to someone who doesn’t respect you. It doesn’t help me.”

“You mean Alejandro?”

“I mean you. You don’t respect my decisions.”

“Just that one decision. I respect you.”

“You think I do things because I’m screwed up. He was a mistake but not because I’m fucked up. OK? He was a mistake anybody could make.”

I said, “I don’t think you’re screwed up.” But I also knew I wouldn’t make that mistake.

Jules said, “Liar.”

Of course I was lying. “What do you want me to say? I’m loyal to you. You’re my best friend. Would you rather I took his side?”

“It’s like you can’t understand anything complicated.”

“Bullshit.” I wanted to say, *Complicated like I just broke things off with my friend with benefits Paul? Who happened to be your ex-one night stand?* “What’s complicated? You married a dickhead and both of you are obviously too young to get married, and the dickhead cheats on you with some whore. Plus his crazy Catholic family all up in your business and all that grossness with his sister. It was your decision, yes, but I have no idea why you’d make it.”

“OK, that sounds like respect. I can hear it. It’s there, right? Just read between the lines.”

“This is how your best friend’s supposed to feel,” I said, and then Jules hung up. I tried to call back right away. No answer. I called back again. No answer. And again no answer. Then she picked up.

“What?”

I said, “You hung up.”

“I don’t feel like talking to you anymore.”

I said, “OK,” and hung up on her.

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The prints looked like frames from some weird comic book. Jules explained that once she’d made the prints, she painted over them with watercolor, then the other media was layered over it with some collage technique with a complicated name I hadn’t caught.

Each piece was connected to two other of the prints so that they formed a strip with progression like a comic. In between, they were held together with beat up little girl necklaces, their heart locket, flower pendants, or center script “Jules” suspended between the chains.

“Were those all your real necklaces?” I asked. I was trying to stick to concrete questions so I could avoid having to repeat the sort of fawning compliments everybody else was saying to her. When she nodded, though, I figured she was lying since I didn’t remember her ever wearing any of the necklaces.

The series was called *Inheritance* and all of them were about her dad. One was just a portrait of Nuttie. “That’s her dog,” I told the guy next to me. He was some friend of Jules’ from art class. “He lives with my parents.”

“Like the dog she had growing up,” he said.

I wanted to explain that Nuttie was in the series because he came from her dad’s money, not her dad’s house, but I just said “Yeah” because I could tell this guy didn’t really care. I moved to look at the next series. It was three close-ups of asphalt. Bits of *The Macon Daily News* and a McDonald’s bag were pasted on them. The words “Face down ground/Asphalt Wound” written in what looked like red lipstick, along with a band-aid that had been shellacked in something shiny. I said, “I was there for this one. This is from when I drove her to see her dad,” but the guy was gone.

There was an apple tree in full bloom by the door to the gallery. The doors were open and people stood around outside eating stuff from the avant-garde bake sale. I’d bought a brownie shaped like a gun and frosted a sickly pink, and I tried to eat it to avoid having to do anything else. Jules talked to everybody who came in the door, it seemed like. I told her I was good not knowing anyone and to just do her thing. I said I was good at talking to new people, and not to worry about me, but I considered faking illness so I could go back to her dorm, or even over to Mom’s. I considered grabbing one of these guy’s dicks and just rubbing it until he would talk to me. I considered just leaving, just driving all the way back to Vermont and calling her later with some emergency that I’d had to attend to. Instead, I tried to look very interested in my brownie and to eat it but also to take small bites and make it last because that brownie was all I had to keep me from looking like a jerk.

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I said, “What are you doing?”

Jules said, “Looking at *American Idol* with the sound off and dicking around on the Internet.”

I said, “Sound off?”

“I know how they sing.”

“What are you looking at?”

Jules said, “Online?”

“Yeah.”

“I have two screens, actually: old *Eight is Enough* youtube and Iraqi death count. You know, the one with the actual count.”

I said, “You’re so deep.”

“And complicated.”

I agreed, “And complicated.”

She didn’t ask what I was doing.

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Jules said, “I’m going to do step four with Nori. I’m going to find Dad and apologize to him for some things and make amends. It’s going to be totally freeing.”

“That’s not step four,” I said.

“What are you talking about?”

“I read the AA Big Book.”

“You said no judgment.” Jules stared at me until I nodded fine, no judgment. “It doesn’t matter what step, I’m not an alcoholic so I don’t have to go in order. I know he’s the one at fault, but his apology wouldn’t be good for him to do, mine is the only one I can control and it will be like a good closure. I can close the book on the whole thing and have an adult life that is really separated from it.”

I said, “Are you crazy?” Then, “Sometimes I feel my job is to balance the therapy, JuJu. So you don’t sound like a wind-up doll quoting from a self-help book.”

“Whatever makes you feel useful, MiMi,” Jules said. “You’ve got to feel useful, don’t you? But I’m doing it and you said to tell you what I was doing.”

“If it blows up and it’s not like you want it to end up—not that I want that!—but if it does, are you still going to talk to me?”

“Of course. I always talk to you. Damn girl. Shit doesn’t even happen unless I tell you.”

I said, “Nice. But it’s a terrible idea.”

“Why?”

“Did you think of it?”

“Who else?”

I said, “Bunny.”

“Don’t be stupid. Yeah, I’m just a puppet for my shrink’s every whim, yes, I’m actually a puppet, I’ll be playing me but it’s the me that Bunny built so she’s just very helpful to herself, very self-helpful.”

“What if he’s mean?” I said. “Or not happy to see you. Or happy to see you? And

where does he even live?" I didn't want to say, *You haven't thought this through.*

"I'll deal. The whole point is that it doesn't matter what he says or does, I'm regaining control of my associations with him."

"You want associations?"

"Please, Mia. Don't be an asshole. That dude goes everywhere I go. Let me do my fucking thing."

"I just wanted to make it easier for you to talk to me if it didn't work out."

"Will you go with me? And drive?"

"Where? Sure."

"Georgia. He lives in motherfucking Georgia now."

"Is he a Cracker?"

"I guess he's not doing well financially, Grandma says he lives in a hovel."

I said, "Well, who knows what that even means."

"I know that's her but still. I guess I'll see."

"What are you talking about? Meet him at a McDonald's or something."

Jules said, "He doesn't have a phone."

"Hovel."

"Yes. I just want a ride, *you* can sit at a McDonald's."

"I want to go into some weird southern restaurants. And look at trees in Georgia."

"Great! We'll find a downtown, you hang out and eat and look at people's gardens and I'll find Dad."

Because I couldn't think how to talk her out of something that was so clearly her own decision, her own wrong decision, I said, "OK, when do you want to go?"

“Today. Now.”

“What? I have work after school. Let’s use Senior Skip Day.”

“That’s not for two weeks!”

“It’s perfect. Plan everything out.”

“Your mom won’t care if you skip?”

“Usually I doubt she’d want me to skip, although I’m never caught. But I don’t skip whole days either. She’s fine with Skip Day. She said as long as I’m going to college, I should do it. Both of us are going to college, so I don’t see a problem.”

“She wouldn’t be cool with us driving to Georgia.”

“That’s why we have to plan.”

“We should go today. Better to ask forgiveness than permission. Remember?”

“You haven’t thought this through. I can’t just take off.” I was stalling, but I doubted she could figure out another ride. I knew she wouldn’t go alone, so I needed to buy time until I could figure out a good enough reason not to do it.

“I can’t wait two weeks,” Jules said.

I said, “You can.”

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Jules wore a halter top, a pale purple thing with sequins around the edge, but delicate sequins, also pale. Not loud at all. Lilac. No bra and a long flowing skirt. As I looked at us in the mirror standing together, I steeled myself to spend the evening hearing all of her compliments. She was going to get so many. I thought it might help if I started.

I said, “You look so pretty,” and I petted her hair. Inside I was seething with

something, but at what? I did like that she was pretty. And it's not like I thought I was ugly, but I didn't look like Jules.

"We should match," Jules said.

I said, "I can't wear that."

I stopped petting her hair. She was twirling slightly, making her skirt swirl, showing her pale thin calves.

"Why?"

I looked at her, but she didn't look at me, just at herself in the mirror.

I made a noise in my throat.

"What? You're really pretty, Mia. You should dress better. You'd look great in this. You can borrow it."

I said, "I have boobs, stupid."

"So?"

"I have to wear a bra."

"Why?"

I didn't know how to answer. How do you explain boobs to someone who doesn't have them? So I said that. "How do I explain boobs to you? Let's see. They're these round things I carry and can never put down."

"Ha, ha. But really, why? Are you going to get black eyes from walking around without a bra?"

I said, "Not from walking. But what if I have to run? Or take the stairs?"

Jules said, "You could probably wear some kind of bra with this." But she said it doubtfully. It basically had no back.

“That’s OK, JuJu. It looks good on you.”

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I said, “Is the food terrible?” Because I couldn’t think what to say and you always heard about hospital food being so terrible.

Jules looked normal, and she was talking normally, too, and I felt—not disappointed, disappointed was the wrong word—but unnerved. I expected her to be a completely different person. How could this have happened and she seemed so fine, so like her regular self? I knew they’d given her some medicine, but I couldn’t tell that either. I hadn’t mentioned anything about the airport or why she was here, or what they thought was wrong, or anything that actually seemed like a normal thing to talk about. She was wearing sweatpants and a t-shirt, not a hospital gown, and she seemed tired but otherwise herself.

“The food is great if you’re a pudding fan,” she said. “I’ve never seen people so obsessed with pudding.”

“Like little pudding cups?” I asked. It was such a stupid thing to say, but what was I supposed to talk about?

“Like a dish of pudding. I didn’t eat it, the vanilla had a grayish color that freaked me out.”

“When do you get to go home?” I asked. That was as close as I was going to get to acknowledging the reality of the situation.

Jules said, “I’m not sure.” Then, “It’s nice of you to be here. Aren’t you missing classes?”

“Nothing important.” That was actually true. “I just took a test on Tuesday, and I don’t have anything big due for weeks.”

“You’re not staying weeks, though,” Jules said.

“I don’t know.”

Jules said, “No, I’m telling you. You need to go back to school. I’m OK.”

“You *are* OK then?” I asked. Finally, we were going to talk about it. I wanted to ask her whether she knew she was being crazy, if any part of it was an act, and if she thought it would happen again.

But she just said, “I’m fine,” and then we both watched TV until visiting time was over and I had to say good-bye.

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Jules said, “My dad’s friend knows your dad. He teaches at the University, too.”

I said, “Who is he?”

Jules said, “I don’t know his name. But he says your dad’s name isn’t Cohen. But he knew it was your dad.”

“It isn’t his name,” I said. “That’s the girls’ name in our family.”

“Girls and boys have different last names in your family?”

I said, “Dad’s last name is Behrmann, and Mom didn’t want all of us girls to have a last name with *man* in it.”

“That would be funny,” Jules said. “Because you’re girls.”

“Yeah,” I said. “And besides, Cohen is for Cohen Farms, the company. That’s my Grandma and Poppy Zayda’s company, so they want to keep the name in the family.”

Jules looked confused, so I added, “Besides, Jews didn’t used to have last names. It’s not important to us. It’s not in our culture.”

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Every time I caught sight of myself in a mirror, I tossed my hair aside and saw the hidden piercing on the very top of my ear and thought *dangerous/stylish*. I loved the way it looked, but it was definitely infected. I faithfully turned it and cleaned it like I was supposed to, breaking the blood-pus crust like a sugared rim on a jelly jar.

I got it at the mall, not even Jules knew. I’d been thinking that I had a goody-goody look. It’s my hair, maybe the tightness of my curls, the frizziness I can’t tame, that makes me seem harmless. Ringleted girls are angel badasses, but there’s something uptight about how I look.

The ear infection hurt, the scab and the twisting and oozing but it felt like an accomplishment, too. Jules had no earrings and while I wanted rows and rows of piercings, I did admire her pristine pale lobes. The opposite of my desire was usually also my desire. Even though it was her dad who wanted her not to get piercings, which now seems gross. He was always like, *Why do you girls always want to mark your bodies?* Nori got her ears pierced after he left, but Jules didn’t. Her ears were roses and cream and whole. Since mine had already been punched once though, I figured it wouldn’t hurt to do them more.

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Jules said, “It’s funny you talk like this when nothing bad has happened to you ever.”

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Discussing the plan, I said, “Maybe at sixteen? For the first serious boyfriend. Sweet true love at sixteen.”

Jules said, “Sixteen is good. Fifteen is whorey.”

“Yes. Sixteen, a sweet hand-holding soda shoppe sipping boy. Twine your greasy fingers in the popcorn. Get your braces tangled up when you kiss.”

Jules laughed. “Do I have to get braces to be normal?” She bared her teeth in the mirror. “My teeth are pretty freakin straight, you know? Except for the gap.”

I was thinking aloud. “How are we going to find him? And what about spin the bottle makeout parties and shit? Seems like you should have those first. Like early high school.”

“I don’t know,” Jules said. “Then I’d have to hang out with a group of losers. I think I can bypass that.”

I wanted to go to those parties, but as soon as Jules said she didn’t, I knew I wasn’t going either. She felt uncomfortable at school already, especially when she had classes I didn’t have, like our science classes were different. I could go to those parties alone and make her feel bad, or I could concentrate on how she was going to be normal.

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Jules emerged from the bathroom and stood hanging in my doorway. She reported, “I found a totally fucking undigested piece of mushroom in my shit.”

“Um, ew?”

“What does it mean?”

“Mean?”

“Like, does it mean I’m sick.”

This gave me pause. “What do you mean sick?” It didn’t seem normal to be picking through your own feces.

“Not crazy sick, Mia. Poop sick.”

“No. That just—happens. Sometimes.”

“To you?” Jules demanded. She was bracing each foot on the doorway sides and trying to touch the little gold cross. There was one above each door. At first, we thought it was a Czech thing, but since we never saw it in any other houses, it was probably just our landlords being weird.

“I guess. But I don’t mine my poo like that so I can’t be sure.” I paused. “How big was the mushroom?”

“Well, not a whole portabella. Not an Alice in Wonderland.”

I laughed.

“A chunk, OK? But enough to know what it was. Like a thumbnail.”

“A thumbnail? Don’t worry about a thumbnail. You can pass a million thumbnails.”

“It doesn’t mean I’m sick?”

“No.” How should I know?—but I figured it was better not to worry. “Our pee smells different, our sweat smells different, you know? Your digestion is just different in

different places. Apparently mushrooms go undigested in Central Europe.”

“There’s nothing abnormal about it?”

“No.”

“Do you want to see it before I flush?”

“No. Jesus.”

“OK,” she said. She jumped down from her perch. There were black scuff marks in all the doorways from her climbing them. “I climb the walls,” she kept saying. She thought it was funny. I felt like that, too, sometimes, trapped in here because I didn’t know where to go, but I kept still. I heard her flush and then she reappeared in my doorway.

I said, “I cannot believe you saved it for me.”

“I saved it in case something was wrong. That was OK. That’s normal.”

I said I guessed so. But in that tone that said it was actually a super weird thing for her to do.

“What are you doing?” she said.

“Trying to figure out my fall schedule.”

“So you’re definitely going back.”

“Are you really thinking of not?” If she stayed, I would have to, too, but I was tired of Prague and I felt angry all the time about missing my senior year with everybody.

Everybody would graduate before me. Adam would graduate before me.

Jules said, “I guess I am. I miss you, America. Old red white and blue. The apple pie, the credit cards, the boring money.”

“No Prague pussy smell.”

“There’s bad smells in America.”

I said, “Hot dogs and beer.”

“No, I’m going back. I’m not sure about the school thing, but I’ll go back with you.

I know you want to go, and I don’t want to stay without you.”

“I’m staying with you if you stay, JuJu. You know that.”

“Nah. Let’s go back. Want to go to the Swiss Air office and get tickets?”

“Really?” I said.

“Sure. We can salivate over that orange laptop next door. And we can get a coffee on the fancy street.”

“I’m hungry.”

“Well, let’s just go to World after and Stepan can make us pancakes. I’m broke. And I’ll be more broke after I get my ticket.”

I didn’t really want to go eat at work since it was my day off, but it was hard to argue with her about being broke.

Jules said, “Tell your mom to send me some more money, too, OK? I want to buy a bunch of stuff before we leave.”

I said, “You can ask her.”

“I don’t like to though. Please Mia? You know she’ll say yes if you ask.”

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The kitchen was huge, bigger than the dining area. I loved that. The guy I’d met the night before, Stepan, was the kitchen manager and he showed me the whole restaurant, even the back with the garbage, and then he introduced me to Katja. Katja was tall and

blond, and she sounded American but had the easy glamour of a Czech woman. I estimated her age to be late twenties. “Hi,” she said and extended her hand. “This is my restaurant, World.”

“Hi,” I said. “It’s a great restaurant.” It was a nice mix of Prague and America, a halfway restaurant, an expat hangout. There were American magazines on all the tables, old copies of *Newsweek* and *The New Yorker*, and plants in the windowsills.

She said, “You’re American but you’re not here to teach English.”

“I like to cook.”

She shrugged.

I said, “Are you American?” I knew that was an insult to a lot of English-speakers, but her accent was pure middle America.

She said, “Czech American, uh huh.” Then, “You’re cute, and of course we like the servers to speak good English since we have an American clientele.”

My heart sank. “I’m Czech American, too. But I’m better back of the house.”

“Why?”

“Just suits my personality better.”

“I’d rather have you cook anyway.”

I smiled.

She said, “Why don’t you come back tonight after we close, maybe one o’clock. We’ll drink a beer, hash it all out.”

Stepan had said this would happen. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him watching, but I thought it would be best not to look at him. Katja had all new employees over after work, got them high, told them her life story, and then, finding most people

unwilling to be anything but friendly on this weird job interview, christened them her new best friend and hired them. Stepan said if I made it to the invite, I was in. Katja also started drinking after midnight, and he said she was a friendly drunk. He said my main problem would be holding her off if she came onto me. Because she was a very friendly drunk.

“No problem,” I said. “Maybe I’ll just take a menu with me to look at beforehand?” I was dying to see what I was going to be cooking.

“Sure.” Katja shrugged her elegant shoulders. She looked like the kind of woman who always carried a cigarette. She was smoking, but that’s not why I thought that.

“Have at it. We’re changing the menu anyway. Maybe you could bring some ideas.”

“So exciting,” I said, but then I felt stupid. “Yeah, I could do that,” I said. I tried to sound cool. “No problem.”

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My room was freezing. I wore socks and, usually, shoes all the time. It felt weird, as it always did. Dad said gardeners were barefoot by nature. My feet felt like dry paper and surrounding them with socks was consistently uncomfortable. But it was worse to be so cold.

Without knocking, Jules came in and threw herself on my bed. She said, “I’ve been thinking of all the ways I could kill myself.”

As usual, I had a pot of hot tea on my table and a hat on. We’d subscribed to some weird reduced fee heating system where the heat came on only at off-peak times like three in the morning. We turned the oven on sometimes and opened the door, it was that

fucking cold.

She had her shoes on and they were dangerously close to my pillow, but how could I mention that after her opening remark? I sighed. “Do you feel like you’re going to do it? Or are these just thoughts?”

“I don’t know,” she said.

She didn’t look upset, particularly. I’d been looking forward to reading, maybe writing a letter to Adam. Just having some time alone. I said, “But it’s safer to stay with you?”

“That’s what the doctor said.” She said it like there was nothing she could do about it: doctor’s orders.

“Yeah.” I’d rather go out if I couldn’t be by myself. “What about a pivo? It’ll be warm at the pub. We can sit upstairs so it’s even warmer.”

“I just want to stay home.” Now her shoes were actually kicking the pillow, gathering its squish between her shoes. Her shoes were these suede Mary Janes that she bought on one of the fancy streets where the rich German and American and Swiss people shopped. One of the streets that had a tapas restaurant and took credit cards. Richer than tourists, a street for frequent and exclusive visitors. Usually Swiss or Dutch business people having to slum it, here in Prague to save this or that branch of a fancy company. Jules kept spending all her money on clothes and then I ended up covering the whole rent.

I said, “How serious are you feeling? Like what about going to the bathroom. Do you want me to go in with you?” I thought of drowning, razors, head bashed against the faucet edge, or porcelain shattering. Sometimes she wanted me to go to the bathroom

with her, to sleep with her, and so I did. I wanted to get rid of her in the short-term all the time because she killed my buzz. But it was my responsibility. We were by ourselves in a foreign country. And watching over her was all I had to do in a way. I didn't *have* to work at World. I had Grandma and Poppy's money. I worked because I needed something to do away from our flat, and besides, having money enough to not work wasn't a reason to be idle. Grandma wouldn't have liked that. "The bathroom is a dangerous place to play," I said.

"I can go to the bathroom by myself," Jules said. "I just wanted to tell you I'm having the thoughts." She said it muffled into the bed and didn't acknowledge my attempt at levity. Maybe she really was miserable.

"Should I trust you?" I asked.

"Maybe we could get high."

"Maybe," I said. My bottom drawer held no clothes—our flat came with a gigantic chest of drawers and wardrobe for each of us, plus three closets—and my weed and extra crowns rattled around. I held up the jar. "I'm running out."

"Of weed?" Jules sat up.

"Weed and money both. Have 5000kc for rent, but that's it. I'm going to have to go exchange more soon. Got two bowls here, max."

"We could scrape your old pipe."

"Relax. I've got two bowls, I said." I spread the notebook paper meant for Adam's letter on the table and started to break up the bigger of the two buds. I was sitting cross-legged on the floor and Jules stood over me. "I've got to get out of the house though. If we get high, can we at least go for a walk or something?"

“Mia, you’re supposed to be taking care of me. It’s cold.”

“It’s cold in here, too.” I didn’t bother to get into taking care of her. She had no idea what it entailed, and it felt lonely not to be able to tell her.

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Jules said, “I feel totally locked away, sitting in this room, isolated, trying to get work done. I thought it would feel like a different world, but Prague is exactly the same as Delaware. I want it to be night, so I can go to sleep and maybe I’ll feel differently in the morning. But then every day, the same. I can’t wait to go to sleep again.”

I said, “You need to get out and see more people. We should be socializing more.” Which meant, I should be pushing us to get out more, I should be figuring out ways to override and outsmart and thwart her objections. I had failed at caretaking.

Jules said, “I hate people is the problem. I miss them, but then I hate them.”

I said, “I know exactly what you mean. Maybe we’re too alike in that.”

“Actually we’re not at all. You think we are, that’s your problem. I’m actually *afraid* to hang out with people. You lack imagination to see us as different. You assume. All the time. Because you’re narcissistic. You—”

I said, “I get it.” It’s a cliché, but I felt like I’d been punched. Her words punched me, in my gut, which is a place I don’t usually consider. Patience, must use patience. I might be a lot of things, but I wasn’t narcissistic. How could I be when everything was about her. I figured self-control was my best defense, so I said, “What are you scared of?”

She said, “What if they piss me off. If I get angry, it opens up this way for other

people to get angry, it gives them license.”

I said, “I’m not scared to get angry, that’s true. What part are you scared of, like to know that angry part of yourself exists?”

She said, “You get angry all the time, and I never can.”

I wanted to say that she got mad at me plenty, always had, but she was crying by then, so I sat next to her on the sofa and stroked her hair, and she let me.

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“Do you like the special?” I said. “Going for pure Americana there.” It was the first time Katja had let me create the special, and I thought it was good.

“This potato is very vaginal,” Jules said. She indicated her slice of fried potato, which was oval with a slit down its center. “I’m going to squeeze your American-style ketchup on it since I’m about to get my period.”

“What is that stuff in your scenario, that pepper and paprika stuff?” I asked.

“That’s stubble,” said Jules. “My little potato—which is totally a name for vagina for the new millennium—like, want to mash my little potato, my little potato shaves and it’s got an irritated bikini line.” We both started laughing and couldn’t stop.

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Jules went to the retreat to Moravia with the other teachers. I spent the weekend alone, in bed until three, reading, getting up occasionally to eat the pastries stuffed with sweet dried fruit paste, the garlic Bohemia chips, the raspberry jam-filled cookies with

the good chocolate dippedness—in America it'd be chocolate coating, waxy. Here chocolate is good as a matter of course. I wished I hadn't taken the weekend off, everything was outside, but with what I was doing I could be anywhere. I was always trying to get Jules to go out, but when she left, I felt so exhausted it was hard to even get out of bed.

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“Joe's getting married,” I said. I wanted to talk about something that had nothing to do with her being crazy, or us leaving the country.

Jules said, “Joey Joe from your dorm?”

“Joey Joe,” I confirmed.

She said, “Are you upset? Like, losing a friend to getting married, I mean.” As if she were worried I was into Joe.

“Well, she's not my favorite girl,” I said. “But not upset. But he seems different.”

She said, “What different?” Then, “Do you want help?” and gestured at my bags.

I said, “This one is for you,” about my duffel. It would help me concentrate more if she had something to do. “He's planning this, like, fancy wedding. It seems so stupid, and unlike him. Like, all these rules, and he's so *involved* with everything.” I picked up my purple feather dress as if to suggest packing it, too, and Jules pretended to shudder. “It's all he talks about anymore. How many groomsmen. What kind of icing on the groom's cake. He picked out the flowers, the kind he always buys her plus the kind that's going to be the signature flower for their first daughter.”

Jules said, “Barf.” Then, “Lots of girls would like that shit.”

I said, "I think she does."

Jules said, "What's her name again?"

"Violet. I had a Family Systems class with her. She never said a word. But she's pretty, so that's Joe."

"Violet," Jules said. Then, "How cold do you think it will be in Prague?"

"Colder than here," I said. "But you don't name yourself. To be fair."

"And what could your nickname even be really? Let? Vio?" Jules was in my closet. I wished she would stop. Everything I wanted to pack was already out. When she held up my old vinyl jacket, I shook my head and she put it back. I'd moved everything back from Vermont and I wasn't going to go back in the closet for stuff I wore in high school.

I said, "Lettie."

Jules said, "I guess they have clothes there. I can't concentrate on what to pack."

I said, "Of course. We should just be sure to bring résumés in case we can't find a place to print there."

"It doesn't matter if we get jobs right away. We should hang out in the city. Or travel around for a few weeks."

"And use all my money."

Jules said, "Isn't that OK? I thought that was the whole plan. You keep saying there's nothing more appropriate than to use the money in the Czech Republic. We can visit all of your grandparents' places; it's such a great way to look at their inheritance."

"We're not going to use all of it on this trip."

"Of course not. We won't even make a dent in it."

"I can't even get to all of it."

“I know, you have fancy stocks. All I’m saying is, I thought the point of this trip was to get away from our current reality. And you are not going to miss the tiny bit of money that it takes for us to live for a few weeks.”

“OK.” I’d meant it when I said we should use my money, so I needed to just commit to it.

“I’m not saying be homeless and wandering for months. I’m saying, let’s take a few weeks and have fun. With your grandparents’ money that they would love for us to be using sightseeing in their country.”

“I know, I know. It’s making me anxious to plan, I think. We should keep packing.”

Jules said, “OK. You need socks.” Then, “I’m not trying to make you spend your money this way. I thought it was the plan.”

“It is the plan. I just didn’t know how long you wanted to travel.”

“Not long. Let’s get over the jet lag anyway. Be tourists.”

“Sounds good,” I said. “Do you think we should make a list of stuff to bring? I feel like I’m missing important stuff. Like when you said socks I hadn’t thought it yet. I might have forgotten them.”

“They sell socks in Prague, Mia. Let’s not get bogged down in the piddly shit. It’s going to make both of us crazy.”

I decided I’d just make a list when she wasn’t around. Because having to buy all new socks in the Czech Republic was exactly the kind of thing that would make me feel crazy.

Jules said she didn't believe it. "She's a copycat. She asked me a bunch of questions."

I said, "You told Milena? I never knew about that."

Jules shrugged.

"That could be because she felt a similar way and wanted to connect," I tried.

"No, Mia. She's a liar."

"What, you have a monopoly on problems?" I said.

"No," Jules said with a deep kind of disgust in her voice that indicated she thought I was so outside the realm of this experience as to be completely ignorant of it.

I wanted to say that it was a lot of trouble to go crazy, but I wasn't sure if she knew how much trouble it was since other people took care of everything for her.

Instead I said, "She's got some weird jealousy of you, that much is definitely true. Probably because of that time Eli tried to kiss you. But you really think she's copying your crazy?"

"I mean, who was crazy first, Mia? She asked me a ton of questions about it at the pub once. I could see the wheels turning, like this would make a lot of stuff easier for her. Wipe it out with the crazy, get sympathy."

I said, "That's kind of self-centered, JuJu. I mean, you were crazy first? No one can be crazy except for you? Come on."

"She didn't want to go crazy here, around people who knew her. Stage the crazy off in Budapest so we can all hear about it before she gets back. Convenient crazy."

"There's no way you're right about that," I said. "I'm sorry."

“It was Katja who said it first, not me. She hates her, called her a beanpole lesbian. But it’s what everyone was thinking.”

“I think she’s bi. She’s definitely not straight-up gay,” I said. “And besides, that doesn’t mean Katja hates her.”

Jules said, “Whatever. She and Eli are both fucked up.”

I said, “Good. I’m glad you see that.”

“Thanks for your pseudo-encouragement,” Jules said. “I definitely know you don’t want me to get with Eli.”

“I never said that.”

Jules said, “That’s the most annoying thing about you. Nothing direct, you just hardcore judge me and assume I can’t take care of myself.”

“Wow,” I said. “I do think to jump into another relationship after Alejandro would be a lot. You got divorced and then had to be hospitalized, so it’s OK to just take it easy on the dating for a while.” I tried to use a soothing tone because it was clear she was so hypersensitive that anything I said was going to provoke her. But it was the first time I’d said Alejandro’s name. It was like we had an unspoken pact to not talk about him in Prague, and here I’d broken that.

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Jules said, “This is about when we did shrooms together at that campground. I saw you as a bad person in darkness with a lot of darkness in you, there was so much darkness, the word and the color and the feeling and the light, in your hair and your being and everything and I felt like there was a dark spirit in you, one who was maybe

malevolent towards me or who was just so different than who I thought I was dealing with.”

“You were just mad at me about what I said about your dad.”

“Yeah, that was part of it, maybe. But you know how the shrooms make you feel like you’re understanding this elemental thing?”

“So?” I said. She’d messed up the mood of that trip completely by freaking out and it was like she couldn’t even acknowledge that. It felt like everything I was saying was waiting, and then I was going to jump, just as soon as she gave me an opening.

Jules said, “Yeah. You already hate me. I knew it was always in there, that’s the thing. Like when we were tripping, I know that’s what was happening, I knew it was just the shrooms, but then after it left a stain and I still felt that hate or badness in you.

Something dark towards me.”

I said, “Are you sure you’re not just crazy? The last thing I feel for you is hate.”

“Yeah. I mean, there’s a lot of shit you can throw at me if you want to be a bitch. I can’t ever repay you, I can’t remove all that you know about me. I can’t go back from having gone crazy and from having my father abuse me. You’re always going to have that.”

“But?”

“But I know what I’m talking about when I talk about you, too. Even if you never went nuts. And there’s something wrong with you.”

What could I say? She was a child, and children need soothing.

I'd pulled the chair to the window. My pajamas fell over my feet. I leaned my forehead against the chilled pane of glass. My feet were cramping, but I heard footsteps and I thought my pose was appropriately melancholy, so I stayed put. Ben came in the kitchen and opened the fridge. He looked at me suddenly. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see his expression change. Without turning to face him completely, I said, "You look shocked."

He said, "Why aren't you at the restaurant? Why are you in your pajamas?"

"I got up at four and put a 'gone fishing' sign up. I texted Cara and told her not to come in."

He said, "You did not. Why are you here?"

My forehead now sufficiently chilly, I took my head off the window and looked at him. "Did too."

He took the milk out and drank straight out of the carton. I gave him a disgusted look. "You're not here," he pointed out. "I can do what I want."

"It's gross."

"Are you sick?" he asked. He was wearing his paint-covered clothes from last night.

I said, "I feel bad."

"Jules?"

I said, "I hate the way you say that. Like I should be over it."

"I just don't know how to combat all the moping."

"I didn't ask you to do shit. I'm just sitting here."

He said, "Can we start over? Good morning, Mia. How come you're not at work?"

I could feel myself starting to cry. “Fuck off. I am not in the mood.”

“Fine,” Ben said. “How long are you closing the restaurant?”

I said, “It’s my restaurant.”

“Yes, I know,” Ben said. “What does that mean?”

“It means I can do whatever the fuck I want.”

“Jesus. No one’s going to call you a morning person.”

“You know, I’m really sad, and I need a little sympathy and maybe some compassion,” I said. “I’m sure there are boyfriends who would be concerned for me, who might even try to soothe me.”

Ben said, “There probably are.” Then he went back upstairs.

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Jules said, “She is so annoying to me. Look at her boobs.”

I didn’t look. I said, “I have boobs.”

Jules said, “But you don’t still play with dolls. She plays Barbie all the time.”

“She plays with Barbies? Who is she?” Now I looked.

“She’s in my ballet class. Her name’s Amy. She’s just, like, not growing up but her body is. Or whatever.”

“How do you know she plays Barbies?” It was a little hard to believe, even though, as I looked at this girl, I was willing to believe anything bad about her because I hated her immediately.

Jules said Amy’s mom had told Nori that Amy was developing physically—that was how she put it, *developing physically*—but that she was a bit behind socially and still

played Barbies. And Jules heard her say it.

“Oh my God,” I said. I looked at Amy, who did have kind of gigantic boobs, although they were probably about the same as mine. She also had dark blond hair and those perennially rosy cheeks that some blond girls just seemed to have. She obviously didn’t wear any make-up or care about her clothes. She was standing with a couple of other nerdy girls on the edge of the basketball court.

I asked, “Is she good at ballet?”

Jules said, “No.”

I said, “Her boobs get in the way,” and we laughed.

“But it’s true. Like, you don’t have the body for ballet,” Jules said. “Just cause you’re not tall.”

I said, “And I don’t give a shit.”

Jules said, “Yeah, but Amy thinks she’s going to be a ballerina or something. Like, maybe she had a ballerina music box when she was a kid and now it’s, like, her goal.”

Jules was totally straight board skinny, but beautiful, with the body of an actual ballet dancer and long hair. She didn’t have boobs, just little nubs but she wore a training bra anyway. I think she sort of decided she had to join me in my approach. It was like someone had shone a light on who was going to be able to seize power in the middle school hierarchy and whatever other considerations there were, I could tell it wouldn’t be the girls playing with their Barbies. The girls who had accepted puberty gathered in important-looking, tense clusters, their conversations’ urgency and giggly-grim sense of purpose stringing out like electrical wire across and between groups on the playground keeping a low murmur going, and if you couldn’t see that low murmur as the power that

ran the school, then you were left out. I saw that clearly, and so I joined. Not the group itself—Jules and I hated those girls—but the acceptance of the new way. That, and I had boobs.

Jules and I didn't have other friends. But I felt the important distinction was carriage; we obviously could have friends, but we didn't want them.

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“Every time you bring up Israel, it's like you're tattooing a fucking yellow star on my forehead,” I said.

“But you agree with me! We agree.”

“I know, it's not that. It's just weird of you still. Like you're constantly reminding me I'm a Jew and you're not.”

Jules said, “You are a Jew.” With absolutely no affect, no tone at all to her voice. Not, *You are* a Jew. Not, *You* are a Jew. Not, You are a *Jew*. Not, You are a Jew! Why was it bugging me? I didn't care about Jewish stuff, I *chose* not to care. I wasn't *raised* to care. And yet, sometimes, I still felt like I cared.

I said, “Other. It's like you're saying I'm Other, but I'm the *good* kind of Other, I can hang with Not-Others, you're trying to emphasize how I'm not hung up on distinguishing my Otherness and it makes me want to. To distinguish.”

“What the fuck are you even talking about?” Jules said.

I didn't answer.

She continued, “Plenty of Jews have a complicated response to Israel. It's a big nuanced issue. It's people, for fuck's sake! People are complicated. It doesn't take away

your Jewishness.”

“When non-Jews say ‘Jew,’ it sounds dirty.”

Jules said, “I guess I’ll go ahead and ban you from mentioning my craziness so that I never feel bad at how you identify me.” Then, “Besides, you *are* a dirty Jew.”

She smiled, because she wanted us to be kidding.

I never brought up her craziness, except when I had to, but I laughed, because I was supposed to, and because the other options made me feel tired to even think about. How could I explain why it stung when I didn’t even understand it? I didn’t buy into the idea that I had to participate in an old pain from previous generations, across an ocean, and that had nothing to do with my life.

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Ben said, “Jules and I weren’t best friends. We hooked up a couple times and only for those intense all-night bullshit sessions that you have in grad school.”

“Oh, you used to hook up?”

“Mia, don’t sound like someone is strangling you. Jesus. Not hook up-hook up, hook up-hang out. You know.”

I said, “All I know is, it’s super fucked up of you. Like, do you want to see me and Jules make out? How about me and my sisters? Mother-daughter gang-bang. Perverted.”

“What the fuck are you even talking about?” He wouldn’t look at me, instead staring at the mess of bills on the coffee table.

I tried to think of the nastiest thing I could say that was still safe enough not to last. I said, “I should probably start charging you rent for having your studio here.”

“I pay for stuff, Mia. It’s not my fault you own a giant building outright and invited me to move in. Remember that? You *invited* me,” he said. “Because of how we’re together. It’s not my fault you have tons of money.”

I threw his glass paperweight with the dead scorpion inside at the TV and broke it. The TV and the paperweight. I hated being reminded I had more money than everybody else. It put me at a weird disadvantage that I wasn’t allowed to talk about because the disadvantage of not having money was the only acceptable disadvantage. It was interesting to see the inside of the TV. Immediately, I felt as calmed as if I’d screamed at the top of my lungs. I’d never quite lost the idea that there were great secrets inside the TV, figures made of modeling clay, the parted curtains of the puppet show on *Mr. Rogers*, tiny tiny people running around pulling levers and making it all happen on the screen. I wanted to retrieve his paperweight to see the scorpion, but Ben held my arm and wouldn’t let me forage through the debris because he thought it was dangerous. And, after acting crazy, I felt placid and directable and I liked to let someone else be in charge.

So we calmed down and then we had make-up sex on the floor, and then I told him I spit on a girl once.

He said, “You spit on another person?” He was wearing an undershirt but no pants and was propped against the bed, half-sitting. I was lying on the floor. I moved to put my head in his lap because I liked to smell him after sex. His penis smelled like the ocean in my nose and was so relaxed and friendly after; spent, happy. I kissed its wrinkly softness, quality of a freshly used tissue, and he smiled at me like he loved me, like I hadn’t just acted like an insane asshole, and like we weren’t both afraid I would again.

I said, “Yup.”

He said, “Their face?”

I said, “Yup.”

“When?”

“High school. Middle school?” I couldn’t remember exactly, which seemed incredible. I said, “It had to do with Jules. I was defending her, or something.”

He said, “Figures. Pretty much everything you do has to do with Jules. Does it make you feel powerful, to get so angry?”

I said, “I truly hate and despise those kind of questions.”

Ben said, “OK, but does it? I’m genuinely curious.”

I lifted my head up and frowned at him. He said, “I’m putting up with you. You just smashed our TV. You know? Give me some guidance.”

I thought about the TV. I said, “Fair enough. Maybe not powerful? Powerful people are in control, and I get so angry that I almost black out. As soon as I express it, it becomes a memory I can’t categorize. I have so many options available as to how to remember it—and the options arrive immediately. I’ve already started to forget. Like, the corners go dark.”

He said, “What do you forget?”

It’s hard to explain to him, how stuff just gets foggy. “Circumstances,” I tried, somewhat lamely. Then, as if the past hour were just sinking in, I said, “I made a mess. I broke the TV, oh my God. I’m a mess! Why do you like me?” My face was settled on his thigh, which was stringy with muscle and usually taut but which right now was yielding and cradled me. I pushed his t-shirt up so all I felt was skin on my face and I shut my eyes against him.

“I’ve never met anyone else like you,” he said.

I was going to have to be satisfied with that, even though I knew neither of us understood if he’d meant it as a compliment.

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Jules asked, “So, any boys? Or girls?”

I said, “I’m aggressively putting my sexuality out there,” which is something I heard Hedda say, and she’s a photography major.

Jules said, “Something is happening?”

And she said it so bored that I wanted to tell her everything, but I couldn’t. I said, “I’m kind of like a vessel.”

“What’s that mean? Like a vagina?”

I said, “No, like, I’m just hooking up with whoever is also drunk.” Since I was telling part of the truth, I thought to add a detail. “I got drunk Thursday, because I only have class late on Friday, and I woke up in the hallway at like three in the morning.”

“You did it in the hallway?”

I’d been drunk, but not so drunk I didn’t remember doing it in Jeffrey’s room on his bed with no sheets. I kept thinking about what if the mattress had bugs in it, like lice, and my squirming and twitching was related to that but it went over well with him. He thought I was in the throes. “Yeah,” I said. “We did it in the hallway, and he left me there on the floor.”

Jules said, “Was it good?”

But that part I didn't remember.

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I saw him but I had to make it look like I wasn't trying to find him. Like I'd run across him. Like usual.

So I let him see me first. I hadn't wanted to come inside, I'd wanted him to run across me outside, but he wasn't hanging out outside. I knew he hadn't gone out, but I thought I'd run into him outside smoking or something. When I finally saw him, I figured I was cold enough from my looking that it would all be OK.

I drank from the water fountain even though my fingers were so cold they felt like turning the handle would crack them off. The water was probably cold but I was chilled and it felt warm and so I drank deeply. It was warm running down my throat and I felt everywhere it traveled. I was going to have to remember to pee before we did it.

I sensed him walking behind me the whole length of the hallway but I drank and drank until my stomach was a filled water balloon. He touched my shoulder. Gently, as usual.

He said, "I didn't want to scare you. Don't chip a tooth."

I came up, gasping slightly. There was water dripping from my chin and I knew my face must still be beet-red flushed and pretty. "Adam."

"Where's your coat?" He was dressed to go out.

"I dunno," I said.

"What are you doing?"

"Wandering."

“Did you not notice it’s winter in Vermont?”

I shrugged.

He gave me that look, that appraising squint look, the one that tells me he knows I’m sad, the one I know is a bridge, a precursor to love, but I don’t know how to walk him over. I’d thought I would look sadder without a coat. Also it meant I could request a hug.

I decided to say the last part, so I shrugged and I knew my eyes were sad, I knew my face looked forlorn and then I allowed a wan smile and I said, “I need body heat.”

He had that look of concern that said he thought I was troubled and he was a boy and boys wanted to fix troubled because they couldn’t stand it when you cried and so his mind had come to that simple answer, that he could fix my sadness with his dick. We started kissing, and I forgot and put my frozen popsicle fingers on his neck and he yelped mid-kiss.

“Fuck, Mia.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I just—I left my gloves and stuff.”

“Let’s go somewhere,” he said. He ran his fingers over my shoulders, and it made it hard for me to think of anything. “Somewhere inside my room. Warm.”

I knew he was going to say that and I wanted it so bad because it was a bridge, too, it has to be a way over, if we do this enough it will be less and less random and he’ll choose me and he won’t even know that he didn’t, that I actually chose him a long time ago. It’s fragile and I knew he must believe he made the choice, that it grew naturally out of random hooking up, that he loved me and it was gradual.

I said, “I have a bottle of Jager.”

Adam smiled.

I said, "My room is free tonight."

"Sounds good, but let's go in the back. Your dorm creeps me out."

"How do you know where I live?" My hands hurt and I wanted to put them on his neck, under his arms, in the crack behind his sitting knees, I wanted to take the heat from the hottest part of him, I wanted it to freeze his genitals, but I knew the rules were that I had to wait for him to give. I could set it all up, but then I had to wait.

"I used to go out with Kelsea."

"Really?" Even though of course I knew.

He said, "Are you friends?"

"What's the right answer?" I blew on my fingers to warm them, and he took them in his hands and then put them in his mouth. If I saw that on TV or something, somebody sucking on somebody's fingers, I would laugh, but here with the orange carpet with the vomit stains and someone's Metallica blaring but everyone else out because it was Friday night and we were all young and we knew we were supposed to be having fun—here it was beautiful and I did my best not to let my eyes tear.

"Whatever is true," he said.

"No." That was actually true, so I softened it. "I don't hate her or anything."

He said, "We all make mistakes." He said it totally philosophically and I was positive that skank was a total bitch to him but he said it so kind and I couldn't wait until he loved me, too, like I guess he loved her. And then we kissed and were walking again and he put my fingers in his mittens and we walked like we were one weird creature, like we were a crab or something with tentacles that connected and I felt drunk already even

though all I'd had was water.

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Ben wanted me to talk to him about all of my men. He said I'm more fucked up than Jules, which I—what's the right word?—relished. *I am more fucked up*. It was the nicest thing he could have said to me. He said I'm like a sponge. *Baby, you're like a sponge for everything that happened to her*. Like a love song: baby, baby, what a liar you are, what a fake, oooh, baby, baby. I replayed it in my mind, over and over. I started calling myself *sponge*. As in, sponge, turn left here. Sponge, maybe don't eat that last delicious bit of cake. Sponge, honey, I love you.

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I wanted help. I also wanted back-up. I approached Dad, as I usually did when I wanted reassurance that I already knew Mom would give me; when I was really going out on a limb and taking a chance, I needed to be sure Dad was with me. "Will you look at my Voices outline?"

Dad was busy paying bills. He said Mom couldn't be trusted to keep a roof over our heads if she had to pay the bills. He said that kind of thing all the time, only the tone changed depending on how he was saying it. If he was mad at Mom, he'd say it in a disgusted, put-upon way. Like he was long-suffering and had to do it all. The same way Mom talked about Dad being hopeless with the laundry and how we'd all have pink, infant-sized underwear covered in pieces of Kleenex if Dad was in charge of washing

clothes. But Mom's tone never changed because she never brought it up when she was feeling fond of Dad. Dad, on the other hand, would sometimes tease Mom in a nice-sounding way about not being practical and how she thought she could either charm or strong-arm the creditors, that keeping up with the bills was for people less dazzling than she was. It was clear to me that Dad really meant it as an apparent truth: Mom *was* more dazzling than other people.

Dad filled in a number in the checkbook, put the pen in the checkbook to hold his place before he closed it, and took off his glasses. "What do you need, honey?" he asked.

I sat down next to him. We were at the dining room table. Mom said Dad liked to pay bills and do taxes in a public space, instead of in his office, to show her up. Dad always took this as a joke and usually winked at one of us before answering Mom seriously in the affirmative. I took a deep breath and shoved my outline at him. "I need you to look at my Voices outline."

"OK," Dad said. He didn't put his glasses back on or look at my paper. "What's the assignment?"

I was prepared for this. As a teacher, Dad always wanted to know the assignment before he would help. I drew the crumpled copy from my back jeans pocket. I read, "Your Voices Essay will be a 500-word essay, your voice on a matter of current importance to the people of the United States. This assignment must be typed on a typewriter or computer. If you do not have access to one of these, you may use the computer lab during your free period. For this essay, you may look at any issue in the news of the past year, and your essay should include both a summary of the issue and your opinion on the issue. Your essay should include an introduction, a conclusion, body

paragraphs, transition words, and topic sentences. Remember that verbs are the strongest words in a sentence. You will need to complete an outline, or a web, due two weeks before your essay. Your outline or web will be approved, and then you will draft your essay. Your rough draft will be due one week before your final draft. Remember that your topic is up to you, and how you feel about the issue is not what's being graded. You are being graded on how well you communicate your opinion. Use your Voice!' That's it."

Dad said, "What's a web?"

"That's for the artistic people. Mrs. Blake says it's for people who organize differently," I said. "Jules is doing a web."

"Ah," said Dad. He still hadn't put on his glasses. "And you are doing an outline."

"Yes." Jules was only doing a web because it was like drawing and she could do it on the bus and not type it, but I didn't bother to tell Dad that.

Dad said, "When's it due?"

I said, "The rough draft is due tomorrow, but it doesn't have to be long since it's a draft."

"What are you writing about?"

"Well, my title is 'Why Christa McAuliffe is Not a Hero.' And it's about—"

Dad said, "How she's not a hero." He laughed. "Did you show this to your mother?"

I said, "No."

Dad put his glasses on. "Well, let's have a look at this thing. What's this sentence here at the top?" He read it aloud, "The dictionary defines 'hero' as someone admired by

many for brave deeds.”

“That’s my topic sentence,” I said.

“OK, let’s see here. You have a paragraph of summary, the contest to be the teacher in space, the Challenger explosion, the news coverage. Then you have a paragraph of opinion, what a hero is, how Christa McAuliffe is no different than a tourist who gets hit by a bus in Paris.” Here, Dad laughed, so I laughed, too. He continued, “You say here that bravery indicates intention to be brave and does not apply to people who thought they were doing something safe.” Dad put the paper down. “You don’t think she was worried about going into space?”

“No,” I said. I was prepared for this argument. “She was happy, to be the first teacher and everything, and no one thought anything would go wrong. She’d trained, it seemed safe. If she just thought she’d got chosen for this honor, and then something goes wrong, then we all treat her like she knew she was going to die beforehand and if she’d just completed the mission and come back and taught people about space, she wouldn’t be a hero.”

“That might not be true,” Dad said. “People might say she was a hero just for being a teacher. People say service workers, like teachers, firefighters, police officers, and doctors and nurses, people say they’re everyday heroes.”

I was stumped. “Dad, do you know what I mean? All of a sudden, people put all this intention on her that wasn’t there before, that isn’t fair, and it’s like how people romanticize the dead and make it seem like they weren’t ever annoying when they were alive.”

I said, “Did you say something to Jules about conspiracy theories? Or conspiracy theorists?”

Emmie said, “Not that I know of.”

I said, “But what do you think?”

Emmie said, “I don’t know. I’m not a believer generally, although I do believe groups often turn malignant. As do secrets. But I’m not a conspiracy theorist.”

I said, “Oh.”

Emmie said, “Why?”

“I was reading an old email. Jules said you had some idea, that’s all.”

Emmie said, “You save your old emails?”

“Yes.”

“I’m going to have to remember that next time I write you. Wait, are you taping this call?”

“I was just reading over some old stuff.”

“Linda Tripp.”

“She should make you believe in conspiracies. Although I guess she was acting alone.”

“So did Jules say what I’d said?”

I said, “No, just that she always thought of your take on conspiracies.”

Emmie said, “That’s funny. I wonder what I’d said.”

Jules said, “Whatever. Men can’t be raped. It’s not even possible.”

I said, “What about by other men?”

“Duh. I mean by women. I mean this political correctness fucking offends me.”

“Where are you even talking about this?”

“In my dorm meeting, I told you. They’re very concerned everyone understand how not to get raped. Apparently if you don’t get wasted and you do show respect to people, you don’t get raped. Isn’t that cool?”

“We didn’t talk about that in my dorm.”

“Whatever, it was so smug. I told them about Dad because I figured they deserved it.”

“You did what?”

“That. What I just said. It felt amazing.”

But it made me feel panic, like something that was mine had suddenly been stolen. Even though of course Jules had told lots of other people. I said, “Are you sure that was a good idea? Wait, at your actual dorm meeting? To everybody?”

“I’m tired of feeling like I’m hiding a secret that could explode on me whenever. If somebody finds out, am I going to get upset? Is it going to be awkward? Am I going to cry? Fuck that. I’m going to tell everyone and then I don’t walk around worrying about it.”

“But is it a good idea that everybody knows?”

“Long-term, no, maybe not a good idea. Maybe I’ll regret it. But in the moment, amazing idea. Amazing! Made me feel amazing. And I’m pretty into being in the moment right now.”

I said, “What did people say? How have they been acting to you?”

“Normal. You know.”

“Jesus,” I said and then felt bad. This was just the kind of thing we’d talked about, where stuff was going to change and be less comfortable because there were all these new people. Even though I felt jealous of them, the only way to keep my place was going to be supportive of all her other options.

“It’s very Christian-centric the way you fling the Jesus around all the time,” Jules said. This was her signal that we were to discuss lighter fare.

“I feel it’s a nice incongruity.”

“I know, but you’re neglecting other deities. Like, I would like you to start saying Jesus Buddha.”

“Jesus Buddha.” I laughed. “OK.”

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We went out to dinner at Bernie’s Pizza with Jules and Alejandro even though it was the night after they’d eloped. When Jules had called to tell me they’d gone to the courthouse, I hadn’t believed her. I asked if she was pregnant which is the only way eloping at twenty made any sense. She couldn’t even drink! She wasn’t but she said she could imagine having babies with him, so I decided maybe she’d lost her mind.

Alejandro picked the place because he said he’d heard all about it but never been. They hadn’t been together long enough for him to even meet Mom and Dad, or Nori, or Nuttie, or go to her favorite pizza place.

“What are you studying, Alejandro?” Dad asked, all freshman advisor. Even though we all knew he was anti- in loco parentis. We were at our usual corner booth at Bernie’s, only Jules was co-opting our favorite pizza, explaining it to Alejandro, how much he would like it, as we ordered.

“You can call him Ollie,” Jules said. “I call him Ollie.” Alejandro whispered something in her ear, and she giggled. I felt like I might throw up. Dad stayed quiet, waiting.

Alejandro said, “Um, I’m not sure about my major yet.” Then he went back to giggling over the menu. Their heads were so close together they looked conjoined.

“He’s painfully shy,” I told Dad. “He has trouble talking.” Mom kicked me under the table.

“Excuse me,” I said. The bathroom had to be better than the table, even though there was a line. When I got back, two blobs in heavy coats with dirty fur collars were talking to Mom. When they left, Alejandro asked who they were. I wasn’t surprised. Mom and Dad were both terrible at introductions. They just didn’t seem to think about it. Dad would say he was bad at it, but Mom always prided herself on being socially skilled, at least compared to Dad. But neither one ever introduced us to adults who came to talk to them.

Mom said, “That was Bert and Elsie; they used to live in our neighborhood, and Elsie and I have worked together on several things. We wrote that grant proposal.”

“She has really big hands,” Alejandro said. “They wrapped all the way around mine.”

Small hands mean small penises—or was it feet and penises? Either way, I smirked

nastily at Alejandro.

“She used to be a nun,” Mom told Alejandro. “She’s a wonderful person. I’ve sat on several committees with her. She’s really the one who got the Children’s Center up and running.”

It was like Mom, who worked like a dog on that Children’s Center, to give the credit away. It was close to false modesty but with a dash of something else thrown in. She did it all the time. It was boring, and I sought to change the subject.

“Elsie got fat,” I offered. Normally, Jules would have agreed with any criticism I dished out, even if only to inspire outrage at our meanness, something we both found funny. But she wasn’t paying attention to me. She was just giggling with Alejandro. It was like I was left alone with my family again. I saw Alejandro pinch her stomach and she giggled again—all the giggling was getting on everybody’s nerves, I could tell.

He was ordinary and just not special like Jules, he was run-of-the-mill, uninspiring, he diminished her. After dinner, when they’d left together and I was in the backseat riding home with Mom and Dad, I said as much.

“They care about each other, Mia,” Mom said.

Dad turned around and looked at me sympathetically, which made me feel like hitting something. He said, “Maybe somebody like Jules needs somebody, as you say, ordinary.”

I turned to Mom. “You *care* about bad people. You *care* about child abusers and drug addicts and wife beaters.”

“That’s true,” Mom acknowledged.

I continued, “Jules *cares* about her dad.”

Dad said, “Do you have reason to suspect he’ll hurt Jules? Take advantage of her in some way?”

“No.” I could hear how I sounded. I said it like a kid being forced to disclose the location of a secret clubhouse to a uniformed police officer.

“Well, then,” Mom said, wrapping up the conversation with the tone of her voice, which was a talent I hated and envied with equal measure. “We support her decision. Alejandro seems like a nice young man.”

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The exhibit featured a series Jules called “The monotony of head.” A series of bald heads, obviously phallic. I liked the little patches of tight pube-y hair around the ears.

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I reported to Mom, “She sleeps with her hands balled into fists.”

Mom said, “She does?”

“Doesn’t that mean she’s tense? Or trying to fight?”

“Is she having nightmares?”

I said, “I don’t know. No.”

“How do you know about her fists?”

I said, “When we do sleepovers in the basement? On the sofa bed?” I didn’t mention my nightly checks to the spare room even though I was pretty sure Mom knew I went down there.

Mom said, “Bunny is working with Jules, honey. She’s trying to help her relax in her body.”

I said, “The ballet stuff?”

“Yes.”

“But that’s about movement. You don’t move when you’re asleep.”

“I know you don’t like ballet—”

“That has nothing to do with anything!”

“You can’t be with Jules every second. Even if she decides to live here full-time you can’t. She’s doing OK.”

“She’s not doing OK.”

Mom finally put down her papers and looked at me. She said, “Mia. Is there something you need to tell me?”

I sulked. “No,” I said.

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The new series of paintings was based on old photographs. There was Jules climbing a tree. Cut-offs and a striped rainbow tank, her limbs long even when she was so small. Grinning. In each of the photos, actually, she seemed to sort of gleam with happiness, her body intent on its activity. Even your smile looks shiny, I told her.

“That one was my dad’s favorite picture of me,” she said. I liked to stare at the large brown frames, and at the way the picture disintegrated into dots when you stared, the flatness of it. I felt bad for them, for the photographs themselves as inanimate objects who hadn’t done anything wrong and didn’t deserve to be punished.

I said, "More angry art?" I knew when I said it that it would piss her off. But she'd said she wasn't doing any more art about her dad. I wanted to piss her off, I guess, or I wouldn't have said it.

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Ben said, "Like that series she did, *Photos on My Father's Wall*."

I said, "Exactly. What did people say about that kind of work?"

"Different stuff. What do you mean?"

"Did people think she should try to talk about something other than her dad?"

Ben said, "It was never a secret. She was extremely upfront about it. I wonder if she's ever gone anywhere where people didn't think of her as someone who was molested by her dad. I mean, she's *out there* with it as an artist."

I said, "Prague. No one knew in Prague."

Ben said, "She didn't tell anyone?"

"No."

"Interesting."

I said, "We went to Prague right after she went crazy. That's why I went, to look out for her. She was pretty obsessed with having been crazy, so everybody there knew that. She loved being the person who'd gone nuts. The incest thing took a temporary backseat."

"And you didn't tell anyone?"

"She didn't want to. As I look back on it, maybe she was kind of fragile, maybe it was too hard."

“Well, yeah.”

I could feel how that had sounded, so I tried to explain. “I mean, of course she was fragile, but you know Jules, she never comes off that way, no matter what’s going on.”

Ben said, “You know her better, but I always thought of her as a really vulnerable person.”

“Why?”

“She was so right there with her emotions, a weepy person. Her subject matter. And she’d talk to you about anything.”

I said, “It makes me feel defensive.”

“What?”

“This conversation.”

He said, “Why?”

“I can’t explain it to you. I just want to defend my notion of her.”

Ben said, “The amazing thing about that series was how pure the joy in them was, this is what we all remarked upon. It made them so creepy, in a way, when you knew about her and her dad. Her smile, and she was so physical in every picture, like a tomboy. Just so much body in each picture but a body totally devoid of sexuality. But *really* physical.”

I said, “They were like Little League pictures, right?”

He said, “I think so. I remember one of her on a balance beam, doing gymnastics stuff, like kiddie gymnastics. And one riding a horse. I guess you saw the originals hanging in his office, huh?”

“Yup.” Although I wasn’t sure I’d ever been in her dad’s office.

“What was he like? Her dad.”

“It’s hard to say. Because of what I know now.”

“But what did you think when you were a kid? Was there a time you knew him before it happened?”

“She always says nothing happened before he raped her. Like it was completely out of character.”

“You don’t believe her?”

“I have no idea.” As I said it, I realized that was true. It seemed impossible that it was an isolated incident, but all of it was so impossible and possible all at once. What did I know? “But I was little, elementary school. So I hardly interacted with him. He was jolly. That’s a weird word. But yeah. Like joking and quoting from movies and stuff.”

“Did your parents get along with him?”

“My parents don’t like other people, really. Mom is social but only to gain more fodder for criticism, or to enact some social change, some project. I don’t get the sense she truly enjoys most people. And Dad is a typical academic, very withdrawn.”

Ben said, “They didn’t socialize with Jules’ parents.”

“No. Well, we had to get along with Nori after, but not when they were still a couple.”

“I know how you feel about Jules’ mom.”

I said, “I doubt it. I feel about a million ways about her mom.”

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Crit. I said, “Like critter.”

“Try critique.”

“There’s something awful, strange about that word. *Crit*. Crotch, croup. Roach, thing.”

“It is a weird word.” She said it bored. As if my lack of familiarity were familiar. It made me want to list the way the word sounded until I came up with something that made her pause, that made her re-imagine it whole. On and on, until we were both bored with each other’s knowledge.

She said, “It’s a weird thing, too, all of us standing around assessing each other’s paintings. Critiquing at the crit.”

I said, “Critter.” Lamely.

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I expected it to smell bad, cat piss and death, but it was sterile like a hospital. At least the lobby was. Jules’ dad had sent her a bunch of money for college, and my parents gave her part of it for whatever. Jules called it her settlement money and said she was going to enjoy it.

“Where do we go?” Jules whispered. I could tell she was excited, but once we stepped inside the pound, I think we both felt scared.

“Can I help you?” a woman behind the desk asked.

“We’re looking for the puppies.”

“To your right and down that little hall,” she said. “Take a look at the room beyond it, too, girls. Lots of older dogs who need a loving forever home.”

“I guess I’m supposed to feel bad that I want a puppy,” Jules said. She said it to me,

but she also said it so the lady behind the desk could hear her.

“Shut up,” I said as I dragged her down the hall.

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Adam emailed me, said we should get together, that he was in Burlington for a few days to see friends, and I was sort of excited even though we hadn't talked in forever. We sat at a table at Denny's, not our usual after-the-bar booth from college, but a table. A table with a view of that booth.

Adam wasted no time with pleasantries. I could tell from his face he wasn't going to hug me hello like I'd imagined. As soon as I saw him and sat down he said, “I need to tell you that you really messed me up. When you lie about something sacred, it fucks with a person. It was so disappointing. That's why I hated you. Or why I was so angry with you.”

I said, “OK.” I wasn't prepared to talk about all this. I'd even invited Ben, but he said, “Protocol is you go see old boyfriends without the new boyfriend. If he flirts with you, bring all that sexual energy home.”

Adam said, “When I was applying to law school, after you came back from being abroad, I was obsessed with being angry with you. I was consumed by it. But I couldn't tell you.”

“Have you decided on some drinks?” Our server was young, like maybe nineteen, with bleached blond hair and dark roots. Strung-out skinny.

I said, “I think we both want coffee and that's it.” I didn't know what Adam wanted, but he nodded without looking at the server.

“Do you take cream?” she asked. It seemed to me that she was staying at the table in order to give me time to think how to respond to this onslaught. I wanted her to leave and I wanted her to push Adam off his chair and sit with me while I cried.

Adam nodded at her about the cream and she left.

I said, “Why couldn’t you tell me?”

“I don’t know, I just didn’t want to get into it.”

“You’re the one who wanted us to be fuck buddies. And you know you led me on, made me think there might be more we could be,” I said. I took a deep breath because even after all this time, what I had to say was scary. I said it even though our waitress was setting a pot of coffee and a bowl of plastic creamers between us. I said, “You knew I was in love with you.”

Adam shrugged. “That’s a different issue. It has nothing to do with anything.”

“I wish you’d told me.” If he’d been angry, at least I’d have known he gave a shit about me. Or thought about me when I wasn’t there. He’d said *obsessed*. Even though he was hurting my feelings, even though I’d thought he couldn’t hurt my feelings anymore after all this time, I paused to savor it: he’d been obsessed with me.

“You wanted me to tell you. Yeah, I don’t think so Mia.”

“I guess you understand everything about me.”

“I understand you’re a liar.”

“I didn’t lie.”

“What are you talking about. Of course you did,” he said. He said it dismissively. I thought if I tried to argue, I’d cry. “You know what I kept thinking about? It’s weird. We never even dated really. But you were the only Jewish girl I hooked up with in college,

and so my mom knew about you. And my grandma.”

“Your grandma knew about me?”

“They thought of you like my girlfriend.”

“I would have wanted to be your girlfriend. I wished I was.”

“I didn’t want a girlfriend,” he said.

I said, “That part was real clear.”

“But I did like you. And sometimes I thought about after school was over, like maybe we could be together.”

“Why after school? I mean, why not in school when we were actually sort of together?”

“I had a plan for myself. I always figured I’d play around in college and then I’d settle in graduate school.”

Settle like he was deciding upon a meal.

I said, “Settle down.”

“That’s what I said.”

“No, actually you said settle. Which is negative.”

“I remember my dad told me that’s what he did. He had some kind of weird analogy, like college is an ice cream store of the ladies, and you should try all the flavors.”

“Did he mean try the non-Jew flavors?”

“So is settle down,” he said. “Negative.”

“To you.”

“Anyway, I’m friends with Leslie. And when I heard from Leslie that you’d told

her you'd been molested you or whatever—”

“What a bitch.”

“Leslie? She's not a bitch.”

“That's not exactly something you're supposed to spread around,” I said. “I don't understand why all of you were so interested in talking about me.”

“Actually, Mia, she was concerned about you. She meant it to be nice to you.”

“Nice to me.”

“Yeah.”

“It's still inappropriate.”

“I'm glad she told me. Because now I know. And regardless, her intention was good. When she told me, I thought it smelled funny. Like what Jeffrey said. In fact, exactly the same story. The one you told me was a lie. So I asked her some questions, and she wasn't lying and she wasn't spreading secondhand rumors. She had a bunch of details.”

“So you're fucking Leslie now?”

“That doesn't have anything to do with what I'm telling you. She's actually a very good friend to you, Mia. She wanted to ask you what happened, she figured you had some good reason to lie, or even that you weren't lying. But she doesn't know you as well as I do.”

“You hate me.”

“You never had any details.”

“You never asked me,” I said. “I *longed* for you to ask me so I could explain. You have no idea.” I knew it was illogical, but what if I'd been telling the truth. He didn't care

enough to ask me anything.

He said, "I figured it was painful."

"It was."

"Everything is so hard for you."

I said, "If you'd been more upfront with me, maybe I could have been more upfront with you." As I said it, I knew it was true. I could have confessed to him, the way I told Ben, if he'd ever been interested in who I was beyond just fucking me when he was drunk or felt horny or bored. I'd spent years thinking about him, wanting to really know him, and he hadn't cared about me, and I'd always known that deep down.

"You would have told me the truth? That's hard to believe." He was angry now, but less passionately so. His voice was more contained, he'd moved from even sharing his anger with me. Neither of us had touched the coffee and now, as if to demonstrate his complete removal, he poured himself a cup and slowly stirred a creamer in.

I said, "If I'd felt like you wanted to know me and that you actually liked me, I would have, yes."

"It's just not a forgivable thing you did."

I said, "To you."

"To anyone!"

"That's not true. Some people can forgive things. Because they understand the person's reasons. Which you never tried to do, because you never cared about getting to know me."

"Since we stopped seeing each other, I've spent a lot of time alone, a lot of time thinking of you."

“How would I have ever known that?”

“I didn’t want you to know.” Now he was sitting back in his chair, enjoying the power.

“What do you want?”

“I want to say this to your face. It was just so fucked up of you to lie. It totally fucked me up. I had this recurring fantasy of killing myself and mailing you a letter—or having you find me although I knew that would never happen. The letter would say it was liars like you who made me do it. And then I figured you’d keep going but be, like, haunted forever by what I’d done. I knew you were in love with me in college. It was obvious. And even after college, you seemed kind of starstruck by me, like if I lived close by, you’d be in love with me again.”

I wanted to interrupt him because I’d been in love with him for years after college and because there was no way I could let him get away with that. I wanted to say, I have a nice man who really loves me now. But I stayed quiet because I knew if I talked, I was going to lose control.

He said, “I figured I could ruin your life or that you’d at least never be able to lie again. Maybe you’d even kill yourself.”

I said, “Kill myself?”

He said, “Yeah,” and took a gulp of his coffee with a kind of finality to his expression, as if my mistakes had earned his horrible words.

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I said, “Let’s see. Well, I’ve been noticing lately that I’m not as good a person as I

used to be.”

The therapist said, “In what way?”

I said, “I used to pick up litter and trash that I saw. I used to pick recycling out of trash cans.”

The therapist said, “And you don’t do that anymore?”

I said, “No. I just leave it. I always notice, is the fucked up thing. So I know I could still be a good person. But I choose not to.”

The therapist said, “So not picking up trash makes you less of a good person?”

I said, “Yes.”

The therapist said, “Are you sure this is what you want to be talking about?”

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The desks were supposed to have a narrow aisle between them, but since we were the only two who ever sat in the back, there was no reason for us to keep the aisle, and I did notice Adam’s desk inching closer and closer to mine the first week of the semester. We were rolling our eyes at each other that week, or smiling, flirting but not really talking. The course was stupid, so we talked about that the few times we did talk. “Why do they make you take a freshman experience course again?” Adam asked after the first class.

“First-year,” I corrected, mock-priggishly. “I’m not a fresh man.”

“Either way,” he said. A smile that indicated he got my little joke but that he liked me and also that he may be a bit of a jerk, a *fun* jerk. “It’s a retarded class.”

So after the first week, our desks had migrated next to each other. They touched. It

was like a Ouija board, I don't know how mine moved, it happened of its own accord. And he started by leaning his leg against mine, a move that made my leg shiver and press against his for stability. I started wearing shorts to class, and, once he started touching me under the desk, moving up my leg, skirts. He would basically jerk me off. I never touched him. And we never talked about it. I hooked up with lots of other guys before Adam and I finally started getting together my junior year, but we never talked about him groping me under our first-year experience desks. We never mentioned it.

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Ben always wanted to sleep after sex, or, even more boring, just lay around with no talking. I hadn't thought anything could be more boring than sleeping, but here we were.

As usual, I sat up, naked and cross-legged, while he reclined. He made his fingers a camera and took naked pictures of me. I said, "I need you to talk to me about Jules. I need you to commiserate."

Ben said, "Talking again, huh? I can't talk this much. I'm not built for it."

"Haven't you ever had a girlfriend before? Am I, oh my God," I dropped my voice to a whisper, "am I your first talker? I know you had a screamer."

"Ha ha."

"Please?" I said.

"I need to go paint."

"If I hadn't asked for talking, you would stay?"

"If you wanted to lay around naked, hang out after sex, no talking, just laying, yeah. I'd hang out. But that doesn't sound like you."

I said, “Five minutes of talking. If you talk to me now, it’ll make you feel so much happier to be alone in your studio all night. You’ll be so happy to get away from me.”

Ben said, “OK. What do you miss most about her?”

“Good question! Little stuff, weird stuff. She appreciates small bodily stuff like how good it feels to wipe your ass after you’ve lotioned after a shower.”

“Like using an aloe baby wipe. I know what you mean.”

I said, “I guess,” even though I felt sad when he said that because that wasn’t it at all. “It’s been awhile for me with the baby wipes. Like, since I was a baby. Although they make that scented wet toilet paper shit now, totally wasteful. And weirdo.”

Ben said, “That guy, the one from *Crash*—”

I said, “I hate that fucking movie.”

Ben said, “I did, too. But we were the only ones. It won some big award.”

“It won best picture! I lost all respect for best picture after that. And it had been pretty fucking low since *Million Dollar Baby* and *Braveheart* and that Russell Crowe bullshit.”

Ben said, “Yeah, it’s not really about good movies.”

I said, “They should call it best pandering picture or best commercial transgender cryfest or something.”

Ben laughed. He said, “For me, it was when *Forrest Gump* beat *Pulp Fiction*. Travesty.”

“Oh God, I don’t remember that.”

Ben said, “That’s when I officially stopped believing. Anyway, that guy from *Crash*, I forget his name, he only fucks ladies who use those wipes.”

I said "Which guy?"

Ben said, "I don't know."

"White guy?"

Ben said, "No, I can't think of his name."

I said, "Black guy?" and Ben shrugged.

Ben said, "I never remember black people's names, they all sound alike."

"So he has, like, reverse fecal fetish," I said.

"Yeah, he seems pretty anti-fecal."

"How do you know this?"

Ben said, "The internet."

"It's weird how much celebrity gossip you know." All of my limbs felt heavy, like I was inside soup instead of air. I tried lying down. The effort to seem cheerful exhausted me.

Ben said, "Yeah. Anyway, your ass. You wish you could talk to Jules about your hairless ass."

I said, "Not specifically my ass, just that kind of thing. Wait, it's hairless?"

Ben said, "You're the least hairy Jewish girl I've ever met."

I sat up. "You don't know how much that means to me! Are you just saying that? I have hairy forearms."

He grabbed my arm and turned it over. "You don't."

"I do, they've just gotten better." I examined my forearm. "Or the hair's gotten lighter or something."

"Maybe you've gotten tanner working in the garden."

“Maybe. Or I just got used to them.”

“I’ve never noticed them being extra hairy.”

“I used to bleach them. And shave them. All kinds of stuff.”

“Did that look funny?”

“In retrospect, it probably did. But I thought it looked good,” I said.

Ben held my wrist and I kissed his hand. He actually had made me feel better.

I said, “I thought I was the first non-Jew you’d dated.”

“Hey, as long as you’re technically Jewish, no one in my family cares. They won’t even care that you’re not hairy.”

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I said, “She wouldn’t have done it to me. She’d never in a million years do it to me.”

Merrie said, “Are you sure you’re not being too hard on yourself?”

I was crying, but it was not Merrie’s nature to comfort me with any physical gesture. Even the soothe in her voice seemed put-on, an overlay, maybe because I could sense her frustration just underneath. She sat across from me, and her legs were crossed perfectly, perfectly waxed legs, like she never grew hair there to begin with. When I’d started to cry, her hand had moved from its fold on her lap out toward me, an involuntary move, like: don’t leap out into traffic. Her hand had returned itself to her lap quickly, and it was a minute gesture, but it was meant to hold me back and stifle me. So I took some pleasure in my energetic sobbing. Some mean pleasure.

I said, “I’m sure. She would never do that to me.”

“I’m not even sure I understand what you think you did to Jules.”

“I bossed her around. I *intruded*.”

“Surely that’s not new behavior.”

I covered my mouth with Merrie’s expensive wool throw pillow so the choking part of my sobbing was more hidden. It was an involuntary gesture, too.

“I mean, Mia. I mean—”

I covered my ears with the pillow, but Merrie was so loud I could hear her anyway. She said, “That’s just how you are.”

I managed, “She just got tired of me maybe.”

“You know, it’s not a one-way street. She’s hard to be around, too,” Merrie said.

I said, “You are the least comforting person ever. You just argue.”

“It’s not irrelevant that she’s a fucked up person. It’s a part of what happened.”

I kept crying, letting the stream from my nose soak into the wool.

Merrie said, “You need to perform teshuvah.”

“I’m not really Jewish. This shit doesn’t help me.”

“I wish you’d stop saying that. Under no one’s definition is that true. Even Mom identifies as Jewish.”

“To you maybe. Because she wants to suck up to you so you’ll quit hating her.”

“Mom could stand to perform teshuvah, too.”

“Fine,” I said. “What is it?”

“Seriously, Mia. I’m sure you heard about it at Hebrew School. Something you want to do before Yom Kippur? You really don’t remember?”

“No, I never paid any attention there.”

“It’s an act of repentance. It takes many forms.”

“Like confession.”

Merrie said, “Way more intellectually based than that.”

“Because Jews are smarter. More chosen-er! See, I hate this shit. Tribalism.” But I felt better. I’d lifted my head, and I looked around for something to blow my nose on.

“Tissue?”

Merrie pushed a heavy silver tissue holder across the table towards me.

I touched it, happy to leave smeary fingerprints. “This is fancy,” I said, blowing my nose. “I didn’t even notice it as a tissue holder.”

“That’s kind of the point of it,” Merrie said.

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I said, “It’s Vermont, you dork. We need hair up here.”

Jules pulled her jeans down. “God, just get naked why don’t you,” I said. She had a little strip of pubic hair, very light brown, trimmed close, no stubble around. Landing strip, exotic stripe. Mine spilled out everywhere.

Jules said, “You should shave it or Nair it off so it’s just a little bush like this. That’s what Nori told me. Trim the hedges.”

But I knew without even trying that mine would have stubble, it wouldn’t look like hers. Hers looked soft. She said it wasn’t but I knew it wasn’t a toilet brush like mine.

I said, “I’m not sure I want to take pubic grooming advice from your mom.”

“It’s the only advice I take from her! Oh my God, she does have a purpose. I’ll tell

her next time I call her.”

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“It makes me feel gross that I used to call him Ollie.”

“What did he call you?” I asked. Even though I remembered. *Dumpling*.

Jules ignored me. “At least Ollie is short and fat. An ugly chubby. A penis that hurts going in but then doesn’t feel like much. A mini keg.”

I wanted to comfort her but I was so mad at her for getting herself hurt that I could tell I wasn’t helping. I walked around the UVM campus every day and my footsteps were a drumbeat that synced with my heart, and the refrain was *fuck you you loser*. I hadn’t even liked him, but I’d trusted him.

“He wasn’t as smart as me,” she said.

“That’s true,” I agreed, grateful for the chance to be sincere.

“He said that to me once. That he was going to be this sweet guy who wasn’t enough for me, he was going to be a nice starter guy for me but that I needed more. Like he could see through to the end. I hated when he said that, but I think he was right.”

Except for the sweet part, the nice guy part, I thought. I struggled to maintain my expression. I couldn’t further wound her. I was surprised Alejandro knew that about their relationship.

“Which hurts a lot,” Jules said. “Him being right.”

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“Mom wants to apologize to all of you,” Jules said. “For her amends for AA.”

“What’s she going to apologize for?” I asked.

“I have no idea,” Jules said. “Leaving her only daughter with another family so she could drink more and be fucked up? Your parents buying all my clothes and school supplies and taking me to dance and getting me pottery lessons with George and having Christmas for me even though you’re Jewish?”

“Those sound like things she should apologize to *you* for,” I said. “We had fun having Christmas.”

“She wanted me to come, but I’m not going.”

I said, “What do you mean you’re not going?”

“She owes me a totally separate apology. I will not be lumped in with your family’s amends. That is so fucked up.”

I said, “OK, but does that mean Nori’s just going to come over and talk to us and you won’t be there?”

Jules said, “Yup.”

“That sucks,” I said. Then, “I deserve a separate amends, too.”

“Maybe you’ll get one,” Jules said. “But I wouldn’t count on it.”

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Jules and Nori and I were all lying on Nori’s bed half-watching TV. We’d planned to go get ice cream, but Nori was wasted drunk, so we convinced her to just order pizza. When we had our licenses next year, it wouldn’t matter. For now, though, it was easier to just stay at the apartment. She’d been calmer lately during our visits, but Jules still

wanted me to come over with her. I'd decided Nori behaved better because I was there, although I didn't tell Jules that. But she wouldn't want to have a screaming panic attack in front of me. She knew me, but not enough for that to not be weird.

Jules sat at the foot of the bed painting her toenails with Nori's purple polish, while Nori and I reclined side by side on the pillows like an old married couple. I kept waiting for her to spill polish, but she was crazy precise.

Nori said, "Once I opened up a brand new package of toilet paper—blood stain on it, not big, like from a cut finger. I used it just the same. What the hell."

I said, "What could that even be from?"

"What's the difference. Everybody's afraid of blood these days."

"Because of AIDS."

"No, not that, I mean—yes, these days I guess, but that's not what I meant. Death on their hands. Blood is death but so is plenty of stuff. Other inside-the-body stuff."

"Like bones?" Jules laughed at me, so I pursued it. "Do you think people are afraid of bones?"

"Not bones so much. Vomit, pus, spittle, fluid. There's all sorts of death rattles. But everybody gets worked up about blood."

I didn't say anything. What was there to say? It was hard to talk to Nori, she was always so weird. At least she was in a good mood. We tried to keep her drinking because when she was sober, all she did was freak out.

"I'm going to get some of those glasses," Nori said, indicating Sally Jessy on the TV.

"Those are cool, Mom," Jules said. "You totally should."

Nori's face was super thin and pale, and those glasses would look terrible on her. I said, "I think you should get plainer ones."

"You don't think I could pull them off?"

"You totally could, Mom, right, Mia?"

"Yeah," I said. "Who wants more pizza?"

Nori said, "No pizza, baby, but could you get me a refill?" She held out her coffee mug which I took. I got up carefully trying not to jostle, but Jules kept painting, straight lines of purple on each toe.

"That's fucking amazing," I said, pointing at her feet.

Nori said, "She's an artist."

"I hope I make nicer art than pedicures," Jules said. "You two just use too much polish, that's why you drip."

"I can do it," I said. "But I just take a Q-Tip with polish remover around the edges afterward."

"I never have to do that," Jules said. "You just have to hold it at the right angle."

"Well, you could give me and Mia pedicures."

"OK, but both of you need to wash your feet before I'm touching them."

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"Alejandro told me I fight for my orgasm. He said, you really fight to come."

"You fight for—wait, what?"

"It was a compliment. He said it turned him on."

I asked Adam, later, "What do you think of my orgasms?" I was hoping he would

say something admiring.

He said, “You had one?” He was embarrassed right away then, I could tell.

He didn’t know what he was talking about, and so when I told the story to Jules later, I told it like I’d said, “Hey, how about that” about my orgasm right after it happened and he hadn’t known what it was. Because the frank wideness of the question I actually asked, and the direct tie to what Alejandro said made me feel stupid and too exposed. In case it was significant, I didn’t want her to know.

I said, “I feel like men are supposed to know more about sex automatically, be more into sex. And also be taller.”

“You do?” Jules said. “Ew. Although most men are going to be taller than you. As are most women.”

“I know, it’s like admitting racist thoughts. If you tell anyone, I’ll deny having said it.”

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Jules told Dad, “Mom drank like a whole bottle of wine before we left.”

Dad patted Jules on the shoulder, like the news didn’t surprise him at all and said, “Your mom will get home OK, she wants to talk to some people here for awhile, so I’m going to take you back. You can spend the night. You have stuff at our house, right?”

Jules said, “Lida bought me a spare set of, like, everything.”

“Good,” Dad said. “That’s done then. Let’s get out of here. OK?”

Jules nodded.

I felt silly that I hadn’t known Nori had been drinking since Dad and Jules

obviously knew all along. But how was I supposed to know? Mom and Dad had a bar, but they only drank when they had parties.

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“I won’t say anything against him, you can’t make me.”

“Jules honey.” Mom looked at me, but I didn’t know what to do. Jules ran upstairs and slammed my door. She was usually so polite at my house. I think everyone felt relieved by the breach.

“We’re going to need to go up there,” Dad said. He was sitting in Mom’s armchair and he looked too big for it. It was easy to see he had no intention of following Jules.

“Maybe she needs some space,” I suggested. I didn’t want to go up there either, even though she was in my room.

“You can stay here, Mia, but we do need to finish this conversation,” Dad said. I was shocked when he sighed and stood up.

Mom looked like she was going to disagree with Dad, but she went upstairs with him without a word. I heard them knock on the door and call to Jules, and as much as I didn’t want to be up there with them, I decided I’d rather be up there than out of it all down here. I ran in as they were closing the door. Jules was facedown on my bed. With her shoes on, which shocked me again. I checked them for dirt, but they were sandals and they were clean. Not that I would have said anything about it, I just wanted to know if my bed was going to be dirty.

Mom and Dad stood by the dresser, filling up the room and making it seem smaller. I sat on the bed. “Jules?” I touched her shoulder but she didn’t respond. Mom looked at

me as if to say, go ahead. "It's going to be OK. You don't have to do anything," I said. I looked at Dad. "Right?"

"Right," Dad said. "Jules, it's just an option. We wanted you to know your options."

Jules sat up. I thought her face would be streaked with tears, I thought her nose would be red and runny, but she was very pale and very composed. "Everything is already all messed up because of me. And I'm *not* going to send my dad to jail."

Dad said, "What's everything that's messed up?"

Jules sighed like Dad was stupid. I agreed with her, how stupid did you have to be to not see how messed up everything was now.

"Dad," I said, "her parents are getting a *divorce*. Her dad is moving to a different state, and her mom is going crazy." And what I didn't say: and she's had sex, and she's not even twelve.

Mom said, "That's not your fault."

Jules said, "I know the drill. It's not your fault, mommy and daddy still love you very much even though they don't love each other anymore. But in this case, it really is my fault. My mom and my dad would still be together if I hadn't told her."

Nori already knew, I was sure of that. Mom said sometimes you can know something, deep down, but not admit it to yourself, and that we ought to have compassion for Nori, that there was no way she wasn't giving herself a harder time than we could ever give her. But I didn't care. And I tried to focus all my anger on Nori. In a weird way, I hated her mom more than I hated her dad.

I said, "You *had* to tell. What choice did you have?"

“Yeah.”

I said, “Why do you still *want* your parents to be together?”

“Mia,” Mom said.

I could tell she was going to stop me, so I talked fast. “You can live here. There’s no reason to even see your parents ever again if you don’t want to.”

“You don’t get it at all,” Jules said. “Never mind, just never mind.”

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“We’re going to celebrate,” Mom said. She was dancing around the house. I didn’t see anyone else home.

Mom grabbed my hand to pull me into her dance, but I pulled away. “Mom! Let me at least put my stuff down.”

Jules and I still had our backpacks on and everything. But Jules laughed and flung her backpack by the door and she and Mom danced into the kitchen. I took mine off slowly before I followed.

“Are we celebrating summer school ending? What’s going on?”

“She was confirmed, yes she was,” Mom sang. She and Jules were dancing like they were at a country square dance and watching them it was hard not to laugh. I sat on a stool at the island. It was some kind of inelegant jive-y waltz they were collaborating on. They were both laughing and getting out of breath.

I tried again. “Who confirmed? What?”

“Mia.” Mom stopped dancing and hugged Jules, brushing some hair off of Jules’ face. “You need to pay more attention to the news. You know, right JuJu?”

“Um, the Supreme Court? The ACLU lady.”

“Yes! Ruth Bader Ginsburg,” Mom said reverently. “She’s going to change the world! Now go get dressed to celebrate, both of you.”

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“That’s why your father would drive Nori places,” Mom said.

“I didn’t know he would drive her places.”

“Yes, you did,” Mom said. “We had an agreement with Nori that she wouldn’t drive Jules if she was drinking and then the agreement kind of morphed into all the time.”

“Because she was always drinking?”

Mom nodded. “And she started calling your dad for rides just for her. So he did it.”

“Was she interested in Dad, like coming on to Dad?” I asked.

“I never thought so, but Dad did.”

“Weird,” I said. I meant weird that I didn’t know about the arrangement, weird what I knew as a kid and what I didn’t know as a kid.

“You know your father,” Mom said. “Might have just been his ego.”

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I felt sorry for Dad standing by himself, so I went over to him. We stood against the gray brick of the pavilion. A bunch of the little kids, Jules’ cousins mostly, played an awkward game of whiffleball on the baseball field, and one creepy father-uncle-type played with them.

“It’s kind of weird, huh,” Dad said, “being at someone else’s family reunion.” He didn’t look at me, which was nice of him. He stared straight ahead, studying the game. The kid on first base was running in place and grinning ear to ear. He looked like the kind of kid who got to first through kindness or by mistake, the kind of kid who didn’t get to second ever.

I said, “I guess.”

Dad squeezed my shoulder, and the kid stopped running in place and picked his nose. The father-uncle shot him a look, so I figured that must be his kid. I wanted to pick my nose in solidarity, because the kid looked ashamed to be caught and called out in that silent way, and because it wasn’t so bad to pick your nose, especially when you were about six, which is how old this kid looked. But I didn’t, even though I knew Dad wouldn’t mind.

Dad said, “We’re here to be supportive of Jules, not to have a good time. Although it might be easier to have fun at someone else’s family reunion than at your own.”

“Nori should have told us we were supposed to bring something.”

“It doesn’t matter, honey. There’s plenty of food.” Dad waved to the gray brick. “Did you see all that food in there?”

I had, and of course there was tons of food, fried chicken and sandwich platters and tons of chips and pretzels and a whole table of cakes and cookies, but I said, “Jules cares.”

Dad asked where Jules was, but I didn’t know. I said, “She’s busy.”

“Well, these are her people,” Dad said.

“I thought she’d want me to be with her,” I said. It was dumb to come.

“I guess she was pretty nervous about coming here and seeing everybody for the first time?”

“I think everybody knows, but she’s not sure how everybody thinks about it,” I said, somewhat lamely, because there was so much more to it that I couldn’t tell Dad. “Mostly it’s her horrible grandmother. Who actually thinks Jules did something wrong and blames her for the fact that Fred moved.”

“I know she’s worried about her grandma,” Dad said, “but I almost wonder if she isn’t just as worried about spending time alone with Nori.”

“She’s alone with Nori all the time. She *lives* with Nori.”

“I get the impression she doesn’t spend much time with her alone, despite the living arrangement.”

“Who told you that?”

Dad looked at the whiffleball game. The first-base kid had, by some miracle, finally advanced to third. There weren’t any good players, and it was clear the father-uncle was frustrated by the lack of collective skill. Dad said, “It’s sad when the parents care more about the game than the kids do.”

“That guy’s a jerk, I can tell.”

Dad smiled. “You’re probably right.”

Usually when I said things with such venom, Dad refused to agree, so I dropped the subject in gratitude. “Does Nori talk to you and Mom about Jules?”

Dad squatted down and rocked on his heels. He cocked his head, like an invitation for me to come sit down, but I kept standing, so Dad stood back up. He said, “We talk.”

I said, “I knew that,” although what I knew and what I thought Dad was saying

seemed to be two different things.

“What they need is to be grilling,” Dad said. “I could go for some barbeque chicken, or at least I could go for the smell of it. What do you think?”

“They can’t grill.”

Dad pointed to the line of grills beyond the whiffleball game.

“Didn’t you see the signs?” I said. “Extreme fire danger today or something. No fires.”

Dad said, “So that’s why there’s cold fried chicken at a picnic.”

I didn’t want to be jerked out of my sullen mood, but when Dad said, “I thought they were just stupid,” I smiled at him. It wasn’t his fault.

I said, “Should we go find her?”

Dad shook his head. “It’s enough that we’re here. She knows we’re here. But we could go for a walk, you and me.”

“I’m watching the game,” I said. The nose picker had had to switch sides; he never made it home. The father-uncle seemed resigned to the poor playing; he leaned over one of the bigger kids, the kind who wouldn’t be an athlete when he grew up, and helped him swing.

Dad said, “No girls are playing.”

“They know whiffleball is for losers.”

Dad laughed. “What does that make us, as spectators?”

“I want to stick around here,” I said. “Just in case.”

“OK, honey. That’s fine.”

I said, “She even looks different.” She’d put these weird streamer things in her hair,

and her outfit was pink, new, one I'd never seen. When I'd given it a silent appraisal in the backseat, Jules had rolled her eyes and indicated Nori. I'd dropped it, but it seemed like Jules, at thirteen years old, could just refuse to wear a pink outfit if she didn't want to wear it.

Dad said, "She looked OK to me."

I said, "They dressed her up like a baby."

"It's a lot of pressure. This is the first time she's seen these people since her dad moved away."

"Yeah, that's another thing. They all get to pretend like he just moved away."

Dad shielded his eyes against the sun, as if the game were compelling enough to watch carefully. He said, "Everybody knows he didn't just move away."

I was still focused on the little nose picker who was now sitting on the edge of the field and playing rock-paper-scissors with another kid. He seemed relieved to be out of the game for the time being. A bunch of other grown-ups had come over to the father-uncle and as soon as he walked away to talk grown-up talk, the game spontaneously disbanded. I hoped this would disappoint him. I hoped he would yell at the nose picker so that I could go punch him.

Dad said, "And Nori is anxious that Jules feel like this is still her family. Like she's got some family."

"If I were her, I wouldn't want to pretend my dad just moved. I'd want to yell about it."

"Sweetheart, I know. But everybody here knows what happened. And that's a member of their family, a son or uncle or brother. It's hard."

“It’s not that hard if you’re a good person. If Emmie or Merrie did something like that ever, I’d hate them.”

Dad said, “It might be harder than you think. It’s hard on the person who hates. Hating is a hard business.”

“It wouldn’t be hard,” I said. I was positive.

Dad said, “You know, every family pretends.”

I said, “Oh, yeah?” but I said it like I didn’t care. Dad was going to tell me some way our family pretended something, but it wasn’t going to be like we pretended someone in our family wasn’t a rapist when he was.

The kids had given up any pretense of playing whiffleball. Some of them, including the nose picker, had run past us into the pavilion. A lot of people were starting to gravitate toward the food, and our spot standing against the wall was no longer so private. People were around now, carrying those flimsy paper plates with translucent grease spots soaking through and yelling at kids to wash their hands.

I said, “People are eating.” But I didn’t see Jules anywhere, and the idea of looking for her now, now that she’d left us alone for nearly two hours, made me angry.

Dad said, “If you’re hungry, we can eat,” but I shook my head.

“I’m not hungry.” Then, “It seems like you want to tell me some way our family pretends something, but you should know you’re not going to convince me it’s the same thing.”

Dad laughed. “I’d like to make you feel better. Have you thought about that?”

“Did someone in our family rape his kid and now we all hang out like nothing happened? Are we mean to the raped kid? Do we call her and cry and say she ruined our

son's life and she's a selfish girl just like her selfish mom?"

"When your mother and I met, we made a conscious effort to deceive my family about your mother's religious beliefs."

I interrupted. "I know. Mom pretended to be a Jew. A real Jew."

"She is a real Jew. Her family fled from the Holocaust and many of them didn't make it out of Europe."

"You know what I mean. She pretended to be religious. Or at least like she didn't hate religion."

Dad said, "You know what I'm getting at, but you don't know what I'm getting at. You have been raised in an atmosphere filled with doubt and even scorn about religion in general, and not just from Mom."

I said, "From you, too." Even though I never heard Dad say anything bad about religion.

Dad said, "Undoubtedly. And the culture we've raised you in, academic secular culture, the ideas you've been exposed to. All of that makes this lie you've heard about before seem like no big deal to you."

"You're going to tell me it was a big deal."

"I am. And it was. It was lying about who this person was, and in a way that was fundamental to my parents. Your aunt has not forgiven me for it."

"She knew?" I said. "Is that why we never see her?"

"After my parents died, she knew. Because we stopped pretending. And she takes it for what it was, betrayal." Dad looked at me, and I did meet his gaze this time. "It was a dishonoring of my parents. And while it doesn't seem like a big deal to me either, in a

way, the way that you mean, it also *does* seem like a big deal. Because I knew what the lie meant to the people I was lying to.”

“It doesn’t seem like the same thing at all.”

Dad said, “It doesn’t, does it. But it makes me sympathetic.”

“I have plenty of sympathy,” I said. “For Jules.”

“And that makes me proud of you. You are a fierce friend.” Dad patted me on the shoulder. “I’d hate to have you as my enemy.”

“Thanks.”

Dad laughed.

I felt ashamed that Dad called me a fierce friend and here I was, mad at Jules on what I knew was a horrible day for her. “Do you think Jules is OK?”

Dad said, “She will be. We should eat, talk to some people. If only to get the blood moving, move around a bit.”

I said, “We’re being anti-social, huh.”

“Nothing new for me, I’m used to the sidelines. But I suspect you’re not comfortable as a wallflower.”

“What’s a wallflower?”

“The girl who doesn’t get to dance.”

“Jules is the dancer,” I said. “I hate dancing.”

“You know what I mean.”

“OK, I’ll eat something. How long do you think we have to stay here?”

Dad said, “That’s the spirit.”

“I know you worry about her,” Ben said. “Maybe you’ll always worry about her, even if you never see her again.”

“I feel weird about that.”

Ben said, “It’s normal to care about someone you made such an investment in, who was in your life for so long.”

“It’s not normal,” I said. “Can I tell you something? I used to worry a lot about Jules getting raped or attacked or assaulted somehow and then killing herself, worried about it but it was a satisfying anxiety. There was a masturbatory quality to how I played the whole fantasy out over and over again, not that I wanted it to happen, just that there was something it gave me, unsettling and negative as it undeniably was.”

Ben said, “Mia.” Then, “You’re not going to get rid of me. And I know this will pain your pride, but you’re less shocking than you think you are.”

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Jules said, “Bunny told me I was really brave to have told and to be, to be—she said I have good survival instincts, that it’s a good sign that I’m thinking ahead, that I don’t want this to ruin my life. I can move away from it because I can talk about it, so I’m the kind of person who will succeed.”

I reported on Jules’ progress to Mom—not all of her progress, but I did check things out with Mom, unbeknownst to Jules. I felt like a traitor, but I also felt more on Mom’s level about this stuff. I told Mom what Jules had said about surviving.

“She has to come to grips with who her parents are,” Mom said. “In a horrible way,

much more horrible than most, but all of us face this disappointment, this reevaluation, downsizing the royal figures of your parents. You'll have to, too, someday, but it'll be easier for you than for Jules."

I said, "I have a nice dad."

"It's very different," Mom agreed.

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Jules was crying on the bed in the basement. I went right in, sat on the bed. This was my strategy to deal with her upset barrier she erects, and I figured I could distinguish myself by not knocking or asking permission. Our greater intimacy. She was worried Bunny abandoned her.

There was a message from Bunny on the answering machine saying she was sorry to have had to cancel the appointment but Jules never checks the machine because it's Mom and Dad's to check and Dad has class tonight and Mom won't be home forever. I heard it but I hate Bunny and I kind of want to let Jules know so she quits worrying but I want, too, to let this animosity steep in Jules. Because I wish she didn't rely so much on what Bunny thought.

The basement bedroom was this weird mix of hotel room atmosphere and the ghosts of all the stacked boxes and unused picture frames and crap that had been on the bed forever but was now in the storage room and also all the new stuff Jules has brought over to use when she sleeps here like her quilt and her Strawberry Shortcake doll and her Duran Duran poster. Jules wouldn't exactly tell me what was wrong, but I just knew. It was always Bunny.

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I said, “If I cut my hair it would be a helmet.” I held my hands from my head out from my head as if to indicate, poof! it’d be out to *there*. And thought for the millionth time how nice it would be to have Jules’ glossy plain hair.

Jules said, “Remember when Nori wanted me to wear a helmet outside because I might fall? While *walking*? This was that all over again.”

“So what’d you say to her?”

“I was like, look. The worst thing that’s going to happen to us has already happened. We’re not Job. This is it.”

“You said that?” I’d never heard Jules talk back to Nori like that.

“No, but I thought it.”

“But what did you say?” I hated how people did that, told a story as if they had made clear in the moment how they felt. As if people ever responded that way.

Jules just shrugged. What she said wasn’t as interesting to her as what she could have said.

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Jules was crying. “Everybody knew except me and I thought I had a bunch of stuff figured out that I didn’t know about at all and I feel stupid like a typical *kid* who got married to someone she just met and I was going to be special. The atypical young college couple who stays married. Now I’ll have to talk to people and know they knew I

was stupid and they were right.”

I tried to figure out what to do. “You don’t have to tell everyone.”

“Um, my friends, Mia? I meant my friends.”

“You could leave out a certain number of friends, people you can talk to about real stuff but who don’t know. Like, to give you a break. So you don’t always have to be thinking about it.” As long as she told me, what did I care.

Jules breathed in, a dramatic sort of intake. “I could do that.”

“Just figure out a few. Then you can remember this isn’t all there is to your life.” I thought to myself, you have tons of other fucked up shit, but out loud I said, “You have lots of good news to share.”

“You sound like church.”

I said, “Share the good news!” and Jules giggled.

“What about when they ask about what went specifically wrong with Ollie?”

“Deflect.”

“Evade.”

I said, “Right.”

Jules said, “I think I can do that. You’re pretty smart.”

“I’m just looking out for you.”

“I guess it’s pretty safe advice for you to give since you’re one of the friends who knows.”

“What?”

Jules said, “Just referencing your hierarchy. I know you like to be on top. I know you don’t want to be left out.”

I said, "I'm trying to help."

"I know. Just start trying to cut me some slack. I might be in a bad mood for a while, OK?"

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We all went in the same car, which I knew was going to be weird and possibly bad. Rehoboth Beach is about an hour and a half from Newark. Dad had a friend from graduate school who was speaking at a conference in Rehoboth, and he was going to catch up with him. He said, "We'll just get a drink, and you girls and Nori can get dinner. I think the reunion is lunch, right? This will be after his talk, so he'll be in need of a drink, however it went." He acted like he wanted to drive to Rehoboth, although I doubt he did, but that was Dad. Then he backtracked. "Or he might be too tired, or you may need to go home," he said to Nori who was nodding along as Dad spoke. "It's bound to be emotional for you. I don't care if we get a drink. We might meet up," he said. "Only if it works out."

I hated Nori sitting up front with Dad like they were married: weird and conversation was stilted. I was surprised that Nori still liked her in-laws, but Jules said she liked them more than her own family.

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Jules said, "Listen." Then she paused.

I said, "I'm listening?"

“I’m done with Alejandro.”

“Oh my God. Really? That’s great.”

“It’s not because of you.”

I said, “OK.” Really, why should I care if it’s not because of me? I just wanted her to be through with him. She was trying to hurt my feelings. “I don’t care why, Jules. It’s good that you see what to do, I just want clarity for you.”

“It’s because of your dad.” She threw the words at me like she expected their impact to hurt.

“So what did Dad do?”

“You don’t have to sound skeptical. I thought this was what you wanted.”

“I’m just curious. What did Dad say that convinced you? I can use it the next time you get married. To help you see the light.”

Jules said, “See, that’s what he didn’t do.”

“What? I’m sorry. Just tell me.”

“No.”

“Fine,” I said. “What else is going on?”

“Basically he said there were times for things. And it was time for me to move on.”

“That’s it? There are times for things.”

Jules said, “He didn’t condescend to me.”

“Jesus. I am not condescending to you. I have great respect for you. Happy?”

“You don’t.”

“It’s like you feel like you need to rebel against me sometimes. I’m not your mom, or any authority over you,” I said. This was always so unfair. I was supposed to not give

my opinion because she persisted in this fucked up perception that I didn't even contribute to?

Jules said, "So I won't be calling him. I told him I was done."

I thought of asking if you could really be done if you had to inform the person you were done, but I kept my mouth shut.

Jules continued, "He cried. It was pretty terrible actually."

I picked the dry skin off from between my toes to busy myself because I didn't have anything ok to say.

"Mia?"

"Yeah?"

"Um, hello? Are you still there?"

"I am. I just didn't think you wanted me to talk."

"OK. I'm going now. You have your news, I hope it makes you happy."

"I guess you don't believe me, but I'd really rather it made you happy." I could feel my throat starting to close up. It was unfair how she made me feel bad about her own problems.

"Bye, Mia."

I hung up without saying goodbye, even though I knew it would make her mad.

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Ian was between me and Jules at this weird long table with backless stools. I would have rather sat at the bar or at a normal table, but it was packed in here. I knew he was between us so we could get to know each other. He asked, "What matters more in day-to-

day life, politics or art?” There was this challenging tone he adopted, like he already knew my answer since my degree was sociology and he was an artist. Like that was normal get-to-know-you chit-chat and not pretentious bullshit.

I sucked the last of my gin and tonic through the straw just to be noisy. I nodded to the waiter who silently asked if I wanted another. Oh, fuck yeah, I wanted another. “Politics,” I said, bracing myself for his scorn, which was ruder than I’d even anticipated.

“Wrong,” he said. He leaned his back into Jules and she laughed. She rolled her eyes at me as if to say, *I knew you two would hate each other. Just get it over with.*

“Even under Bush, how did your day-to-day life change?” he asked. He was wearing a cowboy shirt, but a fancy cowboy shirt. An *affected* cowboy shirt. Gold piping, pearl buttons: fake cowboy, fake manure, fake sweat. Fake Ian. Cowboy aesthete.

“Life changed for a lot of people—” I started.

“*Your* life. I’m talking about your life.”

“Lots of people lost jobs. People were detained at airports, ordinary people.” I continued to suck at the tiny drops of my drink. As if my sucking would create more drink. I was aware this was rude. The waiter set a new drink down sloppily, as if the bits that spilled were my punishment for making childish noises with my straw. I thought of licking it off the bar, but I didn’t feel like having Jules yell at me later. I said, “Not to mention all the people who enlisted and got their arms blown off or died or are totally fucked in the head now. And that’s just the Americans! You want me to keep going?”

“You,” Ian said again, as if I were deaf. His face was pure concentrated smug.

“Just me, I guess it didn’t,” I said, but I said it lightly. “I’m not really into being a man who’s an island, you know?” I was going to trick him into thinking I liked him just

fine. I was going to stop playing this competitive game. He was new, I was old, I didn't have to compete for shit with him.

"If he wins, it won't be what you think."

"I love when strangers tell me what I think," I said. "What do I think?"

"That the world will open up, that this will make stuff different. That Obama's the second coming. It'll be prosaic, another cheat."

"It *will* be different to have a black president." Jules rolled her eyes at me again, and I gave her a look that said, *why are you with this asshole*. Then, "And as a Jew, the second coming is purely sexual to me."

"Not that different."

"I mean in the eyes of the world. The world knows we're not post-racial, or whatever bullshit Apple and Levis and Pepsi try to tell you."

Ian said, "But I'm saying day-to-day. You. It won't be different at all."

The bartender had brought my last drink without even asking. I'd decided this meant he was my friend. I'd taken it but I hadn't relinquished my first one. I was going to keep sucking that one until it was dry.

"If health care reform passes, it will be different," I said. "If the war ends, it'll be different, not for me directly, maybe, but for tons of regular ordinary people."

"Who are these regular ordinary people? Are we sure they even exist?"

"You both sound like assholes," Jules said. "This is embarrassing. I'm going to pee."

"I'm just saying, life changes all the time for *regular ordinary people*, new president or no. But your life is pretty unaffected by it."

I said, “I didn’t prep for this conversation, so I can’t offer a compelling argument. But I’m sure it’s made a difference to me.”

He said, “Come back and prove it to me someday then. After Obama wins, cause he will.” As if that settled things.

“I will, Ian, if she’s kept you around.” But I smiled and took the sting out and to my surprise, he smiled back.

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George came over to my table. I was alone, Jules was at the wheel, Mom was in the other room glazing, no one else was around me. There were lumps of clay on the table and I’d been squeezing and smooshing different fist prints into them. I’d made such a big deal of staying in the class, I couldn’t exactly leave now.

George sat down across from me. “How’s it going?”

I said, “All right.” The clay sat, lumpish and refusing form. “I’m thinking.”

“So I see,” George said. “But you should work.”

“I’m thinking what to do.”

“No think. Work.”

I thought of calling George an old neverhasbeen. But Mom and Jules loved George, so I kept my mouth shut. I managed, “Thinking is part of working,” in a really tight voice, the kind I use to let people know, back the fuck off.

George said, “I agree. But there is wisdom in your body. I want you to just play. Try not to engage with your brain just yet.”

“George, can I tell you something?” I asked.

“Sure you can.”

“It’s not me, all this mumbo-jumbo in your body. I need to think it through, OK?”

George said, “Can I tell you something, Mia?”

“Yes.”

“I can tell you’re frustrated. I’m offering you a way out. You need escape from that head of yours.”

“So how do you escape your head?”

George laughed. “I guess you think I’m stupid, Mia.”

I said, “I don’t think that. I never said that.” Even though, of course.

“I’m not offended. Just give this a try, OK? Hold that clay for a day or two. Pick it up and listen to it, the shapes and textures it suggests to you. Give over control. You’re going to like what happens, I promise you.”

I didn’t say anything, and George got up and went over to Jules. Mom came out of the glazing room. “What do you think of this color for my little pot I’m going to give Grandma?” She had a little smear of clay in her hair.

“George thinks clay can talk.”

Mom said, “George is so wise sometimes.” She laughed like she knew what I meant, but I knew she also thought George really was wise. “So what about this color?”

“It’s nice?”

Mom said, “I’m using it.”

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Mom said she had three boxes of stuff plus a trunk in the car. Dad said, “What is all

this?”

“We’re trying to put together a TRO. I told her I’d help her find useful evidence.”

Mom was surrounded by paper.

I said, “What is all this?”

“Evidence.”

“But what is it?” It was a box of crumpled paper and cards and jewelry boxes.

“It’s evidence,” Mom said. “I hope it’s going to keep this creep away from my client.”

“All this stuff?”

Mom said, “This is just the tip of the iceberg. I have two more boxes and a trunk.”

Seeing that I was about to ask again, Mom said, “It’s everything, honey. Christmas lists and letters and restraining orders and notes from her mom. Who died last year and begged her to get away. Emergency room bills. Pictures of her bruises. Hotel receipts. Answering machine tapes, wedding invitations. It’s everything and anything she thought I could use.”

I said, “Use for what?”

“Use to keep her kids,” Mom said. “And hopefully keep her safe.”

“Safe,” I said.

Mom said, more to herself than to me, “But this is late in the game, in their game. She’s not very stable, she has a history of hurting herself. So I hope we can put something together.”

I looked at the box. I said, “This is a lot of stuff.”

Mom said, “It’s like she dropped off her life and asked me to make sense of it. All

of these little bits.”

I said, “It’s kind of like eavesdropping.” I looked at a piece of wrapping paper that had a grocery list on one side. “What does this tell you?”

“Honey, don’t touch this stuff. It’s privileged information.”

I put it down but kept looking.

Mom said, “It’s hard to believe these two people went into this decision, this marriage, clear-headed and in love and thinking about all the complexities of life lived together. They didn’t! How could they have? You start with a marriage license and then all of this stuff is necessary to unbind. And legally, too, as if the other ways weren’t enough.”

“You got married,” I said.

Mom said, “We all do stupid things when we’re young and in love.”

I worried Dad would be hurt, but he grinned and said, “That’s true.” Like they were telling each other funny jokes. Or secrets.

Mom said, “I do wish I’d been more together in myself and we hadn’t gotten married. No government intrusion, just us being together.”

I said, “Why’d you get married then?”

Mom continued, “And we wanted babies. I’d always loved babies and so did you. Well, growing up taking care of your sister so much.”

Dad nodded. “We did want kids.” He said it to me and Mom both, as if he was worried my feelings were hurt.

Mom said, “But if I had it to do over again, there’d be no legal bind. I’m not sure it helps, and it might hurt.”

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Em said, “Hi. What are you doing?” Her voice was normal and not indicative of some horrible news she was about to tell me, so I relaxed with the sort of pleasant surprise that indicated I didn’t even know I’d tensed up.

“You called right in time,” I said. “I was about to start procrastinating on my work.” In truth, I was sitting in my boxer shorts and sports bra on the floor, eating the crumbs from a package of donuts and letting Nuttie eat the non-chocolately bits. I hadn’t made any plans to start my reading. My books were still in my school bag by the door where I’d dropped them days ago. There was probably a layer of dust covering them.

“What do you have to do?” Em asked.

“So much reading I could care less about,” I said.

“Hmmm,” Em said. “Every time I talk to you, you sound totally disinterested in your work. Are you sure you want to be in school?”

I answered without thinking so that what I said was what I actually thought. “What else is there for me to do?”

“Mia. Really? There’s so much you’re good at.”

“It’s not a self-esteem problem. You’re lucky to be so focused. Not everybody knows what they want to do since the beginning of time.”

“You mean Mer?”

“Well, you, too. I think we can argue you’ve always been therapist-y.”

“Therapist-y, sounds like an infection.”

“And Jules. She’s always been an artist.”

“You’ve always been a gardener. And a cook, you were always cooking since I can remember.”

“Yeah, Em, exactly,” I said. “A sociologist who really is a cook and a gardener. Who doesn’t like reading sociology texts.” I got up with some difficulty and got my bookbag from the floor. Nuttie immediately started licking the plastic donut tray. I lunged to get it, but he ran away from me, spilling the rest of the donut crumbs in the process. “Fuck it,” I said to Nuttie. Meaning, take it, I don’t care.

“Fuck it?”

“I was talking to Nutter. He’s eating plastic.”

“Nuttie! How is my boy?”

“He’s good. He’s adjusting to life without Sam. Your best doggie friend died, Nuttie. His lonely life with just me. He hates the winter here, of course, but he likes my student schedule. I’m with him all the time.”

“I miss Nuttie. Maybe I’ll come to Vermont for my Spring Break. Maybe I’ll bring Dora.”

“That’d be cool,” I said. “Listen to this, Em. This book I’m supposed to be reading is called *The Pursuit of Loneliness*.”

“Sounds uplifting.”

“This is my new life. That’s how I feel. And why am I pursuing it, exactly?”

“You should go talk to someone about all this.”

“Just because you’re going to be a therapist doesn’t mean everybody needs one. Although I see how it’s in your best interests to be evangelical.”

“Therapists often talk to people about career and life path stuff,” Em said.

At the words “life path,” I made a gagging face at Nutter who was busy Hoovering up every donut crumb from the floor.

“Anyway,” I said.

“So I’m calling because of Merrie.”

“Figures,” I said. I’d put my backpack under the coffee table where I didn’t have to look at it.

“She wrote me an email. All it said was: D Day.”

“So dramatic. That was it?”

Em said, “Yup. And when I call her, she doesn’t pick up.”

“Because they finalize the divorce today.” I’d forgotten.

Em said, “Yup.”

“How did she even remember? She must have written it down.”

“Who knows,” Em said. “Although I knew actually. Because Jules called yesterday to check on me. I guess she’d randomly talked to Mom, and Mom was having a last married lunch with Dad because he was feeling reflective.”

“Reflective. Does that mean sad?” Jules checked on Emmie, which was sweet, but she hadn’t checked on me. I guess because I really was fine, and Jules knew that.

“That’s the word she used. But we talked about this. I think Dad’s fine.”

I said, “They’re both fine. It’s the friendliest divorce in the history of divorces.” I could actually understand why that made it harder for Merrie, she was the only one who was upset at all, and that had to be weird.

Emmie said, “I think Dad might even be dating someone. From the university.”

I gave Nuttie the donut package to lick and thought about this. “That’s OK,” I said.

“Good for Dad.” Then, “How do you know?”

Em said, “Oh, I don’t. I just got a feeling last time I talked to him, talking about how he’s been so busy socializing, and he said he’s really enjoying it, and he mentioned this one friend a few too many times. She’s in Philosophy.”

“Interesting,” I said. “You get all the dirt.”

“Part of my trade.”

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I said, “But Mom is incapable of keeping a secret. So we can’t use her.”

“I think Mom only tells us. I don’t think she’d tell Dad,” Emmie said.

“No,” I said. “She used to tell Jules what I got her for Christmas and her birthday every year.”

Merrie said, “Definitely not trustworthy.”

“Normally I’d agree with you, Mer, even though you are obviously anti-Mom and should possibly seek therapy about that, but she doesn’t even talk to Dad very much,” Emmie said. “It’s a surprise party. She’d have to be so mean to mess it up on purpose. What’s she going to do, call Dad special just to ruin his birthday?” Merrie made a noise indicating that, yes, this was exactly her belief. Emmie said, “Mia?”

“I already said, Mom tells secrets. She gets overexcited and tells. She can’t help herself. It’s like a compulsion. Let’s move on. Who else can we get to help us?”

“But she could really help us out,” Emmie said. “I think we should chance it.”

Merrie said, “Why do you think Mom is bad at secrets, Em?”

Emmie said, “Well, obviously you know, so maybe you should tell us.”

“I want to know what you think,” Merrie said.

“Fine. I think it’s a mixture of, like, jealousy and pride,” said Emmie. “Mom, like with Mia and Jules—she considers them both hers. So she’s jealous they have something separate and she’s also proud of them because they’re both hers. Same with us, and everyone else’s secrets she tells.”

I was quiet, considering this analysis.

“But I bet I’m wrong, huh, Mer?”

Merrie said, “It all comes down to narcissism. Mom can’t stand to be left out. She wants to be the one in the middle. She wants that moment on both ends. She wants to be the deliverer of the good news. Whatever thoughtfulness the gift contains, Mom wants to carry that message first to the recipient. And she also wants to intercept the gratitude. Then it’s hers, then she’s taken from everybody. It’s no accident, like she just can’t control herself, and it’s not jealousy about the separateness of the relationship that Mom has to intercept—it’s more that Mom wants all the glory. It’s selfishness.”

“You’re always so harsh,” I said. “Jesus.”

Merrie said, “If you want to do a surprise party that retains the surprise element, don’t tell Mom, that’s all I’m saying. You two cut Mom so much slack.”

“Actually your interpretation is similar to mine, mine is just more benevolent,” I said.

“Mine is non-blinded,” Merrie said.

Emmie said, “Don’t start. Let’s just try to think of someone in the department since we’re obviously not going to ask Mom’s help.”

Merrie said, “Should we even invite Mom?”

Emmie said, “Of course we should. Don’t be an idiot. Dad would want her there.”

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Em said, “Don’t tell Merrie—do you hear me, Mia?”

I said, “I hardly even talk to her.”

“Mom and Dad are totally still doing it.”

I thought of a conversation I’d had with Mom when Em and Mer were just babies.

On Merrie and Emmie being so close together in age, Mom had said, “I got pregnant the first time we were allowed to have sex.”

I’d said, “You weren’t allowed to have sex?”

“When you have a baby, it’s a lot on your body, and you have to wait a certain amount of time. We probably didn’t wait as long as we were supposed to.”

I’d thought that was pretty gross, that they couldn’t wait, and also felt a little priggish, which if I was honest, was probably the kind of little kid I was, priggish kid. It was a mantle I wore, the priggishness, not entirely comfortable, certainly not original. It was a layer and not the core, some kind of obscuring of my real self.

“Sex didn’t seem to be their problem.” I asked Emmie how much she thought Mom and Dad’s staying together had to do with Jules. Because it seemed clear they’d wanted to get divorced for a long time.

“Oh, everything,” said Emmie. “More than anything. More than the bond of us.”

I said, “Really?” Her tone was vehement. It was a weird reaction, to be so sure. I’d thought I was introducing the idea.

“Yes,” Emmie continued. Same tone. Emphatic. “We were something, I’m not

saying we weren't a factor, we complicated it, but we were theirs, something they couldn't lose. I don't know how to say it right, but I think Jules was something that they felt dedicated to, like, *we will save this child together*, so if they failed her in some way, it was just different, because they aren't goal-oriented with us."

I thought about this. I said, "We were just theirs," but I didn't disagree with the idea that Jules deterred them more than the idea of their own children. I said, "Mom would say you don't stay with someone because of your kids if you're unhappy, especially an unhappy mom who has daughters. That that's no role model."

"Right. And Jules is not her child."

"I guess. It felt that way to me, too, but I'm not sure why. I'm not even sure if that's fucked up."

Emmie said, "It makes me sad."

"Yeah," I said. "I don't know."

I said, "Once I told Mom that you know how some people say their parents are gross and it's just that they don't like to see their parents as sexual entities, but you guys really are gross, you take it too far. And she seemed hurt."

Emmie said, "She's proud of giving us a healthy view of sexuality."

I said, "Hmmm." Was it healthy? I'd have to think about that.

Emmie said, "You should go to therapy. You might even like it."

I said, "I don't think I could forge anything but a cagey connection with a therapist."

Emmie said, "You think you're too smart for therapy?"

I wanted to say, yes, that was exactly what I thought, but I instead I said,

“Remember when we walked in on them?”

“That’s *why* I’m a therapist,” Em said. “Ugh. Don’t remind me.”

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Merrie said, “It’s like they did the transition while they were still married so the announcement could be all smooth sailing. Now they’re so friendly and all, *Oh! You have a new partner! How wonderful!* and *Oh! Let’s all have a family dinner.* It’s very weird and it makes it seem like you have the problem if you’re adjusting.”

Merrie was so much angrier than Em and I were about the divorce, but it was hard to argue with her here. That *was* how Mom and Dad acted.

Merrie said, “What are you getting Dad?”

“A book.”

“That’s a horrible gift,” Merrie said. “Are you kidding? Dad doesn’t read books for pleasure.”

I said, “This is such a Dad-book though. He’ll like it.”

Merrie said, “What book?”

“You sound so suspicious Merrie. Can’t you accept that I might have found Dad a book he’d like?”

“No.”

“I know Dad just as well as you do.”

“Is it a Michael Pollan book?”

I tried to keep the disappointment out of my voice. “Why?”

“Is it?”

“Yes.”

Merrie was triumphant. “Well Dad hates Michael Pollan.”

“That’s not true. Have you read any Michael Pollan?”

“No.”

“I have, and it’s *so* Dad. Michael Pollan is writing just for Dad. It’s a preaching to the choir thing. He’ll love it.”

Merrie said, “Um, no. He won’t.”

“Fine, Merrie. Why does Dad hate Michael Pollan?”

“I dunno, he just does.”

“Dad is Michael Pollan.”

“Maybe that’s why he hates him.”

“You haven’t even read any,” I said. “That doesn’t even make sense.”

“Like how helpful, arrogant people hate Oprah. Or how crafty people hate Martha Stewart.”

“He out-Dads Dad.”

“Maybe,” Merrie said. She’d lost interest, I could tell.

“Fuck,” I said. “Now what do I get him?”

Merrie said, “I don’t know.” Then, “I have a great present for him. It’s the best present ever. Want to know what it is?”

“How do you know Dad hates him?” I said.

“So when does your flight get in?”

“I told you, I’m driving. And answer my question.”

“It’s like you don’t believe me. When I’m trying to help you.”

“I believe you’d try to ruin my present for no reason.”

Merrie said, “Fine. Some student told him Michael Pollan was inspiring and that Dad should read him.”

“Oh.” She was telling the truth. “Fuck.”

Merrie said, “Want to hear what I’m getting him?”

I said, “Fuck that student. Dad’s just hardheaded, he’d like him if he read him.”

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Emmie said, “Crying is like getting your car’s oil changed.” As in, it’s maintenance.

I said, “That’s such a therapist line.”

Jules said, “Well, that’s how I feel.”

“See, I think you feel too much.”

She said, “You want to know stuff.”

“Well, yeah. And you’re saying I’m not wise?”

Jules said, “I want to *understand* stuff. I don’t care about knowing.”

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Jeffrey never had sheets on his bed. I’d surreptitiously scrunched my hoodie under me to mitigate my ratio of naked skin to raw mattress. I was so drunk. Jeffrey’s eyes were

shut. We'd had a good time, right? I liked him too much to talk first. So I just hung out until he talked.

"Are you hungry?" he said. His eyes were still closed.

"I have to tell you something," I said. I closed my eyes, too.

"OK."

"I have some, like, weird stuff in my past."

"OK. Like what?"

"Not weird," I said. "Kind of bad."

"OK."

I didn't say anything, and I could feel Jeffrey sit up. He said, "Mia? What stuff?"

I said, "Some sexual abuse stuff."

"Oh my God. At your dorm?"

"No, no, growing up." I hadn't expected him to think about here, but it made sense. College was where you were supposed to get raped, not your middle-school bedroom. "In my family."

"That's awful," he said. "I'm sorry."

"It's why I'm weird sometimes," I said. "I just wanted to tell you, you know?"

Jeffrey said, "Yeah, totally. You're not weird, you're cool. I mean, you know."

I said, "Thanks." My eyes had been closed this whole time because I knew he was sitting up, probably looking at me, I could feel him looking at me, and I was naked and on my back and my breasts always sloped inelegantly down my sides in this position, although I felt like no one could complain since they were so big, that was the trade-off. But I didn't want him looking at me, so I said, "Lie down. Stop staring at me."

He said, "I'm not staring at you." But he stretched out next to me and kissed my neck and kept his head close, put it on my shoulder.

I didn't know why I'd said it, but he felt different next to me now, like he liked me better, or would wonder about me more. I decided it was too messy to think about when I was drunk. I'd think about what it meant tomorrow.

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I hadn't heard from Adam in over a week, so I went to his dorm Sunday night.

At the door, he grinned. "Hi," he said. "My roommate's not here."

I said, "So I see."

He waved me in but I decided not to sit on the bed because I had no intention of having sex with him.

I said, "I need to talk to you."

"OK," he said.

"I know we're not going out or anything, so I don't need, like, emotional support from you or whatever, but I thought since we have sex I should tell you that I have a history of abuse."

Adam didn't say anything, so I said, "Sexual abuse."

Adam said, "Oh." His tone was weird, almost relieved. I felt hugely cheated by this. I'd pictured him getting up and holding me and stroking my hair, and now I could see that it wasn't going to be that way at all. I could see he wasn't going to cooperate. Part of me thought that he must be a bad person to not feel sympathy for such horrible news, but part of me felt sorry for him. What was he supposed to do?

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I said, “When I was a kid, there was some abuse.” I stared at the wood of the bar because I couldn’t make eye contact. Shiny chestnut swirls of wood grain, a few gleaming rings from watery drinks.

Leslie said, “I’m so sorry, Mia,” and her sympathy disgusted me, but it made me keep talking because there was something compelling about the disgust that I wanted more of.

“It was my dad,” I said. “And it really fucked me up.”

“I’m so sorry that happened to you,” Leslie said. I could tell I was making her uncomfortable, and also that she felt like she had to hide that because her discomfort was nothing compared to mine. Which was true in a way, but not the way she thought.

“Don’t you want to know what happened?” I asked. Nobody ever asked, and I knew that if somebody did, I could stop lying. But once I said I’d been abused, it erected some barrier that protected me from questions, and all I wanted was for someone to ask me questions, to quit being so careful around pain. I might not be telling the exact truth, but what I knew about pain was that it was lonely, that it craved intimacy. Pain wanted questions: uncareful, intrusive questions.

“Only if you want to tell me,” Leslie said.

I let my hair fall over my face for a second while I put my head down on the bar. It was cool and sticky and I was definitely drunk. I thought maybe I could keep talking with my head down since it was so much easier. Now that I was in, how could I get out? I could feel her leaning in to hear me through my hair as I said that my dad had moved to

Georgia and was an outcast, and I could practically feel her wondering if she should maybe pat my head or offer me some kind of physical comfort. Which she didn't do.

I looked at my shoes balanced on a gold rod that ran across the bottom of the bar. Into the wood of the bar I said my dad was dead to me and that my mom and I had issues still. The book *Freaky Friday* popped into my head, which made perfect sense to my drunk brain. I looked up then at Leslie, at her thick red hair, cut short and perfect like she was an ice skater. If she spun around, even if she spun very fast, every hair would fall back into its rightful place. What I wanted from telling this story was to be her, to be her saddest self just for one relieving minute.

I excused myself and weaved my way to the deserted bathroom. Talk about shutting shit down; no one had been there but us for an hour. I had to pee bad but I made my way to the sink and clung to it. Found myself staring in the mirror. Staring at my face, which was flushed from alcohol and surprisingly pretty, my hair puffed around my flushed cheeks like some kind of weird protection. Like a drunk on TV: white knuckling the sink edge, and reckoning. Then it was like I gave some Jules inside of me permission to get the hell out and the ghostly self emerged from inside and slid out the door and I was all by myself.

I stared for a long time, trying to make out who she was going to see when I finally made myself go back out there.

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I hugged Emmie and plopped down into the first chair I saw. Like I was exhausted from sitting in the car for hours and needed to sit again immediately. Em and

Dora's house looked exactly like you'd think the house of two lesbian therapist Massholes would look: like a Pottery Barn showroom. I rubbed my face against the brown overstuffed velvet and got a faceful of their cat Mickey's hair. "Where's Dora?"

"Work. I took the whole day off. I thought we could get brunch and hang out."

"Sounds good," I said. I looked around for Mickey but he must be hiding. I grabbed a shiny striped throw pillow that looked vaguely Indian and rested my head on that instead of the chair. It seemed less hairy. "Thanks for letting me visit on short notice, Em."

"It's nice to see you a few weeks early. Are you excited for the annual Chanukah Christmas extravaganza?"

"It'll be the first one without Jules in forever," I said. I'd been dreading Christmas, and I'd suggested we just do Chanukah since Jules wouldn't be there this year, but then Em pointed out we'd be excluding Dora.

"This is like a break-up," Em said. "It's going to be hard."

"I guess it is like a break-up. We were friends for twenty-five years."

"Heteronormativity isn't kind to straight women and their friendships. We don't offer a lot of culturally-sanctioned space to grieve their losses."

"Yeah." That was Em's way of being nice. I smiled at her, her round serious face with her electric blue-framed glasses. "Those are cool glasses." They were, too, a vintage cat-eye glamour. They looked great on her.

"Dora talked me into them. I feel like I'm wearing jewelry, or makeup."

"Don't go that far. We won't recognize you."

“I know you feel sort of alone now, but think of all the people you do have in your life. Ben is amazing, you’ve got a nice family.”

I wanted to say it was funny, that I hadn’t realized until Jules broke up with me that my family was mine and not hers. But I didn’t want Em to take that wrong. “Yeah,” I said.

“I know this is hard. You really might want to try talking to someone.”

“I went to a therapist once. I told you, it’s not for me.” We couldn’t even have a supportive conversation without her telling me I needed a shrink. “Can’t you be my sister and not an evangelist?”

“OK,” Em said.

That seemed harsh, so I said, truthfully, “I’d rather just talk to you.”

“That’s why you drove down, huh. Free therapy.”

I said, “I know it sounds stupid, but I trusted her. I didn’t think she’d ever just turn on me. I thought we had a kind of unspoken pact that we’d try to work stuff out.”

“That’s what betrayal is. It’s not betrayal if you didn’t trust the person.”

“I guess that is what it is.” I thought about it. I’d been using the word abandoned to myself. But betrayal was right, too. “But it’s not simple, like she betrayed me, or abandoned me with no cause.”

“If you’re talking about lying to people in college—“

I knew what Em was going to say. “Not just that.”

“Mia. *All* relationships have incidents of people using each other, or hurting each other. It’s not fruitful for you to focus on all the bad from a long relationship that had a lot of good, too.”

“You want me to remember the good. Be grateful for it, blah blah blah.”

Em had been standing, but now she sat down across from me and leaned over the table. “Or just cut the preciousness, Mia. You hurt her, she hurt you. That’s tough, but it’s normal. Did you think betrayal was your own private thing? This is what it feels like. Most relationships—whether they’re friendship, or family, or a romantic partnership—don’t sustain, or don’t sustain the same way, anyway. And all relationships end in tragedy.”

“That’s not true.”

“Sure it is. We all die. Even if you manage to stick together, there’s an inevitable separation.”

“God.” I said. “This is, like, horrible. To talk to you.”

“I’m not trying to make you feel bad. I’m trying to give you a little tough love. It’s been almost a year since Jules sent you that letter. I don’t like to see you wallow. You’re a strong person, and a nice person, and usually an energetic person. And you need to move on.”

“Move on.”

“Yes, move on,” Em said, settling back onto her overstuffed couch as if she’d just given me a key piece of information.

I said, “How do I do that?” It came out a whisper.

“You cut yourself some slack. You spontaneously visit your favorite sister not to rehash a bunch of shit that makes you upset, but instead to go to a nice brunch since we both closed up shop. So we could enjoy each other because we were lucky enough to be able to cancel our regular days and do that.”

I said, "I think I can do that."

"Of *course* you can," Emmie said.

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"Ben's coming," Cara said, indicating the thundering footsteps on the back stairs.

"He is loud, huh," I said. He didn't usually come down while we were open. I smiled at Ben. He was in his painting clothes, but he held my coat. "You're not going out," I said, and he shook his head. "Do you want some food?"

"No," he said. "Do you have a sec?"

"She does," Cara said. "It's been dead since breakfast. Go ahead."

We went outside, and Ben sat on a milk crate by the alley. He didn't even brush off the ice and snow. I sat down next to him. "Something's wrong," I said.

"I hate leading up to stuff," Ben said. "I don't really know how to say this OK. Nuttie was up in the studio with me, sleeping on his bed. But then when I checked on him, he'd died."

"What?"

"He died. In his sleep, I mean."

"Oh," I said. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," Ben said. He held my hand. "Are you OK? Do you want to go see him? I wasn't sure what to do, so I called the vet and they can take his body."

"For what? I mean, why would they do that?" I thought of autopsies and medical experiments. Nuttie was eighteen-years old. I'd been expecting him to die for years. Now that he finally had, I felt calm because it seemed like he'd been dead forever.

“Just, they have like a burial thing.”

“I’m going to bury him at home.”

“In Delaware?”

“Yeah. At Mom’s house.”

“OK,” Ben said. But he said it like I was in shock, or didn’t know what I was doing. Like it was a crazy idea.

“We’re going in two days anyway, so I’ll just go early. It’s been dead because of Christmas. I mean, the restaurant has been dead. Vermonters really like their Christmas. No one’s going out to eat.”

“Well, and it’s been snowing,” Ben said.

I’d been concentrating on how this was the first Christmas without Jules, and now it would also be the first Christmas without Nuttie.

“Are you going to tell Jules?” Ben asked.

“No. How would I tell her?”

“I don’t know. Send her a message. He was her dog, right?”

“You know, technically Nuttie was Jules’ dog, but he lived with my family when she was in school, and then when I got back from Prague, I took him when I moved out of the dorms for my senior year. He never lived with just her. He was never really her dog.”

“OK,” Ben said. “I just thought maybe it would make you think about her.”

“I’m actually trying not to think of her, so it would be great if you could be on board with that.”

“Do you want to see him?” Ben asked.

I said, “No, I really don’t. I want to clean up and close early and then I want to take Nuttie to Delaware. I just want to go hang out with my family.” Mom and I had already talked about burying him in my old garden where Grandma’s roses were.

“You want me to go?”

“Of course,” I said. “You can still go even if it’s a little early, right? You’re the one who thinks I spend too long packing.”

Ben nodded. “Of course I’m coming. I’ll call the vet to find out how we can transport the body.”

“Don’t call him *the body* anymore, OK?” Now I could feel tears which I pushed back against. It felt good to push back against something. “And don’t tell me how we’re carrying him.” I shuddered thinking of poor Nuttie frozen in a cooler.

“OK, I won’t. I’ll take care of it,” Ben said.

“You’re a good boy,” I said. Ben laughed, but I hadn’t meant it as a joke.

“Sorry, I thought you were—”

“I know what you thought. Let’s just get going soon, OK? I want to be at home.” And I did. I hadn’t had such a strong desire to be at home maybe ever, and it superseded any lingering anxiety about Jules’ absence. I thought of staying in my old room in the basement with Ben, getting a drink from the bar and staying up late talking with him about my weird family and knowing they were all upstairs, even Dad, in their own rooms, maybe sleeping or maybe talking about how we all had annoyed each other. I missed us all being together, and thinking of that brought the tears I’d pushed back. Ben hugged me because he thought I was sad.

But I wasn't sad, I was happy for the first time in a long time, and I buried my face in his soft shirt that smelled like paint and sweat, and I kept crying because I could and because I knew he would let me as long as I needed to.

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If I try to isolate any single memory of someone who's still in my life, there's a bleed I can't stop. Everything before and everything after. A hopeless tangle. But with Jules, a benefit to my loss: I have some perfect memories; crystallized and entirely separate.

One: our good-bye to childhood trip. It makes me fond of us to think about how that trip was so self-consciously aware of its ceremony. We knew everything would change and it was a ritual farewell, earnestly planned. A cusp we thrilled to. Vista, possible for us to navigate, but giant, and ours.

I'm thinking of course about the only perfect part of it, before she freaked out on the shrooms. Before we fought about Nori and visiting her dad and before we lost Nuttie for an hour. That first night, after we set up the tent and we were lying in it, not talking, I felt the satin slipperiness of the sleeping bag and the pleasant firmness of the ground and the presence of her body breathing parallel. The tent canvas lit by the one flashlight between us and watching the shadow of insects landing on it, listening to the twigs snapping under animals and how the sounds of outside were completely unknowable to us, a shivery heart racing scary that also calmed. The promise of our weekend in the wilderness. We were set for college, about to cut a bunch of tether, off to become our

grown-up selves. As we undoubtedly heard people say, to start our lives. We were aligned, and we couldn't fathom not being so.

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