ABSTRACT

MY LIFE AS A PINBALL

By Jennifer Davis

My Life as a Pinball is a coming-of-age, first-person narrative about a female protagonist, a thirteen-year-old girl named Alex who bounces back and forth between parents—her mother’s house in Ohio and her father’s house in Florida. The novella is set mostly in Florida and the plot revolves around a developing girl who is searching for agape. Alex’s parents don’t know how to be nurturing, as she bounces through her narrative. Her ideas about sexual love and parental love are skewed by her experience with sexual abuse. But this fourteen-year-old also clings to a dream of an ideal sexual love that is selfless. In her desire to find what she needs both for healthy sexual development, she finds ways to cope with the abuse by using her imagination and becoming, as she calls herself, “a steely marble.” Alex explains her life in her breezy teen’s lingo.
MY LIFE AS A PINBALL

A Thesis

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For my teachers especially Jim & Jim
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I was nine when my father moved two thousand miles away. Since that year, I’ve spent one month each summer at my dad’s condo on Cocoa Beach. I’m thirteen. My birthday was in March, but we, my dad and I, will celebrate it this week with our annual game of Putt-Putt. It’s June, but it’s not like I expect my dad to suddenly start remembering my birthday with a phone call or card or anything actually on my birthday. I don’t think he knows what day it’s on. Oh well, he can’t remember everything. Some people just aren’t good with dates. No biggie.

My dad likes to take his binoculars and survey the babes on the beach. He especially likes blondes in red bikinis—much to the dismay of my snooty step-mother, Iris, who hates physical contact. She isn’t the touchy-feely type that my mom is. My dad isn’t either. Visiting him is like landing on the moon. If he’s an island, he’s Iceland. Really, he’s a planet far, far away in a distant galaxy.

My mom told me that my dad hates touching and hates sex, so I bet Iris does too. Mom said that Iris told her that they got a new King-sized bed and that Iris doesn’t even know sometimes when he comes to bed. Mostly he sleeps on the couch with the TV on. I touched him once by accident and he flinched.

At the beach, my dad acts like he’s the bod-seeker of the universe so nobody’ll know his untouchable secret. My mom told me that he would always flinch in bed if she so much as touched him with her pinky toe. She said if he was sleeping, he’d sometimes jump so hard he’d kick her. I guess he’s what they call frigid. But in public, here he is, acting like he’s having the time of his life looking at bods on the beach through binoculars.

I think it’d be funny if one of those babes came up to him and laid a big smacker right on his lips. He’d have a heart attack. He’d faint.
My dad’s a pretty good looking guy. It might seem kind of weird for me to notice stuff like that about my dad, but I have to look at him close to remember him. I only see him a month a year. So, it seems like as soon as I see him, I have to roll back across the eastern Midwest to live with my mom for another eleven months. It’s not like he can pop in on me anytime like at the house or even for one of my track meets. He comes up for Iris’s family reunions, but he never asks about my soccer games or my tennis matches. So I have to get an eyeful of him until I’ve got him burned into my memory—so I don’t forget what he looks like. He’s not hard to look at, so that’s not a prob. He always gets this honey-smooth tan. And the hair on his body turns golden and shines in the sun. Yeah, it might seem strange that I look at him so close, but when you don’t see someone for about a year at a time, you’ve gotta look to remember. Anyway, he looks like a movie star—a little like Robert Redford in *The Great Gatsby* or maybe like Ryan O’Neil in *Paper Moon*. My mom made me watch those movies. She says they’re classics. I like to pretend I’m Tatum O’Neil, and I’m going to travel around the country with my dad in a Studebaker or Model-T someday.

Hey, when your personal stars don’t shine, you have to make your *own* Moonshine, right? When I want my friends to laugh or look at me funny, I say, *No, I’m not smokin’ anything. I’m just high on life.*

Anyway, when I first get to my Dad’s, we go to the beach where my step-mom makes me cake on the sunscreen (SPF 50) before I step near the water, because I burn way too easy. She always says, *I can’t send you back to your mother with skin cancer!* She only says that because she feels like she’d get in trouble with my mom. She’s always competing with my mom. Like, my step-mom Iris always made *me* clean up *her* house before my mom got there (that was before Dad moved to Florida with her) because she said, *Your mother’s house is always so neat and clean. I don’t want her to think I’m a slob.* Then I told her that my mom cleans the house *herself*, and I just clean my *room* and that I shouldn’t have to clean the *whole house*. She should clean it herself. I got in trouble for that and she just about goes postal, only, she says she can’t hit me, because I’m not her kid. She sure hits my step-sister Sunny. I heard her yelling and slapping her around
in the bathroom before bed. When Sunny got to bed she screamed into her pillow. I hate you, I hate you, I hate you. Anyway, she doesn’t care about me—the sunscreen is just a thing she’s supposed to do as my dad’s wife since my dad doesn’t care whether I get a blistered sunburn or not. He’s too busy with the babes in his binoculars. Well, maybe he does. He did. He did cut off a branch of his giant aloe plant for me once from his back yard. That was after the vinegar didn’t work. P.U.! To my step-mom, I say, How am I supposed to have any fun if I’m always worrying about every little burn I get?

Then she always says Don’t talk back! I think that’s the stupidest thing anybody could say—Don’t talk back. I wonder if she goes around telling her friends Don’t talk back whenever they say something that makes sense that she doesn’t want to hear.

Getting a sunburn is the greatest thing in the world. So I always jump right into the waves and let the salt-water wash all the thick lotion off my body. I like to live dangerously! The stingy hotness of a sunburn against the cool water and wind feels so good. My red-hot back against the cool sheets with the smell of Solarcaine makes me feel like I’m still floating on a raft on the ocean in the sun. Yeah, I’m weird, but I live in Ohio ten months of the year, and sometimes it even snows in April. To me the sun is a god, and I like to absorb as much of it as I can to get the winter chill out of my bones.

The boardwalk is the best. I like to walk up there in my bikini. Except, sometimes, a group of Chicanos will raise their eye-brows and whistle. That scares me a little, kind of makes me want to put my shirt back on. But I don’t. I walk by them as slow as I can—which ends up being kind of fast—until I get into a shop or someplace. I like to watch the college guys play darts and pinball in the open-air food places. My dad’s not a big spender, so I hardly ever have money of my own and never more than about five dollars. So I mostly just watch. My dad and step-mom hardly ever know where I am—either they’re at work or dead to the world on their backs on the sand in the sun. They just want me back before the sun goes down. If they don’t let me go, I just sneak out, they never check in on me when I’m in the house.

I walk down to Sharkey’s Beach House to see what food I can get, since there’s never anything good to eat at my dad’s. There are maraschino cherries in the fridge but
we’re not allowed to eat them. Sometimes I sneak some, but I’ve already eaten about five and they might start to notice. I want to get a fish sandwich at Sharkey’s but I’m a little short on funds. So I get a side of green beans. *Gotta eat healthy* is my mantra when the guy next to me speaks. He’s sort of dressed up in navy-colored travel pants and a long-sleeved light blue Oxford shirt, not the typical beach bum with messy hair. His hair is bluish black and curly but looks shiny and sleek reflected in the metal panels on the buffet bar.

He points out the bay windows overlooking the ocean and the huge wooden dock that looks small next to the sea and says, You’re going to blow away with the seagulls if you don’t eat a little more food.

I laugh and say, That’s all I can get around here for two dollars. It’s not McDonald’s. Not that McDonald’s is any good. Sharkey’s has the *real* fish, the just-out-of-the-ocean stuff. It’s just that that stuff’s not cheap here.

What would you get if you had a little more money?

I wanted to get a fish sandwich but my dad only gave me two dollars. I flap the two dollars like they are faraway seagulls between my index finger and thumb. He smiles, and I see that his front teeth have tiny gap. His eyes crinkle at the outsides and are light hazel. Hazel nut? No. He’s not a nut. I can tell from the look in his eyes that his smile is real—for real. He’d probably help out a bum or give money to the people who ask for money for a Big Mac.

A bum asked my dad for some money once, when we were in Columbus, and my dad told him, Beat it buddy leave us alone. My dad rolled up his window on the guy’s face, after the guy told him he was a veteran. The guy even lifted up his military ID to show my dad. It didn’t matter that the guy was missing a tooth, wearing a jacket too light for how cold it was. My Dad told me that bums shouldn’t come up to people’s windows like that. Then, the vet turned and flipped my Dad off as he walked away from my dad’s brand new Chrysler. I felt sorry for the guy, but I knew not to ask my Dad why he wouldn’t give him any money. If I had any money, I would give it to people who didn’t have enough to eat. Jack London said, in one of the books I read at night when I couldn’t
sleep, _A bone to the dog is not charity._ _A bone to the dog when you are as hungry as the dog, that’s charity._

It’s nice to see that this man standing next to me in line has a heart sort of like Jack London’s, but I don’t think, from the looks of him and his clothes that he’s as hungry as any dog—maybe one of those pure bred dogs like a Rottweiler? No, not as mean, but the build is right and the colors—the dark hair, so maybe he’s protective.

My new good-looking friend is all _take-charge_ at the moment and orders me a halibut sandwich and puts it on my tray. Then he asks if I want some Key Lime Pie, and I say, No thanks, I had a bad experience with Key Lime Pie once. He laughs. We sit together at a table and hit it off. I really like this guy. He’s a lot nicer than most of the guys I have known. He says that he comes here all the time. Josh Livingston.

My friends, the girl ones, and I always put our first names in front of the last names of the guys we are gaga over. _Alex Livingston_. I’m going to write that in my notebook when I get home in pink ink bubble letters. Maybe I’ll draw some ocean waves in his hair or do a portrait of him—secretly of course. It freaked a guy out once when I drew his picture in my notebook. Like it was too heavy or something. Maybe it was the way I drew him with his eyes looking big and teary. He looked sad to me and sweet. Could I help it if I can see through people? That kid, the one in my drawing, lost his dad to cancer last year. He’s living with his friends and their parents, the Ballinger’s. They’re a cool family. The parents seem like they’ll stay together forever. They act like a family too. They’re all friends and go on camping trips together. I wish I could live with them. I wish I was Dave—even if his dad did die. It’s not like I really see my dad that much. I don’t want him dead, but…I don’t really want him living with us. It’s just one of my fantasies—to be part of a family like the Ballinger’s.

My parents can’t live together like in a book I read one night, Judy Blume’s _It’s Not the End of the World_. That book was all about these kids who tried to get their parents back together after a divorce. I know from that book, that once two people split-up—like my parents did—there’s no getting them back together. Those kids must have thought a fairy tale could come true. My parents are done with each other so I just have
to deal with that. Still, it would be nice to imagine them somehow being happy with each other. It’s awful to look like both of them and to have them sort of hate that part of me that’s like the other one. It’s not like I can split myself in two and get rid of the ways I’m like one of them or the other. I have to find some way to get along with the genes I have in me. Since I’m with my mom, I try to tone down Dad’s part that’s in me. If my mom mentions that I do something, *Like your father*, I stop doing that thing. Once, I moved my foot back and forth on the cool sheets on my bed when my mom came to my room to sleep with me. She got tired of my step-father’s snoring. She said, *Your father used to do that all the time—move his foot like that in bed.* So I stopped doing that.

Why is it that people who get married can flip the opposite way and hate all the things they should love about someone? Is it so awful to move my foot against the fresh sheet in my bed? Maybe my dad did that because, like me, he enjoyed the soft cool reminder of clean cotton, to forget the bad stuff for awhile.

Josh says he’s a *newly retired* psychiatrist. He said he *opted for early retirement*, because he got too depressed to listen to people’s sadness anymore. He could feel everyone else’s pain and that made him miserable, he said. Still, he started asking me all kinds of questions—like he’s about to ask me to unload all my problems on him.

Josh is thirty-seven, he told me up-front, like, *I’m thirty-seven* as if it was a warning. He said it in an almost angry way when I looked at him like he was really clicking with me. I don’t know if he knows how old I am but I know he knows I am a lot younger than he is. Maybe that bugs him. Maybe he’s lonely (he doesn’t have a wife or anything). I think he notices how gorgeous I think he is. Some people can tell what I’m thinking by looking at my face. I try to hide what I’m thinking, but I don’t think I can.

About a week after meeting Josh, I manage to get away from my stepsister Sunny again for the seventh time. I make some excuse about going to find a pair of sunglasses I lost on the beach, so I can find Josh again. I go across our bridge with the sand on it and hear the sand crush against the grayish boards. I act like I’m looking for something in the
green vines and grasses that grow in the sand beside the deck boards so Sunny won’t be suspicious. When I find Josh, he’s over by the volleyball nets, close to the boardwalk, on his towel. I take off my flip-flops, because the sand around the volleyball nets is thicker and I’m sinking into the sugary cocoa-powder of the sand. I stand next to him a minute and wonder what to say. He squints up and covers his forehead, Air Force salute style. He gives me a warm smile and says he’s glad to see me. I take off my t-shirt and shorts and, put them down like a towel. He asks why I don’t have a towel. I say I forgot it. So he reaches into his Adidas bag, gets one out, and hands it to me. We shoot the breeze a little about the closest people to us which are about sixty feet away. He says that he’s been enjoying his afternoon watching a baby play with a bucket on the sand and how peaceful it is. How nice it is to see families spend the day together.

I want to try out his psychiatry skills, so I ask, out of the blue, Do you think I’m a baby for crying at night because I miss my mom when I stay at my dad’s? I want to see if he’ll say the right thing.

No, not at all, he says.

Then I ask him another one, Have you ever been so close to someone that to be away from them for more than a couple days is painful?

Yes, that’s how I used to feel about my mother when I was a kid and then later, about my wife just after we separated. When she left, I couldn’t sleep in the bed alone. I’d wake up with panic attacks and night sweats.

What’s it like to have a panic attack?

Well…my panic attacks made me feel like my world was about to cave in on me and there was nothing I could do about it. Then, like most people, my heart started racing, my blood pressure rose, my lungs responded by pulling in air faster. It felt like I was drowning and had to fight to survive.

Sounds bad.

It really wasn’t that bad. None of it was, as I think about it in retrospect. I’m glad that my wife and I had the kind of love that would give me panic attacks, because she and I did wonderful, crazy things together all the time. I would chase her around the house
and end up on our sofa breathing hard and laughing. We did a lot of gawking at one another. We loved that time when everything we did together was new. There was an electric charge in the air between us. Love can be invigorating. There’s nothing better. We were gorgeous when we were young. She said she didn’t want to join me on the sofa once, because she wanted to look at me. She acted like I was Adonis or something. You look at me a lot like she used to look at me. You know, you’re even more beautiful than the both of us put together back then.

I can’t think of anything to say. So I say, Whatever! and roll my eyes. I didn’t realize I was looking at him in any certain way. I’m embarrassed. I want to crawl under my towel, but instead, I roll over and hide my face in my towel. It feels like he knows what I am feeling better than I do, and that’s scary. I’m sure my face is red, and he can see it through the sunburn.

Good, just stay that way, and I’ll put some sunscreen on you. You’re gonna turn into a Lobster. Your skin is too fair for this place. You look like you should live in Scandinavia.

He started rubbing my back with his Coppertone Sun Block 30. He had it in his bag. Actually, he says, I thought you were a Swedish exchange student when I first saw you. He started rubbing the Coppertone on my shoulders and arms then my back just below my neck. He made my hair into a pony tail with his hand to even out the lotion without getting it into my hair.

You did? You really thought I was a Swedish exchange student? I turned my head to the side to look at him in amazement.

Yes! I really did! He chimed back with a genuine enthusiasm and was feeling my joy with me as he said it—tilting his head a little to look me straight in the eyes.

His hands were big and soft on my back. He fiddled with the string on my swimsuit just below my shoulder blades. Then he gives me the bronze bottle and tells me to put some on my stomach and the rest of my body. He sort of looks away—like he can’t look at me.
OK, I say in a sweet voice. He smiles as if nobody could have said anything better. A tingling sensation shoots from between my legs almost like a light that blinks but as a sensation, and it somehow affects my voice. I lose the use of my brain. I can’t think.

I say, That’s good! Enough sunscreen for now!

I know why he can’t look at me and why he has to stop putting sunscreen on me. He wants something more than he should. I kind of want it too—mainly because he’s interested in me in a way that makes me feel wanted. His looks at me are so intense sometimes. His face is so into me—sort of like Robert DeNiro in *Raging Bull* when he’s about to kiss the blonde girl—the one DeNiro’s going to marry later—not in real life but as the guy, the boxer in the movie.

I don’t really want to leave our little spot in the sun, but I ask Josh if he has time to walk me to the Boardwalk so I can go to the restroom. Some ugly old guys are going to drool at me in my bikini, but I guess that’s their pervy problem. I’m steel. I can stand it—for a few minutes—since Josh is with me. He makes everything seem doable, like everything’s OK. I don’t want to leave him for even the time it will take to go into the restroom, but I’ve gotta go.

As we get closer to the boardwalk, neither of us talk, and we dart into the little waves and dodge them on our way to the stairs of the boardwalk. It’s peaceful like this with him. When we get there, I pop in to the restroom. I check my face in the mirror and see that it’s all lit up. I can’t help smiling at myself. I look all happy and starry-eyed, kind of doe-like and graceful. I feel light. It’s amazing. Josh is right about love. I can feel it coming from him, and there’s nothing better.

Josh walks me back to the place he thinks is my dad’s place and says, You’re a sweet girl. Then he kisses the crown of my head. I feel like royalty. All I do at that point is look up at his face and nod. His image gets burned into my retinas. From this point on, he is the only one that I want to think about this summer. So when Sunny, my step-sister, my dad, and my stepmother Iris sit around the table just before dark, all I’ll think about is Josh, his hands all over my body—not just on my shoulders and back— but also where
he might want to put them. It’s up to him; I won’t stop him—even if it hurts. I’ll do anything for him.

EAT! my dad yells at me. He hates it when I get all dreamy-faced. I think it’s because I remind him of Mom when I do that. Everyone is always saying that we look alike when they see us together. It’s how he hates me to be like her like she hates me to be like him. It’s a love-hate thing.

I am, Dad. I am. See? I say as I put some iceberg lettuce leaves in my mouth. It’s so uncomfortable to eat in their house. Iris makes me nervous like she’s going to snap at me at any moment.

Alex! Put your hand back in your lap and put your butter knife across the top of your plate like you’re supposed to. Really! I just reminded you last night. Why can’t you remember the simplest things?

I lift the knife and patiently put the blade exactly how she wants it—facing in at the exact top edge of my plate. I take another bite of Salisbury steak, chew it completely and cut off another piece carefully so I only cut one piece and then replace my knife at the radius at the top of my plate again. I sit up straight, put my hand in my lap, adjust the napkin there and sit up straighter. Then, according to Iris’s dinner protocol, I ask, May I please be excused?

Not until we are ALL finished. Look. I still have more than three-quarters of my dinner left. Iris shakes her head, Really, Alex! Are you this rude at home?

I shrug my shoulders. What can I say? I say nothing and take another bite of food, because I know I can’t talk with my mouth full. It’s always like this here and my stomach tenses up. I look at my dad who gives me this stern look. He knows that bothers me, and because he knows that bothers me, and still does it, it somehow doesn’t irk me quite as much. I lose a lot of respect for him when he’s insensitive like that; so, what he does doesn’t matter so much. He remembers the times when I was a toddler and would fall on the floor crying, saying, Don’t look at me like that! It was toddler heartbreak for me, or so my mom told me. I can’t really remember. Maybe I blocked it from my memory. I might’ve dealt better with the belt than the disapproving looks. The belt snap still sort of
makes me mad. My brother does this thing where he makes a loop and snaps the circle together really loud so it makes a loud whip crack. Then he says, *I’m gonna beat your ass right now little missy!* He’s just imitating how our dad used to be before the divorce, Dad changed after that. He stopped hitting us with switches and making bruises all over us. He even bought us stuff. He let us pick toys from Toys ‘R’ Us. Not anymore though.

Back at the dinner table in the middle of the second week of my visit, Iris asks Sunny. How was your little friend Marcia? Does her parents’ new pool look nice? My step mother has always been obsessed with what people own—houses, cars, boats, those lawyer’s briefcases with the wheels. She wants to be something she is not. She wants to move to a better neighborhood where there are houses with screened in pools near the ocean. She’s into their Mercedes ski boats too. *Fat chance,* I’m thinking, *with my cheapskate dad for a husband. I can’t even get a lemonade out of him, on a hundred degree day, at Circus World with no water fountains. Forget glowy necklaces, Mickey Mouse ears. Forget Disney World even. Forget living upscale. He’s not gonna pay.* Iris makes her own money – more than my dad. My dad’s working at Cape Canaveral Air Force Station where he tests rockets.

What really ticks me off is that Iris complains about having to pay the minimum amount a month for child support. My mom says that it barely pays for music lessons and the amount she pays for my field trips and soccer league. Iris talks about all the things she could get with that extra money, which she wastes on me, until I turn eighteen—when they won’t have to pay it anymore. I don’t even want to think about the money. So I think about Josh again and how he buys me Cokes and takes me to pricey restaurants my dad would never go to. You’d think that my dad would splurge a little, seeing that I only see him once a year and he lives by the ocean. Maybe we could go out for some real seafood, but the closest I’ve come to it here with my dad is his favorite place, Red Lobster. I think about my conversation with Josh last week:

Would you ever eat lobster, Josh?

Maybe.
You shouldn’t eat lobsters. They scream, you know, when they boil them alive like that. It’s really a painful death, because it takes the lobster so long to die. Think about it. They have to cook a long time and they are alive in there almost the whole time. The water has to burn clear through them before they die and their bodies are used to nearly freezing cold water.

For you, Alex, I will no longer eat lobsters.

Thanks. Would you eat a deer?

No.

Why not?

They’re beautiful. I wouldn’t want to destroy something so peaceful.

Have you ever seen a Key Deer?

Yes, I have. What can you tell me about Key Deer, Alex, my budding naturalist? Josh sounds as if he is proud of me even though I don’t know what he means by budding naturalist. I’ll look it up so I don’t look like a dummy to him.

Well…they have spots and are smaller than other deer and they can swim from island to island.

That’s very interesting.

Key deer are an endangered species. Do you know what a giant swallowtail looks like?

No. Tell me what a giant swallowtail looks like.

Well. It’s pretty big. It can grow to be five inches long. Uh no, wait I mean, its wingspan can be five inches long. Five inches wide, and it’s black with yellow stripes and has kite-like tails. It eats nectar from little red flowers, Azaleas or maybe they’re called Lantana. Yeah, lantana like the ones outside our condo. My step-mother wants to cut those down and put some ugly evergreens in, but I’m trying to talk her out of it.

I didn’t see any lantana outside of your house.

Oh, yeah, they’re really hard to see. They’re kind of hidden from the street and the beach. I almost slipped and let on that I wasn’t from the condo he was walking me home to.
Iris is still talking. She hardly ever stops talking. She’s going on and on about renovating my dad’s Mercedes ski boat so that it looks nicer and my dad is nodding over his empty plate. Iris still has a few bites of Salisbury steak left. Iris does make a lot of money. I heard from my aunt that she makes more money than my dad, but it doesn’t seem like it, since my stepsister, her friend, and I have to fight over one package of Ramen noodles for lunch everyday. She asks Marcia over to have lunch with us and feels free to offer her up a third of our noodles.

By the start of the third week, I’m getting to be a pro at making up excuses for heading out the door. I say stuff like, I’m going to go get some exercise riding my dad’s bike. Then I take his fat-tire beach bike and ride it along the beach where Josh usually lays out his towel and umbrella. Sometimes he brings chairs for us. He brings two, since I have met him almost everyday this month. I get nervous, in a butterfly way whenever I see Josh and get close to him. I can be away from him, though, and smell that sand-salt wind that reminds me of him. I try to make him smile when I reach the place where he is lying on the sand. He just seems like he needs to smile. I keep telling him to think of life as a big pinball game where you just get bounced back and forth between the rubber bumpers with red and white bull’s eyes, where you roll over pictures of clown faces and balloons and fall in holes and get spitted back up. I bet he thinks that’s pretty crazy, but he smiles when I talk that way. I try to be funny, but he’s always asking these serious questions. He’s a serious guy. I like talking to him and answering his questions even when he tells me I don’t have to. Maybe it’s a little weird that he asks me stuff when he hardly knows me, but he’s a shrink. That’s his job, right? He’s probably just used to talking to people that way. I bet it’s something he learned and can’t get out of the habit of. It makes me a little uncomfortable though I know he probably can’t help it.
Launching the Steely Marble

In Ohio, about a week before I left my neighborhood friends behind for the summer, I discovered the privacy of the sports equipment room. It was peaceful with the board games between the brick walls of the shelter house at Huffin-Durbin Park. The summer Recreation Supervisor, the Park Lady, sent a kid to check in on us, me and this curly blond-headed kid. I was in the middle of schooling this Catholic ten-year-old on the perfections of the French kiss when my friend Danielle knocked on the red metal door. We had locked ourselves in with the Park Lady’s key and some ruse about getting a basketball. Even if we hadn’t locked ourselves in, Danielle would have knocked anyway. She’s polite with me because I’m nice to her sisters. Danielle’s older than me and just finished her sophomore year of high school—where I’ll go in another year, since I just finished the seventh grade.

Alex! she knocked harder on the kickball-colored door. Her fist sounded like a drummer’s on the hollow metal door. The Beethoven knocks of fate. Inside the mop-closet-sized balls-room, the blue-eyed parochial boy was pulling up his pants which were almost off. He proceeded to knock over some plastic Connect Fours and checkers sets as he tried to get his pants up. I wiped his spit off of my lips as a soccer ball rolled out and thumped the white Nike’s at Danielle’s feet. We squinted into the sunny brightness of the outside world.

Danielle’s voice guided us for those first few blind steps the blond kid and I made to satisfy the Park Lady, who, I got this feeling, was watching us.

Danielle, who was waiting outside the red door, said, The park lady said to come get you because you were spending way too much time in that storage room.

Through blurry, cone-shrinking eyes, I could sort of make out a hoard of kids surrounding the Park Lady. They were doing crafts, making potholders from stretchy fabric loops and painting waxy papers. They had these pastel smocks over their clothes. They looked kind of like tiny old ladies in paint-speckled housedresses. The blond kid looked pretty happy to be out of that dark room. It was too dark to see his face in there.
and his voice and his lips didn’t let on that he was feeling weirded-out. But he looked pretty disoriented and a little confused as we regained our vision. So I’m sort of glad that Danielle broke up our make-out session.

I walked over to the teeter-totters like nothing happened, and this long-haired guy, a teenager I’d never seen before, started talking to me. His hair was in his eyes—which wasn’t the way most guys look in my town. Most guys in Devon have crew-cuts, short GI Joe haircuts, elf-cuts, or bowl cuts. Most girls have long hair that they tie back in French braids or pig tails, but I wear mine down because it smells nice—like Finesse shampoo. The boys like my hair. It’s weird that long hair is such a big deal for them. They should just grow it themselves if they like it so much. It’s just hair. My hair used to be short, before my body bloomed. That’s what my mother said happened.

Before my development, I could outplay the playground boys in any sport—especially baseball. Adults thought I was a boy. Kids knew I was a girl. But the whole jig was up when I got speed bumps on my chest. I decided to grow my hair out, because people were nicer to girls with long hair. Men, and some of the older boys, got nicer anyway. Other girls, new girls I don’t know, are always mean.

Appearance is everything in junior high and in high school, too—from what Danielle says. She showed me the dance she did at her audition and said, A good shimmy of the shoulders and a shake of the chest will get you into the flag corps. You can dance during half-times with the band at the football games and everyone’ll think you’re hot. She showed me her uniform with all the tassely fringe that waves in the wind when she moves. That’s the ticket to popularity in Devon, Ohio. More even than being a cheerleader.

Anyway, this out-of-towner, who looked to be about Danielle’s age, came up to me and shook my hand. Danielle said his name was Ted. Ted’s jeans were pretty tight which would’ve been good if he weren’t so thin. His legs were so skinny they didn’t even touch together at the thighs. He’s sort of bow-legged. But, I thought about what my mom said about NOT judging people by what they look like but by what they act like. Really, I look into people’s eyes, and I can tell if they’re no good or not. Ted was OK, I think, but
he did this thing with his middle finger when he shook my hand. He kind of tickled it on my palm.

I asked him, Why’d you do that thing with your finger?
What thing? He plays dumb.
You know what I’m talking about. You tickled my hand with your middle finger. Like this? He reaches out and does it to me again, this time with a weird look on his face. I jerk my hand away and he says, It means I LIKE you.

I said, Uh yeah, sure. I heard somewhere that that means you want to screw me?
Yeah, well, make out, maybe, but we wouldn’t have to do the deed.
Well, I don’t want to ‘do the deed’ because I’m saving that for marriage.
You Catholic? Ted asks.
No, but Danielle is. Aren’t you Danielle?
What? Danielle said as she looked distracted from her conversation with her littlest sister Becky whose lazy eye crossed under her coke bottle glasses as she looked at us then ran after a kick ball a boy kicked at her.

Catholic, I repeated.
Why? Danielle asked.
Because Ted wants to know.
No I don’t!
Yes you do!
Stop it, guys
Ted followed me over to the swings and sat down next to me. I got up and went over to the teeter totters. He followed. He got really close. Put his hand in my jeans pocket and said, What if I kiss you? Would you hit me?

No. It’s OK, I said, I guess it’s OK.

I’m not sure why I agreed to let him. I was curious. I wanted to practice and see what he did stuff like.

It was a long kiss with way too much tongue, for too long. The blond kid was better and he didn’t even have time to really learn how. So I said I needed to get a drink
from the water fountain—the fountain by the creek—and I planned my get-away. The Park Lady shot me a glare from across the grassy lawn. I escaped down a hill and onto the banks of the pebbly creek. I started to play with a crayfish and picked it up by its body and then let it go. Then Danielle showed up with Ted and the hiding spot was fruitless. I gave up trying to get away from him and walk further down the creek and under the street.

Stalagmites! Ted said, proud of his brilliance at knowing what the dripping mineral protrusions hanging above us were.

Stalactites, I said, Those are stalactites. They have to hold on tight. That’s why they are the ones that hang down. Those, I point to some rocky spikes sticking up from the concrete floor, are stalagmites.

Yeah, Danielle said, Alex is right. Those are stalactites up there, and those are stalagmites down there. We just talked about those in Geology.

Ted put his hand in my back pocket and whispered in my ear, Alex, you rock in Geology. He cupped my left cheek, but it’s useless to try to get rid of him. I’ve had problems like Ted before, and it’s better to just go along. He’d be out of town soon, and maybe, I thought, I could get him to buy me something at Kroger’s.

I asked him and Danielle if they wanted to walk to Kroger’s with me and they headed up to the hill, through a couple maple trees and past the Park Lady. Stay here until I get back, Danielle told her little sisters who were making bracelets and necklaces out of beads and putting them on each other. She pointed at them, I mean it. Stay put. I don’t want you to go over to Megan’s house. I’ll be back before Kate leaves. Stay here! I’ll tell Aunt Peggy if you don’t and she’ll whip you!

When we got to Kroger there was a Ms. Pac Man and a Spaceship game. I played the Ms. Pac Man and beat Ted, of course. Danielle just watched. Ted’s not that bad at it, but I beat a lot of people at video games. I’m really good with my hands. Pinball is better, but Ms. Pac Man and her wockuh wockuh wockuh wockuh wockuh is good in a pinch to escape the planet for a while. Danielle should learn to play—since her life is worse than
mine. She could use a little escapism through technology. Her dad just went to prison for raping her little sister.

Last summer, she tried to tell me about her life, but I was too stupid to understand the clues. She didn’t tell me straight out. She sort of lied, but I think she was just afraid to tell me the truth—about what was going on in her house. Her dad raped her sister, but she didn’t know that was going to happen. She just tried to tell me about her problems with her father at home. None of it would’ve come out, if her dad hadn’t raped her sister. She was afraid for her sisters, but I just didn’t get it. She made up another story, but I know now that she wanted to tell me all about how messed up her life at home was. She kind of hinted that she had some problems. Still, it’s hard to talk on a school bus. That’s where we were when we talked about what was wrong with her life. Mostly, Danielle is pretty upbeat. But this one time, we were on the bus, the one we took from Huffin-Durbin Park with Kate, the Park Lady to the pool. All of us kids were on our way back from the Kahiki Swimming Pool. Danielle and I sat together. I made her sit by me.

Can I tell you something that you can’t tell anyone? Danielle whispered to me behind the big stuffed seat.

Sure, I said, then did the thing with my hand and the mime lock and key at the corner of my lips.

I was raped.

You were? Where did it happen? I was shocked. Yet, Danielle seemed so calm about it.

In the alley, Danielle said. She was lying about where it happened then—because she was scared, but I didn’t know that she was scared of her father. He was gruff, but not mean to anyone. At least he didn’t pinch or play rough. So I didn’t know he was hurting her and her sister.

Which alley? I asked—that was what I was thinking that day, because I wanted to avoid that spot and protect myself.

The one across from my house, she said. The one off Kyle Avenue. Now I know that she was lying when she said that, because she was afraid that her dad might find out.
That’s my guess. She might’ve thought that I’d blab to someone. Maybe Danielle tried to tell me so that I could get her help, but I wouldn’t have known how. Maybe keeping her secret for so long was getting too tough. Maybe she just wanted to talk about it.

I ride my bike on Kyle Alley all the time, I said. But I’m not as pretty as you, so I probably won’t get raped.

It’s not about what you look like at all, Danielle insisted.

It isn’t?

You should be careful all the time. Hey, Alex, I’m really worried about my sisters, Danielle said.

Why? I asked, If they just stay with you and stay out of that alley, then they’ll be OK, right?

It’s not that simple, Alex. I wish it were, but it’s not. Danielle was talking about her father, but I didn’t know it then. My mom told me that Danielle’s father won the Father of the Year Award from the Kiwanis Club and was featured in the Devon Report as this single saint-of-a-father who was raising five daughters alone. He was a hero to the other parents in town—which was pretty much everyone but the kids in Devon. So when Danielle claimed that he was doing bad things to her, nobody important believed her. It was his word against hers. Maybe she thought I wouldn’t believe her if she said it was her dad who raped her. But I would have believed her. I would’ve.

Danielle told me some more stuff, the truth about it all—after I saw the Devon Report. Our hometown newspaper released his name in connection with the rape of a twelve-year-old girl. Danielle had tried to tell the police long before her sister got raped. She wanted to protect her, but the neighbor stuck up for her father. So her father ended up raping her sister, too. I talked to Danielle on the phone. I found out from my mom’s friends and some of Danielle’s relatives what her phone number was and called her.

Danielle?

Yeah?

It’s Alex. Are you OK? My mom said that your sister got raped.
I know. It’s all over town now. Everybody knows my family’s business. This town is too small for people not to know who our father is when they put his name in the paper. So everybody knows that he raped my sister, and it’s really embarrassing.

I’m sorry. I was just worried about you. My mom is worried about you too.

Your mom’s sweet. Thanks.

Do you want to come over to my house? I asked thinking that she might like to visit with my mom since her mom died when she was five.

No, I need to stay here, because my aunt’s coming home soon and wants me to be here for dinner. But you can come over here.

Danielle gave me her aunt’s address. I walked a couple blocks and down a hill to a small white house, with flowers and cut grass—very neat. Not like her dad’s house where the grass was always long and the house needed to be painted.

Danielle and I sat on her aunt’s couch while she told me about what happened to her sister. Her dad messed her up so bad that she can’t have children. She said that after her father finished with her, she sneaked out of the house and walked to the hospital. They arrested her dad and Danielle’s little sister saved all of her other sisters from the same thing that happened to her. But her sister wasn’t the only one. Danielle told me that her father had been touching her and raping her since she was five years old. He started doing things to her the year her mother died. She said she couldn’t remember much of her childhood, because she blocked it from her memory. Danielle told me about her boyfriend, and that he is going to go into the State Highway Patrol as soon as he graduates from Devon High School next year. Danielle said she feels safer with a guy who has a gun and wants to protect her. Then, if her dad comes back and tries to get her, after he spends his two years in jail for raping her sister, then she can have her boyfriend arrest him and take him in with his gun. Two years isn’t a long time when it means someone’s going to be back out on the streets to hunt her down. I asked my mom why he only got two years and she said it was because the jails were full in Devon. He should get a lot longer for what he did. Danielle’s boyfriend is going to live with them at Danielle’s
new home at her aunt’s house. She said her aunt really understood her and what she wants to do with her life.

From Devon, this year, two years after Danielle told me her news and moved out of town, TWA carried me on my fourth solo flight. I flew from the home of the Wright Brothers and the Wright Patterson Air Force Base to the home of Port Canaveral and the Kennedy Space Center. My mom lives in a place that’s the birth of flight. My dad lives in a place that’s the future of flight. As I think about the sky and hear the massive engines of the jets streaking white trails over my head and hear their engines vibrate the air around me, I lay here on a chaise lounge beside our condo’s swimming pool, I can imagine the energy of a 737 melting into the fabric of my skin, my body. If I tighten every muscle, maybe I can someday have the power to reverse the Big Bang of my birth. Maybe I can fuse all my covalent bonds and make myself impenetrable. With the metal of the jet in my skin, I’ll be a bullet. I could travel at twenty-seven hundred miles per hour. If I could be a space shuttle, I could move at twenty-seven thousand miles per hour. At the moment, I can only fly the friendly skies in a Delta jet. Jets don’t go that fast—not yet.

My grandparents are always saying that time goes by so fast, but I don’t see it that way. This summer is lasting forever! There’s too much time to think about what my mother said in a Hallmark card when I was eleven. It was the day I got my first period. She wrote, Congratulations on becoming a woman! If you can dream it, you can be it. On the front of the card, there was this teenager—a blonde girl with this white hat on in this heavenly hay field with flowers all around and in a dress that got pink and yellow from the sunset. It’s been two years, and I still don’t look as old as that girl.

I’m going to look out the windows of the 737 on my way home and be a metal ball. I’ll roll and rock with my ear buds in. I’ll listen to seventies music and whisk myself into another dimension with flower people. It doesn’t matter what’s below me—hot coals, snowy playground, the states in between. I’ll be flowery fine. I’m going to
have a ball and be a ball, a jumbo steely marble. I can dream it and be it. With my dad’s steely eyes behind me, I’ll look out over a wall of clouds that makes the day dark over Tennessee, that’s always blue above the silvery wing. The blue is always shining somewhere like in the photos my brother took from the fuselage a long time ago. We used to go to our dad’s house together on the same plane. He drives now and takes a friend. But I can still remember one of my brother’s photos. In his picture, I could see the shape of the window over the wing, the blue over clouds and the split of the light rays that flashed up and apart just as our parents did.
God as Pinball Wizard

At the beach again in his same tanning spot near the volleyball nets, Josh says he’s concerned that I won’t adjust well. He says I’ve got gifts from the gods when it comes to intelligence. I don’t know what he means. I feel like a ditz most of the time. But Josh tells me, like he’s talking about me, that bright people have a harder time adjusting because of their heightened awareness. I like it that he thinks I’m smart—especially since my step-dad is always calling me a dumbass. Yeah, I do stupid things—a lot, but I try not to believe any of it—what anybody says about whether I’m smart or not. It’s hard to know who to believe—the people who tell me I’m smart or the people tell me I’m dumb. I wish my mom would get a new boyfriend or dump this one. I wish I that I remembered what it was like to have both my parents in the same house. I kinda do and that wasn’t really any better. My dad with his belt and his temper wasn’t exactly paradise.

Josh tells me how important it was for him to grow up with both his parents and that it’s a difficult arrangement for kids. Yadda yadda yadda… There are worse things than parents living apart to deal with. I’d really like to tell Josh some things and trust him to say the right things, but I know he might not always get it right. Still, he seems like he cares enough to want to say the right things. Instead, we chit-chat, the shrink and I, because I’m not sure I’m ready to really talk. It’s easier to just chat, shoot the breeze, chew on some small talk to keep my world from crashing apart, keep anyone from doing anything drastic. Over-reactions are my parents’ favorite way of dealing with private issues that I’m confused about. Usually it’s easier to stay confused than to deal with the fallout of screaming, angry parents. Secrecy keeps everyone at peace—which is better than a lit-ramp bonus and an extra pinball plunge.

Josh’s been a nice guy all along. We sit on the benches of that square on the boardwalk that overlooks the tide when we start to really talk. So…how is it in Ohio with your mother? You like it there?

It’s OK. It’s not the best, right now. I shake my head and say, Just way too many kids in my mom’s house. There’s my half brother, my two step-sisters, and my step-
brother. My step-sister is about ten years older than me and we share a bedroom. She’s always nagging me to clean up my side of the room. I try to keep it neat but I figure that my life is full of stoppers and bumpers and junk, so why shouldn’t my room be?

I’m trying not to wear Josh’s ear out by talking too much about my philosophy on God and pinball. I tell him that God’s like Tommy in the Pinball Wizard. Just think about it: you have a deaf, dumb and blind kid who gropes around and can’t hear what anyone’s saying, or what the machine says, as he pounds the toggles that control a microcosm. What happens is only sort of under control. The rest is just chance. The game tells people what to do, to hit the loop or the target, but if they haven’t played that much before, then they lock up the machine and the lights dim for awhile until someone hits it right again. Some machines have magnets to make the ball roll into at an angle that’s impossible to hit or away from places that could really score. It isn’t like the player has any control, it’s part of the game that there is built-in failure. There must be some corrupt force that has control over the life of the ball. Then again, sometimes the magnets pull the ball into slots or chutes that earn jackpot scores. It’s usually on the first ball if the player isn’t that good or after the second lost ball, so the machine isn’t totally merciless or totally merciful. But I bet Josh doesn’t want to hear any of this. He’s not really into quirky philosophies like I am and probably not into thinking about magnets and life or any of that stuff either. The idea of magnets makes me stare sometimes and think about how, no matter how much I try to go in the right direction, something always pulls me off track. It’s not like I can fight it either. The magnets are too strong.

Really my mom’s house is pretty tidy. She works all day and she and my step-father keep it pretty neat looking. It’s just weird that it seems like my life is so disorganized. I want to tell Josh, this cool psychiatrist, a friend who pays attention to me, to take me home with him, that I don’t like my parents’ homes, and that I’m tired of living in an X-rated house and an empty one. If Josh knew all that, it might squelch his love for me. Plus, he might not keep my secrets.

Josh and I lay on our towels and squint to see each other as he asks me how I deal with rooming with a twenty-four year old who needs her space.
I say, I just roll with it, you know, being the pinball that I am. Look at me, I’m here on the beach with you, far away from her now. So she should have plenty of space back in Ohio.

Yeah, she’s got space now doesn’t she, Josh says. He puts his elbow over his face to shade his eyes from the sun.

Yeah, she sure does, I say. It’s OK, though, when I’m in Ohio, I’m outside most of the time anyway—or at school. I’m pretty outdoorsy. I go down to the park a lot and sit on the playground and meet up with my friends there. I kissed a boy on the teeter-totters last fall and made the park lady mad. Seems like everyone’s always getting mad at me for something! If you got mad at me I’d die. Please don’t get mad at me. If I do something or say something stupid I hope you know that I’d be upset if that upset you.

Josh says, I promise not get mad at you. Cross my heart and hope to die. He does the thing with his finger making an X over his heart and then mimes a pin in his hand and says, Stick a needle in my eye.

I want to talk to Josh about my step-father who says that all men have a one-track mind about sex, that my step-father tells me things he says my mom wouldn’t want him to, that he was trying to help me learn about sex with dirty videos and magazines, that he said I shouldn’t tell my mom, that my mom would divorce him if I told. I don’t want the responsibility of another divorce. That’d just be a bad scene. I know that routine—it’s all about who gets what and who lives where and where will the kids go to school and how will there be enough money for bills, then the electric gets cut off and it’s cold in the house and it’s winter and it’s Ohio. Not a good scene.

What I want to tell Josh would just bring him down. That’s not what I want him to have from me. He doesn’t need more concerns to make his face droop. I just want to be fun to be around. Nobody likes to hang out with a person who has tons of problems and complains all the time. Maybe I have so many problems that it might make a smart person laugh.
My mom laughs about stuff that happened in her house when she was a kid. It was so sad it was funny. She laughs at how horrible some of her childhood memories are. Here’s a story she tells over and over and laughs when she tells it:

When my mom was about three years old, she had a two-year-old little sister. Usually, she tells this story to illustrate that she has always been klutzy and to make people feel better about their own physical coordination. She tells it after she tells the story about her sled-riding falls. She brags on her family as if we were Olympic bobsledders while she describes herself flailing, flopping and floundering down the hill.

So my mom tells a story after the sledding story about when she was three years old and my aunt was two. It was way back when my mother’s mother (Grandma Keinz) liked to go to card parties down the street and leave my mom (who was three) with her little sister (who was two). My mom was supposed to be in charge of her little sister. But she laughs about how, at two, my aunt Betsy could climb like a monkey and reach stuff that my mom couldn’t reach or she’d fall and break her neck. So my aunt gets on the countertop and my mom is afraid that my aunt (at two years old) will fall. So my mom says, Betsy! Get down! You’re gonna fall!

My aunt, as a toddler, doesn’t listen to her that day. My mom laughs as she tells her story. My mom, says, And you know how klutzy I am now. There was no WAY I was gonna climb up on the counter when I was three. I’d fall NOW, if I tried that. So I just kept telling her. Betsy, you’re not supposed to be up there. But Betsy wouldn’t come down. The next thing I saw was Betsy taking out a box of razor blades from the top shelf of the cupboard. I yelled at her to PUT THOSE DOWN! But she wouldn’t listen—until she sliced her hand, and it started bleeding. Then she climbed down. I got her a glass of water. I got her to lie down on the couch and fall asleep. So, when Mother and Daddy came home, they saw Betsy lying on the couch with her shirt covered in blood, her hands tucked under her chin as she slept on her back with her chest all bloody. They thought I had killed her. Boy, did I get it then. They let me have it. They’d just come back from a party and had been socializing and drinking, and they didn’t wait for me to tell them what
happened. They beat me until my head was lumpy and my fingernail flew off my pinky from trying to shield my head.

The stories my mother tells, like this one, are more horrible than funny. They don’t really make me laugh. They scare the hell out of me. Luckily, my mom kept my brother and me away from our Grandma Keinz as much as she could. I’m glad. But I guess, if you look at them as something as sad and horrible to the extreme, you have to laugh because it reaches a point beyond the horribleness that just doesn’t make sense to cry about. I guess my mom’s stories are maybe a little bit like watching *Fear Factor* which is sometimes humorous to some people. My mom tells her legendary ordeals, like the razor-blades story, to her Copper Craft club. She’s a salesperson like her dad was. Good salespeople can make Hades sound like a nice place to be.

My mom’s dad died before she could get a chance to know him, but that must be where she gets her popularity and social grace. It sure isn’t from my drunken grandma Keinz, although, when they weren’t beating their children, the Keinzes were quite the social couple. My mom made her Copper Craft Sales meetings more like parties. My mom’s so entertaining with other adults, that as I watched, as a grade-schooler from the kitchen doorway, I fell in love with her for the thousandth time.

My mom’s stories, no matter how gruesome, always made me love her more. But unfortunately, I’m really more like my dad who is pretty shy and doesn’t want to be center stage at social events. I just enjoyed, like my dad did, to watch and listen as my mom showed her dimples with a Dutch girl’s face that always somehow lights up all the faces around her. She’s always agreeable, always trying to illustrate, to animate in agreement. Conflict avoidance has been more a problem for her relationships than anything else. She won’t tell her husbands if they’re being obnoxious or not. She tells *me* but wouldn’t say it to *them*. She humors people and goes along with everyone even if it hurts her. I am the only one she complains to. My mom’s strategy to combat anger, frustration, and confusion is acceptance and love.

It’s a wonder that she’s like that, because she has so much hurt bottled up from all those times her parents drank, her mother bruised her, her father left her, and her
husbands could not make up for any of those days. The least I can do for her is to listen and tell her it wasn’t right, and it hurts me too, but she’s not like them; she’s better. I won’t tell my mom about my pinball philosophies or other things that would hurt too much for her to know.

My mother used to believe in togetherness in the bathroom, everyday, when my dad was around. Things have changed a lot since I was little and my dad lived with my mom and my brother and me and our dogs and cats. If one of us was in the bathroom, then everyone and the dog would be in there. There was no shame in being human or being a dog in my old family. My mom will keep telling her stories without shame. She can pull it off, because she somehow makes everything sound charming.

I wish I was like my mom and could make everything that charming, but things don’t always appear so rosy to me, and I just can’t spin it all peaches. I try not to be a pessimist, but the magnets pull me to the negative side. The part of me that is bubbly like my mom, wants to talk about my whacked-out childhood and laugh about it like my mom, but it’s not entertaining to me—it’s just sad and shocking.

If I could tell Josh about it all without being a rainy day in paradise, I’d tell him that: We were in the kitchen that day, the day it started. My bare shoulders were against the counter’s ledge, because he asked if he could see my chest, and I was a good little kid, so I agreed to do what he said that day, the day I got excited about my first pubic hair. My mother wasn’t home from work to see it. So I stretched the elastic out on my underwear and showed it off to him. It was my fault, I felt, even though I was much younger then—in fifth grade—and was thinking: this is supposed to be like show & tell—like when I showed him my first big tooth that broke through the skin. I was proud that I was growing up, up, so fast, though, that his eyebrows perked up, and he told me about things I didn’t know I didn’t want to know, things that I want to unknow that have nothing to do with love. It seemed harmless at the time, that he asked me, an eleven-year-old, if he could suck my whisper of breast—not even a breast yet. He fondled it with his oil-stained hand. His greenish-black fingernails stroked up me from underneath. It only took him a few seconds to break that barrier that made me a daughter and him my chance.
at a dad. He didn’t hit me like my dad did. He didn’t yell at me. It didn’t seem that bad—that he lowered his almost-bald head and mouth and knelted down to my height and asked, *Do they get hard? Can I try?* I tried to say the right thing, and advised him, *No.* Because, he had just explained, *It’s against the law for men to have sex with kids—even though ALL men want to have sex with kids, especially with virgins.* Then he unzipped his brown dress slacks and asked, *Does this scare you?*

Since my head was all mucked-up back then, I said, *No.* Then he rubbed himself, held his other hand, between his legs, like a cup and white stuff bubbled out. He said, *See that?* as he stretched his cupped hand out. It was my first meaningless sex. He told me not to tell. *Don’t tell your mother…* (He didn’t make any murderous threats.) He said, *Don’t tell…or it’ll mean another divorce.* I wasn’t much of a talker, so that wasn’t a problem. I wouldn’t have known how to explain it to my mom or anyone, anyway. How would I explain myself? What words would I use? I didn’t know them. I only knew how to say, *Mom I love you. You’re the ‘World’s Greatest Mom’—Like it says on your coffee cup the one you picked out the other day.*

Sitting on the beach with Josh, watching him watch the seagulls go by, I want to keep things light. Josh notices the catatonic look on my face and asks one of his clinical questions.

He says, *Does it stress you out having to deal with all those step-kids back in Ohio?*

Yeah, I guess, pretty much. I don’t know. I just try to stay away from them as much as I can. My twenty-four-year-old step-sister goes out a lot and works at my step-father’s hardware store, so luckily she’s not in the room we share *all* the time. But I can kind of get the focus off of me when it comes to her nit picking. The other kids, since there are four of them, make it easy to put my invisible cloak on and disappear. I can take care of myself and get good grades so if I just write my mom a note and put it on the kitchen countertop before my step-dad comes home, I can go to my friends’ houses and
not get in trouble. I’m not allowed to stay out as late as the other kids, so it sucks when my mom comes home late, because then it’s just me and my step-father. All the older kids stay out really late. Mom doesn’t worry about them like she does me. I wish she would just trust me and let me stay at my friends’ houses until later because it’s safer out there.

Josh’s forehead gets a line between his eyebrows, all worried-like. He says, Why don’t you feel safe at home Alex? Is your step-father bothering you?

No, I say. He just says stuff that scares me. Like when I leave a pan of macaroni and cheese on the stove without putting away the leftovers and washing the pan. He said he was going to knock me upside the fuckin’ head and through that wall, as he pointed at our family room wall, if I didn’t get in there and clean up my fuckin’ mess! He didn’t care that the macaroni was still hot and that I just put my bowl down on the coffee table for a couple minutes. It only took me five minutes to eat and I made my own dinner and that I was only twelve then.

Nobody should talk to you like that, Josh says, Nobody should talk to anybody like that least of all a twelve-year old kid. I don’t blame you for wanting to get out of your house. You need to tell your mom about his threats.

I already have, but she won’t do anything because they are just threats. He knows he’s not allowed to hit me. He just talks that way.

It’s hard for me not to tell Josh what my step-dad did, since he asks all his shrinky questions. I want to tell him about what my step-dad did, and that I spend a lot of time in Ohio hiding in the basement closet under the stairs, where I look through old pictures or read books that I get at the Paperback Exchange like Aaron T. Beck’s Cognitive Therapy and the Emotional Disorders, Charles Dickens’ David Copperfield, T.S. Eliot’s Selected Poems, D.H. Lawrence’s Selected Poems. If it’s too cold or if my friends aren’t home, I visit my secret library. If he comes down the stairs, I hear him right away, flip off the light while his feet pound on the creaky steps, and run out the garage door which is close by. I stay there until dinner, until my mom gets home, so I know he won’t try anything
funny. Since he snores at night, I listen for that, so I know he’s out cold and in his bed with mom.

Sometimes I dream about different escape paths I could take out of my house. In one dream, I am in my room when I hear his footsteps on the stairs that lead to my bedroom. I get up quick and go into the closet. In that closet there is a pine panel door that lays flat with no handle inside. Behind that door is the attic that has grey foam insulation—loose like 3M confetti and two-by-fours that I could crawl with my knees to get to the other side where there is a window with an aerial antennae for the TV that people from way-back used before there was Time Warner and Direct TV. I climb out the window, open the chain-link gate, jump down from our cement driveway wall, and run up the hill to my friend Becky’s house. In the dream, I knock on her basement door where her room is. But she is never home, so I wander around the dark alley and look for a hiding place in the bushes that arc and make little forts or a cave near the Devon Hospital that’s across town and near the Kroger, but I have lots of time to walk there. The town is peaceful at night in the light of the street lamps that crane over the streets with necks like metal geese.

I have sneaked out in the dark for real, before that dream, on a real night, with Becky and her little brother Tom. They wanted to have a night-time rendezvous, Becky called it. They came to get me and my parents heard them climbing on the roof over our family room, but they were too tired to get out of bed and waited until morning to bust my brother, because they thought he was sneaking out again. When he denied it, they didn’t believe him. I didn’t say a word when they asked me if I heard him opening the window. I just shook my head, shrugged my shoulders and raised my eyebrows as if to say I didn’t know.
In June, the beach is popular with topless sunbathers who sometimes let their nipples point up into the heat of the sun. People are cool with bodies and breasts on this beach. Most people don’t even try to hide what they’ve got. Men wear Speedos without worrying about showing their bulge or lack of bulge. It’s a good scene with the sandpipers dodging the waves and pecking at the microscopic sea-creatures that burrow beneath the wet sand into little pores that the shallow waves make. A sandpiper flies away when a toddler in a flamingo-pink one-piece tries to catch it.

I keep looking at Josh the way movie stars look at each other. Their eyes always move to each others’ lips. They do that every time. So I keep looking at Josh like that. He notices and looks away when I do that, but I can tell he’s attracted. I want him to be. I’m not sure what he’ll do, but I don’t care. I kind of want to see what he wants to do and what he’ll do. I want to know how he does it. If anyone deserves to have sex with me my official first time, it’s him.

My mom said my first time would hurt and that I would bleed and it would be awful. But I don’t care. I wish she hadn’t told me about her first time and how she got pregnant with my brother. I want to believe that guys won’t say that they love me just so they can get laid. I’m going to try not to believe her and believe them when they say they love me. I’m not going to ignore them when they say that. But I will only have sex with someone who is so special that I would want to marry him. When I know I’m ready to get married and have a baby, because it only takes once. My mom’s first time was pretty horror-show. She said she bled a lot and then got pregnant. I have so much bad stuff to say that I try not to talk. I’m not telling Josh about any of my mom’s stuff. I don’t want him to have any more reason to not want to be friends with me. He keeps asking such serious questions, though. It’s hard to keep him laughing.

Maybe he wants to save me. My dad was like that once when I was little. He noticed that the undertow was taking me and my brother out to sea. He swam to me and
pulled me back toward the shore. I could feel how strong he was as he pulled the ropes of my raft. He was lean, but his jerks and tugs gained yards toward the shore. He yelled to my brother to swim back to shore that he was drifting out to sea.

My brother is older and not really my dad’s son. My mom’s first husband ditched him, and my dad adopted him. I’m really my dad’s only kid except for my half sister from my dad’s first marriage, but she never visits. Marriage for me will be different, it’ll count. It’ll last. I’m not going to get a divorce, ever. So I have to marry the perfect man.

Josh was married before, but he won’t talk to me that much about it. He just listens to me talk most of the time. It’s kind of nice to have him be so unselfish that way. I’m not used to that. I can tell he’s interested in more than just my stories, but like my mom, he’s trying hard not to do that thing that comes naturally to him. He makes me feel like I’m rolling to the top of a lit ramp, going around and around again until I’m feeling dizzy. My heart beats pretty fast when I see him standing at the place I usually see him at—at the long benches attached to the deck on the pier. My heart jumps. I feel a rush go through my stomach when I see his hand resting on the rail and wait for his head to turn and see me. I almost want to run away, I get so nervous. It’s weird that I want to see him so much that I feel like running away. I’m not sure what that’s all about.

All Josh wants to talk about is me. I don’t want to talk about me. I want him to do the talking, do what he wants to do to me. What my step-father wants to do, but in the right way. In a way that isn’t selfish or fake or wrong. At least Josh is trying to help me with all the problems my family is putting on me. He wouldn’t disconnect love and caring from sex like some people. Love and sex can go together, at least it should. I want sex to be an extension of love, but not with someone who’s already married (to my mother). I’m not sure if Josh loves me, but he sure is showing me that he cares.

Let me walk you to the end of your condo’s gate, he says. He wants to make sure I get home safely. He’s been walking me as far as I will let him. He wants to protect me, make me feel safe. I don’t want my parents to find out about him. He thinks my parents know. He thinks I live in the condos on the opposite side of the pier, but I walk through a condo that isn’t mine and down the street to the other end of the beach. I don’t want my
parents to ruin him for me, so I tell him that I live in the Blue Heron Condo Complex when I really live about a mile from there. They’re a lot alike, so it’s easy to talk about Blue Heron like it’s my home, because our condo faces the beach in the same way and has the same kind of swimming pool and the same kind of shower spigot to rinse the sand off your feet just beyond the iron gate and the wooden foot bridge that leads to the ocean. Josh usually walks me there then walks back to his car on the sand near the boardwalk. It stays light for a long time, and he makes sure to get me home way before sundown. That’s good because the mile walk is much better in the daylight.

My step-mother does her detective duty and asks how my day went and what I did. I tell her I watched the surfers and talked to a few of them about waxing their boards. I think her questions are mostly for her own entertainment, because she skips right over what I say and tells my dad a story of her own about something or other that is only remotely related. She talks about a dance she and my dad went to a few years ago—a Parents Without Partners dance. She talks about how handsome my dad was and still is. Then she tells me to set the table.

She knows I hate salad, so she has me make that. She always has to be in control and the center of the world she inhabits. She uses the reasoning that if I make the salad, somehow, I’ll like it. That’s what she believes and that’s what she thinks exists. She tells me to make a spinach salad to see if I’ll like that better, but I know I won’t. She tries, sort of, but doesn’t have a clue who I am or what the problem is even though she could if she cared. It would be cool if she’d listen to me, but I can’t tell her stuff, because she only knows how to tell me to stop talking back. So I’ll just sit there again at the table until I finish my salad, and I’m not allowed to get up from the table until I finish it. I try to eat it first, but it’s too awful, so I eat my stuffed green peppers (another thing that isn’t on my hit foods list, but I would rather eat forty of those than one bowl of salad). My mom can get me to eat salad. I miss my mom. When I was younger I used to cry every single night because I missed her, my home. She’s always been my home. When I was little I didn’t care where I was as long as I was with her.
One time, when my brother was twelve and I was seven, my mom had to follow the moving van that my step-father was driving to Port Charlotte, Florida. My mom had always wanted to live in Florida and my stepfather was out to make her happy, so we all packed up our rickety furniture and the few toys we salvaged from the house our dad left. My mother told my new step-relatives to take whatever they wanted from that house so we only had a few things and not much furniture. I didn’t need any of that. The best thing to me was my mother. As my mother lost track of the U-haul truck my brother freaked out. I tried to tell a joke to my mom to make her laugh but my brother yelled, HOW CAN YOU MAKE JOKES RIGHT NOW, WE ARE LOST IN ANOTHER STATE OUT IN THE MIDDLE OF THE FLORIDA STICKS! MOM, WHERE’S THE MAP?

My mom said, Relax, Eric we’ll catch up to him at the next gas station or we’ll see him down the road.

Mom and I were carefree. We had each other. That’s all we needed. I believed in the magic of my mother’s ability to take care of us. I wouldn’t have cared if we had to sleep along the highway homeless without covers as long as I could be with her. Love. It’s more important than food. My brother’s perspective was a little different.

My mom is the most beautiful person I’ve ever met. Nobody dances with the charisma she does when she dances around the house and sings, Ain’t we got fun? Through the house in Gatsby flapper style when I was watching that movie, In the mornin’ In the evenin’ ain’t we got fun? Sometimes she comes into my room when I’m studying and starts dancing and singing to my music—teeny-bopper tunes is what she calls it. But it’s not really. It’s what all the smart kids listen to—John Lennon, the Beatles, Death Cab for Cutie, and some Jim Morrison—the classic stuff.

I’m still not all that comfortable at my dad’s. I sleep on a cot in the office. It feels like boot camp here. I keep books on Florida history—Osceola, Sacagawea, the oldest town in Florida: St. Augustine, birds, butterflies and biographies of musicians like Schubert, Rachmaninoff, Louis Armstrong and John Phillip Sousa—under my bed and read until about 3:00 a.m. most nights. When I try to use the I-have-to-practice-my-
trumpet excuse to get out of dishes, my step-mother says it’s not important and that learning how to take care of a house is more important than practicing a trumpet. My dad just lets everything she does float into the cosmos. He stares into space most of the time like he’s in a trance. My dad used to get so angry he’d whip my brother and me with a belt or with green tree branches when my mom and he were still married. He would make bruises and welts on us—or so my mom says. I don’t remember it, but he stopped doing that after the divorce. Now he just ignores us or lets his wife deal with us. My brother used to come to Florida with me, but now he flies over with a friend. But my brother is just a pain anyway. He’s always picking on me. He’s jealous. I wish I could talk to Josh about all this, but I’ve told him enough to keep his mind whirling for an eon, so I don’t want to tilt his brain and lose him forever.

I’ve never really missed my dad. I don’t know what happened that made me not love him. I just don’t feel a bond with him like the one I have with my mom. I used to cry when I had to stay with him when she left to go somewhere. If my mom is gone, I feel the pull of her to me and me to her. Even when we’re miles apart, I can feel if she’s upset or happy.

My friend, Missy, who’s all into sciencey stuff, said something about rubber trees in a building we visited last winter in Ohio. It was tropical in the room called The Palm Room. It smelled like honey in there—because of the orange blossoms that grew on trees planted in giant orange pots on either side of a brick walkway with huge planters filled with violets, orchids, bonsai trees, and moss. There were rubber trees tucked in the corner with some palm trees. Missy said, Look at the trunks of those rubber trees.

Yeah, they look like two trees with one trunk.

They’re fused because when their branches touch each other for long enough, they graft and fuse together. When they grow close like that in the woods, the two trees make one stronger tree by being close to each other. I think that’s what happened in the Palm Room in the planters. At that moment, it dawned on me that my father got chopped out of my life—well not exactly chopped, because he moved away by choice. His
company moved from Cincinnati to Port Canaveral. He’s an engineer for the airplanes there. When I was little, he tinkered in the basement with his soldering iron and the green electrical boards that he never talked about. When I asked what he was doing, he’d tell me to get back, because it was hot. But he never got too close to us, so we never really grew together. Maybe it would have hurt worse to lose him if we had had a strong hold on each other’s branches. As it was, I didn’t know him very well, so I might have missed him, but I’m not sure what it was that I would have missed. It’s kind of confusing. Maybe I don’t know what a dad is supposed to be. Josh said that he knew that I was spending so much time with him because I wanted a father, but I thought it was because I wanted a boyfriend. I am pretty attracted to Josh, even though he’s older, not so much because of how he looks, or what he says, though it doesn’t hurt that he’s got a beautiful sculpted face, a nice tan, and smooth skin, but I’m attracted because he’s trying to love me in the way I need him to. I can see him struggling between being fatherly and his attraction for me. I can feel it the same as I can feel the sun. It feels good. It burns a little. His face with its always wanting something from me that I can’t name, makes me feel wanted, finally—even though it gets intense and creepy at times. He wants to be in me, and he is, but he doesn’t know it. I can pretend like I’m not into him that much, but he reads my face when I want him to say something, it’s like he knows it, and he says that thing. He can just tell. He watches me really close. He wants to be close. He doesn’t want to do anything wrong, though. He wants me to be healthy and happy which makes me want to dream about him more.

One of the nights when I could hear the ocean, I had a dream that Josh undressed me and that he undressed and that we touched each other. Our skin touched. We formed a Taoist Yin-Yang symbol with our bronzed bodies until a wave approached from the shore and washed us away with the sand.
One of the books I have been reading at night to go to sleep is a book of poems I got from the used bookstore I found on my way back from the beach. In the condo, I found some old books in a closet, in my sister Sunny’s room, and I traded them for other old books. The sign in the window in red neon cursive says, *We Buy Used Books*. It wasn’t a big store, just a little shop in a strip, but every inch full of paperbacks. It’s called *Vacation Paperbacks*, but they have some hardbacks too.

I like when places make exceptions like that, like when I went with Josh to the IHOP and got a Belgian waffle. It reminded me of an ugly scene one time when my mom took my brother and me to a Waffle House and my brother ordered a pancake and the waiter said, This is the Waffle House, not the Pancake House. We don’t have any pancakes here.

I wish I had known at the time that the International House of Pancakes serves waffles. I would have told that waiter, Yeah, but did you know that I got a waffle once at the International House of Pancakes? That waiter would have been baffled. He would have had to eat his little notebook.

It makes me giggle to think about how rude that waiter was. I’ve seen waiters get away with that before. Waitresses usually aren’t as rude. Maybe waitresses can’t get away with that. It’s so not fair. Anyway, I used the books, hardback and paperback, to beat my insomnia by reading about ocean birds in Walt Whitman’s poems. My favorite poem’s called ‘Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking.’ I sit in my dad’s Lazy Boy rocker-recliner and imagine being on the waves on a creaky ship. The chair makes creaking noises and feels like the ocean rhythms. In my dad’s chair I imagine bird’s wings making those sheet-flapping sounds and the wind making it hard to hear the who-who-who of the morning doves in those poems. If I close my eyes, I imagine the soggy salt air surrounds me and takes me under.
On the shore with Josh as I listen to the waves and think of the words of Whitman washing away the sand and bringing it back again, Josh reads my mind. Well, maybe he just saw me yawn and rub my itchy eyes. Josh notices EVERYTHING. He really pays attention to every move I make.

He asks, Do you ever have trouble sleeping?
Yeah, how did you know?

Well, I guessed that the way you are living, right now, causes anxiety. Your parents aren’t really spending much time with you. You feel like you have to know what is going on around you all the time. That’s stressful. It can interfere with your sleep.

Oh, really?
Yes. You’re dealing with some stressful events—with the divorce of your parents.
So have you told your mom?
Told her what?
About your life here and how your step-father treats you?
What?
Alex, you know what I mean. You know that I’m a psychiatrist, don’t you? I know things about people, I just know, because I’ve heard it, seen it so many times. I can see it in the way you carry your self, the way you talk
I don’t know what you’re talking about.
Are you sure you don’t?
No, I’m fine. Everything’s fine between me and my step-dad. He just doesn’t have much time outside his store to spend much time with me—so I’m not that happy with him, and maybe with the whole situation with his twenty-four-year-old daughter bossing me around all the time. Do mixed families, you know, like families with step-kids, make kids stressed out?
Yeah, it sure could, Hon.

Oh, OK that makes sense. I have leg cramps and my mom keeps calling them growing pains, but I think it’s stress. I hope it’s not growing pains, because I’ve got a few more years left to grow, and I don’t want leg cramps the whole time. My leg cramps keep
me up all night some nights. I asked my mom, one time, if I could take some sleeping pills, but she said I was too young. I used to freak out when I was twelve, and I couldn’t sleep, but now I’m used to it and just read a book if I can’t sleep.

You’re going to need to tell your mom about your leg cramps.

I did. She just said to lay there and that I’d fall asleep. She said to take a warm bath for the leg cramps. She told me not to wake her up anymore. I’m doing OK in school. Books keep me company at night, sometimes movies, sometimes TV shows. The TV gets too loud and wakes up my mom. She comes out and blow a gasket—her neck muscles flare—if I wake her up since she has to go to work early in the morning. So books are better at night than TV.

Alex, you need to tell your mom everything.

What?

I told you. I’m a good psychiatrist. My patients all improved. I was the one who got worse. There are just things that I know about people, about you. I know, Sweetheart, how hard you are trying to cope, and it makes me feel terrible. It makes me want to change the way the world works, but that’s not possible. I can’t change anything for you, but I can listen, if you want to talk.

I really don’t want to talk about this anymore. Can we talk about something else?

I really think you should talk about things. You need to talk about these issues—to put everything in perspective, to give yourself credit, to realize that you are working harder than most kids your age do or should. You need to tell your mother about all that might be bothering you.

Can we just go for a walk? Will you get me an ice-cream cone? Then I can watch the drips plop on the wooden slats of the boardwalk. It’s meditation. It makes me feel better. What do you think?

Yeah, OK, Alex. But I want you to tell me about anything that bothers you when you feel like you’re ready to talk to me about it. OK?

OK. I want raspberry chocolate chip or bubble gum with all the little tiny Chiclets mixed in. Raspberry Chip and Bubble Gum have always been my favorite ice cream
flavors. I used to want the chocolate chips to disappear when I was little but now I kind of like the little bitter chunks in there. It makes it not too sweet. Too sweet is not good. Gotta learn to take the bitter with the sweet, right?

Yes, you’re healthy and wise. I can tell by the way you look at ice cream and pinball.

In my world, I take the ups with the downs. The bumper-balls that crash with the chutes and dazzley loops.

The ice cream place is next to the place with the guy who plays his guitar so we sit down and listen to If you like Pina Coladas and getting’ caught in the rain. If you like makin’ love at midnight... The psychiatrist isn’t really into pop music, not even Florida’s own Jimmy Buffet or any of the parrot-heady-type stuff. He likes classical music. He’s a fan of Beethoven and says it’s because Beethoven’s music is full of emotions. He wears Oxford shirts mostly fresh white ones rolled with navy blue Ex Officio or Columbia hiking shorts to the beach. His tan makes his shirt look even whiter, crisper. I like his bookish look. He’s eccentric like most smart people are. He can get away with geek-wear, because he’s so tan and has curly Greco-Roman hair. He looks like some of the pictures in my art and mythology books. His face looks bronzed with a Mediterranean fineness. When he asks me about my emotions, I don’t know what to say. I say I’m happy. I’m fine. I like the sun. I like Satchmo and The Sunny Side of the Street. I play the English horn—better than anyone in my school—ever and maybe even in Ohio and probably in Florida since there aren’t as many college music teachers like the one I’ve got in Ohio who plays in the Columbus Symphony. I’m fine.

Across the table from me, Josh, my friend, my summer soul-soother, tells me I’m a beautiful girl. He tells me the things my parents haven’t told me since I was little. My mom used to be nice and tell me how beautiful I was. She read me books like my favorite one called Never Tease a Weasel and warned me with her index finger waving in the air. She’d hug me all the time and especially when I got upset. She’d lie on my bed with the window open and listen to the wind and the crickets with me and talk about how nice the summer smells. After she married my step-father and we moved out of her and my dad’s
house, she sort of checked out of my life. All the toys I remember, the breezy summers, her smiles at me, and that book are gone. Now, she just yells about the shoes I leave on the floor and the dishes I forget to do, then she throws them at me as I read. She’s a terrible throw, so she never hits me, but she tries and sounds so scary doing it that the cats run and hide. Whoosh, they disappear. I’m used to her outbursts. I’m not afraid of the mood swings or her emotions or my step-father’s when he curses at the screen door he’s fixing or the electronics he can’t figure out how to hook up. I know what to do—just become invisible, a thing I’m incredibly good at. I just stay where he can’t see me.

I look at Josh and focus on his lean, clean hands, tan and soft. He licks his vanilla ice cream cone and stares at the waves rolling in and back on the beach below under the surfers.

Do you know how I get out of doing the dishes at home in Ohio? I say.

No, how do you get out of doing the dishes?

I tell my mom I have to practice my English horn. She can’t say no to that because we have a deal that I have to practice before my step-father goes to bed at 8:30. He gets up at 5:00 in the morning. He can’t sleep if I practice after that and I don’t get home from soccer until about 7:30. So after dinner, there’s only about a half hour for me to practice, so I get out of dishes that way. Oh, and she said she would sell my English horn if I didn’t practice. I believe her too. She’s tough that way. Either I do things right, or there’s some serious consequences. She scares me. I don’t want to make her mad like my brother always does.

Oh really? Your brother makes your mom mad? How?

Oh, he just doesn’t know how to handle her moods. He’s not good at calming her down the way I am. He argues with her when she’s upset. When she’s upset, all you have to do is nod your head or make the sign of the cross to make her laugh. She’s had a hard life. She told me how mean her mother was to her. She can’t help it if she goes a little crazy sometimes. But at least she doesn’t say, Don’t talk back. She just gets super-angry and her face turns red, then she punches or lashes out. She’s never punched me. She
punched my brother in the arm once. Oh and she did try to stab me with her nail file once. It was sort of funny though. It was rounded on the end and in its little plastic cover and my leg was so built up from soccer that the nail file bent sideways. She felt bad. I knew she couldn’t help it, and she said over and over how sorry she was. I told her not to worry, that it didn’t hurt, and that someday—maybe later today, we’d laugh about this.

Was your mother abused as a child?

No, I don’t think you could call it abuse. Her mother just didn’t treat her as fairly as she could have. My mom told me about her childhood and that she has to try to be a better mother than her mother was. She says that her mother would hit her with the buckle-end of a belt. She said that her mother didn’t give her hugs and kisses the way she hugs and kisses me and my brother. But it got kind of weird with her hugs and kisses when I got older. So I asked her not to do that so much. It’s like she needed the hugs and kisses more than I did.

Alex, I think that your mother was abused and that your role with her is reversed. I think you should be aware of that. I also think you need to get some counseling when you get back to Ohio. I’m going to look someone up for you. I’m worried about you. I really am. You’ve got too much to deal with for someone who just needs to deal with growing up. Would your mother be willing to go to a counselor?

No. My mom tells me her problems. She would never go to a psychiatrist. She thinks if you go to a shrink, you’re a mental case, a lunatic and may as well be institutionalized.

If your mother doesn’t get some objective outside help, then it’s even more important that you do. Does your school have a counselor you can go to?

Not a good one. There’s just this mean lady counselor for my grade. She’s the counselor for the whole eighth grade. She’s a nut-case herself. She yelled at me because I wanted to quit band at school. She just gave me this story about how she quit the violin when she was a kid, and she’s always regretted it, blah blah blah blah blah. She didn’t have to screech that stuff at me. Anyway, she’s mean. I’m not talking to her. Adults think that they can yell and save kids, but quitting band was the least of my worries.
Well, I think you better find someone you can talk to about all this. Pretty soon, I’m not going to be around for you.

OK, maybe there’s someone else. I’ll check it out. I lie to him since I have no intention of getting a counselor. I don’t trust people. I’m not telling a grouchy old shrink about my personal stuff. I’m only telling Josh this stuff, because he’s different. He cares. He’s not someone the school hires or someone I’ll have to pay to talk to. He wants to know about my life, because he cares. He isn’t just a creep who wants a joy ride. He really likes me. I’m attracted to him too.

You know what? Josh asks. He’s been watching as my eyes have been drawn to the surfers. I can feel him watching me watch the surfers as I talk to him about this stuff that makes me worry.

What? I say.

I have an idea. I want you to get out there and make some friends with those kids surfing out there. Why don’t you meet me next Monday morning at around 11:00 at the surf shop? We’ll get you some gear to start out with.

Really? I say.

I hope he’s not too good to be true. When my jaw drops, he shakes his head and reassures me that it’s OK, it’ll be good for me, and that he’s got more than enough money for himself, so he wants to do something good for me. I nod and take him up on his offer, because, so many times, my parents have promised me things I know I’d love to have but they never come through—like the time my mom had a coupon for a computer at about a third of the usual price, and after we stood in line for about an hour at Best Buy, the guy said that the sale was over. My mom just looked at the blue-smocked cashier dude and walked out the sliding automatic doors. I followed her, empty-handed, to the car. I knew not to say anything. She trained me young not to ask for things. I could explain that I would love to have this or that but never in the store and never by arguing with her in public. Even if I made a case and reminded her of how nice it would be and how useful a thing would be to have even if it was in private, once her mind was set, she didn’t give in. Once she started grinding her teeth, as she did at Best Buy, it’s better to
wait for her to cool off. But my computer dreams were dashed, at the checkout counter of Best Buy. The metal bars reflected the blue and white of the box as the cashier put it under the counter and apologized.

I’m hoping that Josh will come through in a way that my mom couldn’t. He hasn’t let me down yet. If anything, he makes me feel light. I float on his words sometimes. I zone out and just listen to the lilt of his Brooklyn accent.

It’s Wednesday, the middle of the second week of my trip. Sunny and I are doing our assigned laundry duty. We lug the baskets full of towels, underwear, socks, and blouses to be ironed later, into the family room. Every room in my dad’s condo has a brown fake-wood ceiling fan with what reminds me of a big brass nipple with a chain. We are close to getting finished with the third load at ten o’clock on Wednesday. I’m thinking about Josh and getting over to the Surf shop, when I get an idea of how to have a fun time doing the laundry. I throw one of my step-mother’s bras and it hooks the fan. I have good aim from all the practice ringing the horse shoe stakes at the park. Sunny laughs at my accuracy, though she frowns a little at seeing her mother’s bra flying around on the fan blade above us. I toss a pair of my dad’s underwear up there and it hooks again and she starts laughing. Then she throws a hot-pink tank top up there and another pair of my step-mother’s baggy underpants. After every fan blade has an undergarment spinning in the air, she calls the whole thing off and tells me to go flip the switch and turn off the fan that we have to get those off of there so the fan won’t break. She’s still got a smile on her face, but she’s back to business and looks annoyed with me again like her mother always is.

My excuse for leaving the condo this time is that I have to finish the baby turtle rescue from the night before. Sunny knows that mother turtles swim in at night and that there are people there to catch and kill the baby turtles, but there are also people who will rescue them and keep them in little aquariums with baby turtle food in them. They hide the aquariums under the wooden deck-bridges that overlap the sandy shoals between
hotels and the shore and in private beach sheds. The turtle-savers lock them in little wooden sheds until morning when people can swim out with them on their boogie boards or boats with paddles to scare the gulls away. It’s a good excuse for me to use on Sunny and her mom, because last year I helped some marine biologists with the turtles and learned a lot. So, if my step-mother asks me any questions, I’ll be able to answer her in excruciating detail. She’ll drift off in boredom into a conversation with my dad.

At the Sex Wax Surf Shack, a half-hour early, I look through the wet suits for about fifteen minutes until I spot Josh walking toward the awning. There are lots of tan guys looking at me like an oddity since I’m the only girl in the place. All the regulars there are talking in their crazy surf lingo. They’re saying things that don’t sound like English. It sounds like some of the things my step-dad says when he’s talking about tools and repairs in his hardware shop.

The colors are bright, the black suits with flowery colors on the chests. Guys wear flowers on their shirts down here—which hardly ever happens in Ohio. These guys don’t worry as much about being macho. At least they don’t worry about anyone dissing them or ostracizing them up for wearing flowers on their clothes. It’s normal here. But these guys are digging the fact that I’m perusing wet suits. One of them comes over and starts talking to me but Josh sort of clears his throat and the boy leaves.

Why’d you do that? I ask Josh.

I saw him smoking under the pier. You should stay away from him. Don’t let him talk you into anything.

Oh, OK I say, but I won’t smoke. Everyone in my family—my Ohio family—smokes but me. Don’t worry, that kid isn’t going to influence me. Peer pressure is not something I pay attention to.

Do you like this one? Josh asks.

He has picked up a $200 wet suit, and I say, No that’s too expensive. I don’t want to spend all your money.
Don’t worry about it. He says. This is your day. Pretend it’s your birthday.
When’s your birthday?
Why? Are you going to send me a card?
Sure. When is it?
March 5th.
Oh, beware the ides of Alex!
I giggle and say, but my English teacher said that *April is the cruelest month*. It must be because you were born then.
How did you know I was born in April?
Because I looked at your driver’s license when you went into the water last week to cool off. Remember? I teased you about being an Aries—a ram—that day.
Oh yeah, he says, I remember that. You rammed into me like this. And he butts his head sideways into mine, but gently. A guy looks over at us and smiles.
I sift through the wet suits inspecting the sizes of the ones that go below the knee and have long sleeves. I pick one that’s marked down from $100 to $50 with a bright orange tag attached by a black plastic loop. In black marker, it says *Clearance*.
Josh says, OK, but I want you to try these too. He hands me about five wet suits. All in varying sizes that look like they might fit me. All super expensive.
Are you sure? I ask.
I’m sure, he says.
I try them all and the most expensive one fits the best. The clearance one is tight in all the wrong places. But Josh sees the best one and tells me that’s the one he wants me to get. What can I do? I try to refuse, but he keeps saying yes, you can have it to my no, I can’t.
After the wet-suit argument, Josh talks to this surf-geezer, who has minimal head-hair but a mass of grey scraggly beard-hair, about boards and instruction. Josh hooks me up with surf lessons. All I have to do is show up at two o’clock, but that might be tough. I promise Josh and the instructor that I’ll be there at two o’clock everyday. After about an hour and a half, I have a stack of surf stuff—a “Supersoft” surf board (chosen by my
instructor) with a neoprene fin instead of a metal one so I won’t cut myself, a rash guard so the wetsuit won’t chafe my chest and abs, and a pair of paddle gloves. The grand total is huge—around three hundred dollars. Exactly a fourth of what my dad gives my mom in a whole year to raise me with. My mom hasn’t asked my dad for more support even though he got a few promotions and raises. She feels guilty because she left him, so she doesn’t make him pay that much. At least that’s what I figured out from their conversations and from what my mom told me about their break-up.

I ask Josh, feeling guilty about how much he just spent, Do you want to put it all back? We can. It’s OK. I won’t be mad. I won’t even be disappointed. I love that you want to get me all this stuff. It’s the thought that counts. It’s really cool that you want me to go surfing, but you shouldn’t do this for me. You should spend this on yourself.

Still, I’m hoping Josh will let me off the guilt-hooks by giving him this out. I’m hoping that he’ll let me reap the rewards of my non-greedy plea (you know, my saying the right thing), because I want to run off with all this loot and jump for joy. As much as I try not to be materialistic, it feels really good to have someone spend a ton of money on something that is totally not for them. The magnets are pulling me toward materials the flashing lights, the drop-gates, the glitz, the green.

No, Alex-honey, Josh says, Don’t worry about it. I can afford it. Really. This is how I want to celebrate the summer. You let me worry about my finances. I want you to just enjoy your new surf board and get ready for your surf lessons.

I don’t even know what to say. I just look up at him and nod, about to cry. I can’t understand why I’m getting all sad. He just did something really great, something altruistic. (Altruism is my favorite big word this year. Now, I’m the receiver of Josh’s altruism). I should be happy, but I have to force a smile, since I feel like this is how my dad should appreciate me and not some stranger I just met on a beach.

For once, I feel like I really matter to someone, my happiness matters, to a man. We both know that the board will mean that I will go off and leave him to be with kids my own age. He’s even sacrificing his time talking to me. I know he believes in me and he must—to spend this kind of money.
The cashier is a blonde kid with a great tan and a coral choker like all the cool kids wear. He asks, Would you be interested in signing up your daughter for Free Surf on Saturday mornings?

Oh, he’s not my dad, I say in a knee-jerk way. The cashier looks down at the calculator and closes the drawer to the register like Josh is going to steal something. When I notice Josh blush, I say, But he makes a better dad than the two I’ve got!

Josh says, kind of defensive-like, I’m just helping the kid out. The cashier looks at Josh funny like he doesn’t understand. He doesn’t know how much I need Josh and how great Josh is with me. He’s a good guy. I know that I can’t expect the cashier to understand that. So I don’t even try to explain, that the people I have to watch out for are the people who live in my house—not strangers. Everything my mom taught me about strangers is wrong.

I say, He’s a family friend—of my dad’s. They went to college together.

The cashier’s face loosens into a half smile, and he says, Oh. Sorry. Well, maybe I’ll see you on Saturday, then. Have fun practicing with your new stuff. See you later.

Yeah, See ya Saturday! I say and wave as Josh and I walk out the door. I never felt so great, and I can see when I look up at Josh’s face that he feels great that I can’t stop smiling. So he pulls me to him from my outside shoulder and says, You’re golden, Alex. You really are.

My favorite pinball game, up at the Pier, The Comet says, in a New York accent, “Ya pay ya money. Ya take ya chanzes.” That’s when you lose your ball to the magnets. Sometimes I actually win, though. So when I hear that guy that sounds a lot like Josh, I laugh, because it reminds me to keep playing. I’m planning to have a blast just playing—not thinking about the magnets, the attractions. All anybody can do is “Take ya chanzes.” This time, I’m winning. I’m flying with fuel now. I’ve got a chance.

Josh says, OK. Now, I want you to make younger friends than me, alright? You saw the look that guy gave me. You need to be with people your own age. I love to hang out with you Alex, but you really need to socialize. This surfing gear should make it
easier for you to meet people your age. So I want you to come back on Saturday morning and meet that kid. I know you’ll have fun. Are you going to be able to do that?

Yeah. But it’ll be hard to carry everything and my dad and step-mom like to sleep in late on Saturdays, they won’t want to bring my stuff in their car. Could you take it and bring it back on Saturday? And tomorrow? For my lesson?

Sure, Alex.

Great! I jump up a little and grab his hand and squeeze it. Josh breathes deep, looks away from me and squeezes my hand back. I feel that little tingle again, between my legs. I wonder why he won’t look at me. I’m not worried about it. He’s got a lot on his mind. Maybe he’s worried about something and doesn’t want to talk about it.

On Thursday, one day after my Sex Wax shopping spree, I go to my first group surf lesson. Josh hands me my new Supersoft surf board and the equipment. He hugs me and leaves. I head into the shop’s dressing room to change. It’s about 1:30. I’m early, because I snuck out of the house while my step-sister Sunny was talking on the phone—laughing with one of her friends about God-knows-what, probably a drummer from the marching band. Sunny gets spaced out and engrossed in whatever they’re talking about, so I just acted like I was going into my room with a book in my hands, so she would tell my step-mom that I’m in my room reading when she calls to check in on us from work.

The first person I meet at the surf lesson is a high school guy who looks a lot like a young version of Josh, so I notice him right away. I think he notices me noticing him, too, because he stands up a little straighter, smiles and comes over to me. He introduces himself. I’m Mark he says.

I’m Alex. You surf a lot?

Yeah. You?

Never surfed before in my life, I say.

I’ll help you then. Let me give you a few pointers before we start. We still have plenty of time.
Before the rest of the surfers get there and before the instructor is ready to instruct, Mark takes my hand and says, Come on. I’ll show you a few things to get you started. I’m just taking this class, because the advanced instructor said I picked up some bad habits, but I won’t show you any of those.

He winks at me. I smile back and nod like he was referring to something like boyfriend-girlfriend bad habits. He guides my board as I put it down on the water. We’re about thigh-deep in waves. My board floats next to his and he says, Get on and paddle. Like this. He has his body on the board but only does a few strokes to make sure I will follow. His expression is all like he’s wanting me to stick with him. That’s fine with me, because his tan feet, his white foot pads look gorgeous. He has baby-soft skin that wicks the water in little continent-shaped slip-slides that glide off him.

See that wave right there? he asks as he points.

Uh-huh. Which one?

The one that isn’t white but is rolling—way out there, he says as he motions closer to my face.

Uh. Yeah. Sure.

We want to go out there, he says, try to time it so that the wave will roll to white when we get beside it, OK?

Uh. OK, I hesitate.

Remember, get beside the wave. Put your board parallel to it, then try to head into it and out of it again. Sort of like making circles with the front of your board on the water. I’ll show you. Like this, Mark makes an arc of his back VW-Bug style. His coral necklace sits just below where his hair flips in a little curl on the back of his neck. Every move he makes exposes new sets of muscles in his body. He’s solid but not stocky, lean but not skinny. He makes it easy to see how I need to move. Keep your hands down. Don’t try to stand, just stay low, he says. Keep your center of gravity low for now.

I do what he says and head into the wave but it knocks me off the board. My wet suit makes me carefree, since I don’t have to worry about whether my bikini got pulled down or not. It would be impossible to do this in my bikini without exposing what little
it covers. Mark’s wet suit loosens up a little in the water, but he seems to fill it out in all
the right places.

When the instructor, the old guy with a grey beard, calls to us from the shore, he
tells us to lay our boards beside us, and to lie face down on the sand with our heads
closest to the water and face the water. I’m Kirby he turns to me and says, You’re new.
Have you surfed before?

No, I say.

OK, that’s OK, Kirby reassures me, just watch me and listen to what I tell you.
Alright everyone, I want you to jump up from the sand into a standing position as fast as
you can, then freeze. We’ll do this three times. Are you ready? This is jump number one!
Get set, go!

I jump up and wonder what this has to do with surfing. Maybe just that it has to
do with getting on the board. It’s gotta be easier practicing on the ground than in the
water. I look to my right and left and the other girl smiles at me like she’s sort of
embarrassed that she wobbled when I looked over. I smile back. She’s cute and acts sort
of shy. She is shorter than me and a little thinner, and with lighter blonde hair that’s
shorter, but her skin is just the same pinkish-tan as mine.

Alright, that’s good, Kirby projects with his voice so we can all hear, Look at
your feet. Which foot is front and which one is in back? Now get ready for jump number
two. On three. One. Two. Three!

We jump up again.

Now, Kirby says, Jump and face right or left, whichever feels more comfortable
for you. Ready, on three. One. Two. Three!

I jump up and face left.

Kind of like a drill sergeant in a movie, Kirby yells, If you are facing to the left,
you are what you call “goofy foot.” You are going to face away from the wave and stand
on the board with your right foot forward. If you are facing to the left, you will face the
wave and lead with your left foot in front. You’ll control your board with both feet but
you will need to use your back foot to pivot from and the front foot to head into and out of the wave. Now, plant a foot behind you. That’s what you’ll jump to when you start to surf. Now. Let’s get on our boards and paddle out together as a group. Stay at least an arm’s length away but stay side-by-side. OK?

Then, Kirby pretty-much teaches us what Mark just showed me before the lesson started—you know, to stay low, not to stand, but hold the board with our hands, and to bend our knees but to try to time the wave first. That stuff—a bunch of times. When the lesson is over, a girl waves to Mark and he waves back, but he turns to talk to me as we head back to the shore and toward her.

Mark asks, Do you want to go get a sandwich up at the Fish Shack? My treat.
I say, Sure, but is that your girlfriend?
Well, not anymore, but we’re friends now. She still likes me, and sort of follows me around, but it’s OK we’re just friends. I told her that. Don’t mind her.

Oh, OK, I say. I squint my eyes a little and try not to let my forehead pinch together between my eyebrows. My mother used to smooth that out when I was little to let me know I was making a serious or worried face. I want Mark to think I’m carefree—not worried all the time. I’m exuberant, I think to myself to cheer up, and it works. I laugh at my thoughts, because I know I must be completely bonkers to think like that!

Yeah, Mark says, we broke up, because she was jealous all the time of me and anyone I talked to. I couldn’t stand it, so I told her that it just wouldn’t work.

I’m not the jealous type, I say, but I do like it when a guy gets jealous when I talk to someone else—unless they obsess about it and drag it out for days or refuse to let me be around other people like at parties and stuff.

Yeah, Kendra’s obsessed. Really, it was awful. She’d come between me and whoever I was talking to. She really was a pain. Just don’t let it bother you. OK? We better stop talking about it now. We’re getting too close to her.

OK, I say and do the lock and key thing with my lips, but he isn’t looking and neither is Kendra who is planning to third-wheel-it with us to the Fish Shack.
We eat as a threesome, and Mark looks at me a lot while he’s talking and ignores Kendra. I feel sorry for Kendra and keep looking to make sure she’s OK and ask her some questions from time to time. She’s a nice person, and I ask her for her e-mail address. She gives it to me on a napkin with the waiter’s pen and I put it in my pocket then stick it in my suitcase when I get back to the condo. It’s been a whole day and I didn’t see Josh at all. I hope he comes back tomorrow. I don’t have his e-mail address, but I remember his home address from his driver’s license. I’m going to surprise him with a letter sometime. I’ll draw all over it. Maybe I’ll make the envelope a butterfly and put some flowery perfume on it. That’ll make him smile. I know he’ll smell it. He’s sensitive like that. He notices everything.

The next Saturday, Free Surf Day, I check to see if the door to my parents’ room is open—which means that they are awake. If it’s closed, they are still in bed sleeping or talking or something. Whatever, I’m glad that I can escape before they see me. I leave a note on the counter just in case. I write, knowing that they will laugh:

To whom it may concern,

I’m out riding Sunny’s bike on the beach—like she said I could. Be back at noon or soon—whichever comes last!

–Alex

I’m usually late getting back, so I try not to make any promises, but my dad and step-mom know that. They chuckle a little when I’m late, because I am so much like my dad. I do other things that he does too. I watch PBS Nature shows for hours and am nerdy and bookish. My step-mom kind of likes it when she sees me doing the things my dad does. She smiled that day and said, Your dad always watches that series! None of us like it around here except him. He watches it when we’re not looking—like you do.

So basically, I’m thinking, from what my mom says, that I share most of my dad’s weaknesses—the social ones at least. But she did occasionally say something good about my dad once—that he rescued her and my brother from an alcoholic creep and from my
grandma Keinz who locked my brother in closets and made him sit on his little potty chair in front of the TV all day when he was a one-year-old. My mom likes to tell the story of when Grandma Keinz tripped on her way to empty my brother’s poop from the potty chair. The poop flew through the air and went straight into the fan. When my mom called and asked how things were going, my grandma Keinz had the pleasure of saying, *Well, Kay, the shit hit the fan today.*

So I take my sister’s bike, with the fat tires, out of the storage area, lock the padlock, walk it across the wooden bridge over the sand, and ride down the beach to the surf shop where the paper the cashier surfer-kid gave me said to meet. The bike’ll make it faster to get home after the Free Surf—whatever that is. So I get up to the Sex Wax Surf Shop at 7:30 a.m., and Josh has already arrived with the board and all my surf stuff. He’s a little scruffy with a wrinkled shirt and heavy looking eyelids, but he smiles and waves me over to his car. Here you go Alex, he says, I’m gonna go now, OK?

No, don’t leave. I want you to watch me.

I have some things to do at the house, and I need to let the dog out. But OK, I’ll stay for a few minutes, but then I’ll have to leave.

OK, I say and write *Thank You Josh, XXOO, Alex* in the sand with my toe.

That’s sweet Alex. You’re one-of-kind. Now, go get dressed in there. He points to the shop and says, Get out there on your board so I can watch you and so Lady doesn’t have an accident on the floor before I can get home! Prestissimo! Go! Faster! Vivace! Move it! With each word his hand motions like a director’s to the shop. I laugh and run away from him. Feeling the little slap on my butt as I took off on the last *Move it!*

As I enter the surf shop, some guys are suiting up. They’re undressing behind racks of surf boards and wet suits. I’m curious about their bodies and one of them gives me an embarrassed smile, so I look away as I head for a more private space. These guys act like they are not used to having a girl around them before they surf on Saturday mornings. But there is one other girl I find in the back. She looks kind of like Danielle.
but tanner. The cashier is there and he introduces himself as Matt and shows me where I can change in private since I’m new and a girl. The other girl looks to see what I’m doing but heads out the back door. The sun has just come up and the water is all sparkly with warm yellows and pinks. I can see where the tide has been the night before and run out to it with my board. Another guy who is wading out, Mark tells me that I need to just float and paddle out a little ways so that I’m out of the shallows where, if I fell off my board head-first, I could break my neck. He’s pretty caring, so I stick with him. He doesn’t move away when I start to get pulled back by a wave. I fall in love a little with him that day, because he looks me in the eyes with a shy smile that makes me look at his dark eyelashes as he looks down at my board and then back up again. He looks Greek. It doesn’t hurt his looks that he’s so golden-skinned and that his muscles make everything he does look easy for me to imitate. I can see what he flexes and when. He’s wearing a short wet-suit like the one I changed my mind and got at the last minute at the register.

Josh sees Mark when the two-hours I asked for are up. Mark’s putting his hands around my waist in that light way of his when Josh yells to me that he needs to go and that I need to hurry up.

Please? Just a little bit longer? I’ve almost got this, I say, but Josh looks perturbed and doesn’t say anything. I tell Mark, as we stand in the shallows that I can’t paddle out again, but I’ll be back tomorrow! I pick up the board and hold it under my arm but it slips so I run to Josh with it over my head so I can get there faster. I hug Josh. One hard squeeze.

What was that for? he asks.

I just felt like doing that. That OK with you?

Fine. But you know I can’t be your dad, right?

I don’t want you to be.

I think you do. You don’t know it, but you do. That need never goes away. But I’d make a terrible father.

No you wouldn’t, I insisted.

Yes, trust me. I would.
I imagine us touching and how neat he would be about everything we did. How expert he would be. How he wasn’t pervy at all and that I was the one who wanted him to touch me and that was making him want to be with me. He would be patient my official first time. He’d go slow. I know it’ll only hurt a little, because he’ll be gentle and talk me through it and watch my expressions to make sure I’m OK. He’ll have to be talked into taking his clothes off, and I’ll have to fiddle with his belt, pants button, and zipper. He’ll resist, but the magnets will be too strong.
Boards Rock & Shake the Comet

The waves on Cocoa beach are cocoa-colored just like the sand. Looks more like brown sugar than cocoa but no one asked me when they named it. The water here doesn’t have the blue clearness that the water has on Big Pine Key. I camped there with some of Sunny’s friends once. The white sands and the water look like a movie, too perfect to be real. The white sandy shore gets bluer in shades that become navy the further you look to the depths. But there’s coral everywhere to cut your feet on or to smack your body into if a wave knocks you off a surfboard. The cinnamon sand on the bottom is really pretty forgiving on Cocoa Beach. I’m glad of that, because I don’t want to be afraid to fall off my board. I’ve fallen off my bike enough to know that dirt and sand are better to land on than stone or bone. Coral is a kind of bone, in a way. When it’s dead, Coral petrifies and becomes stony. It’s hard to camp on too. When we put up the tent, the coral bent our tent spikes, so we had to keep moving the spikes and the tent to find places where the spikes would sink into the earth. The Key deer sounded like dogs at night there and kept me awake almost all night. I got a rash on my palms and feet from being too tired. I get hives, when I get nervous. I got pretty nervous there with only a zipper and some nylon for protection from the wild animals that pillaged the coolers and garbage bags for food.

When I get up on Monday morning, on the third week of my trip to Cocoa Beach, I rub my eyes on the way to the bathroom and find Sunny in there. She is wiping down the wall-sized mirror above the two sinks. I wait before I go in. I don’t want to go into my parent’s bathroom and into their room—afraid of using something I’m not supposed to use, like too much toilet paper or the wrong soap or dripping it or getting water spots on their sparkling clean black marble sink with white swirls. Sunny does chores for money.

Hi, I say to Sunny. You almost done? I have to pee.
We aren’t like my friends back in Ohio. We aren’t like family. We aren’t on peeing terms. She yelled at me the last time I peed when she was in there with the door open.

I’ll be done in a minute, she says with a pasty frown, just need to finish this big mirror.

Can I help? I ask thinking that good will will make her stop frowning.

Sure, but make sure you don’t make any streaks, Sunny says.

What? I ask.

No streaks, she says, Mom inspects the mirrors, and if there are any streaks, even one, then she makes me do the whole thing over again.

Wow. That’s gotta be tough. OK I’ll try, I say, as I climb up and stand on the counter and squirt Windex on the top right corner of the mirror. Sunny works the paper towel over the left side. We must look like book ends, I think, as I wipe the little streams of Windex from the glass. I realize that I’m not making any progress at getting the streaks to go away, but that I am making more streaks and paper towel dust, every time I try to wipe them away. The harder I try the more impossible it becomes for me to get my little spot on the big mirror spotless.

Sunny gets frustrated with my amateur work and begins to grind her teeth until she says, Just put the bottle and paper-towels down and I’ll do it myself! OK?

I leave and go pee in my parents’ bathroom, but I plan to go into the kitchen to wash my hands. So I can cover my tracks, I wipe off the toilet seat with paper and make sure not to leave any fingerprints anywhere. I use another piece of toilet paper to touch the gold-plated sink handles and doorknob in there. There, I say to myself, no fingerprints, no evidence, no inquisitions. When I get to the kitchen to throw the toilet paper away, Sunny is in there ironing my dad’s shirts. They make her do all the housework instead of hiring cleaning people and give her an ‘allowance.’ I sort of sneak through the kitchen door to get my clothes, the ones I washed the night before, out of the dryer from the tiny laundry room that gets almost no ventilation.

Leave that laundry basket in there, Sunny says.
I’ll put it back. I just need to fold my clothes.

Do it in there then, she insists.

OK, I say, because I’m tired and don’t feel like arguing.

Close the door, she yells. Mom’ll bitch if we leave that open!

So I close the door and stand in the broiling heat and fold. Since there’s almost no room to move, I bang my hand on the racks with the laundry detergent, and the third time I do, I cry. Sunny can’t hear me because I learned early, at about three, not to make any noise when I cry, since my dad was always ready with his belt which he’d swing down on me saying, *Aw, shit Alex, for crying out loud, you better stop your bawling, or I’ll give you something to bawl about!* I learned to hold what I could inside—the screams and groans—what I felt of his disapproval—almost all the way. Just my face showed it, and I could hide that beneath my hair if I bent my head down. But the bruises and cuts my mom told me about must’ve been too hard to keep in my memory. My mom remembers that when he got done with me, my legs mapped criss-cross patterns of welts, rivers of red streaks and lakes of bruises. How that stopped me from crying, I don’t really understand. I know that I will never hit a child. Hitting doesn’t make anyone feel better or deal with whatever’s making that person sad. Hitting just makes everything worse. I like what my mother always does if I start to cry or if any child, who we babysit for, starts to cry—she finds something to put in front of them, a deck of cards, a glass of tea, a Popsicle, a marionette, anything to distract them from their tears. With her cheek-dimples and big smiley teeth, she’s a soother, not a scolder.

Dad’s gone, at work again. My mom said that work is all he thinks his responsibility as a husband and father is—to earn money—nothing else related to housework or taking care of kids. He doesn’t know how to share his emotions, she said.

I, on the other hand, think that he knows really well how to be angry. I didn’t say it, but *anger* is an emotion he’s really good at sharing. He doesn’t cry in front of anyone, my mother said. He wouldn’t cry when his mother died. (My mother might have loved his mother more than he did). She said he didn’t even want to keep her keepsakes, her scribbles on the notepad she kept by the phone, the things she touched and used. Her
recipes for cow tongue and Ohio farm fare that we ate, lamb and catfish and potatoes mashed. Didn’t laugh when my brother at the age of three said, Grandpa Scotty! Those aren’t ‘taters’ those are mashed PO-TAT-O’s when our Grandpa Scotty said, Pass the taters, Ricky!

My dad would never cry in front of my mom. There’s something crazy about that, macho- to-the-extreme stuff. I know he is a guy, but the rules all change when you love someone and you cry when you lose them. I didn’t cry, but I was too little and my grandmother yelled at me for doing the pee-pee dance. Then she died. I wish I could just forget her last words to me. My dying grandma said, Don’t tell me you don’t have to go to the bathroom. ‘No’ is a bad word. Now go to the bathroom! My mom said that she was grouchy because she was sick. She died that year, when I was five and my mom left my dad. My grandpa Scotty Scott died the next year. From then on, strangers have been better dads than my step-dad and real dad rolled up together.

On this trip, I try to imagine that my dad is really all the things he isn’t or that he will be one day, that he will tell me he loves me and cry that he has lost so much time with me, that he wants to make up for it by traveling around the country in a robin’s egg blue convertible with me and without my step-mom and step-sister. He’ll rescue me one day and sing to me and tell me he loves me. It’s a dream I have when I listen to the lyrics of songs and certain lines in books about how a man realizes that he forgot that he wasn’t the only one who is hurting, so he gives his kid a hug, talks it out, and shows real affection and interest in having that kid around to show her the things he’s learned and what she needs to know and how a man should treat the girl he loves.

The waves fascinate me. As my brother, who got arrested for smoking dope on the beach would say, They’re trippy. They change colors in the sun when I’m in them, on my surf board. The spray can make a prism that glows purple, green, yellow and white rays through the waves. The sea water is always changing, shifting patterns, never in the
same pattern twice. The water holds life that moves continuously, little plankton, and shells that are both full and empty, waiting for snails, clams, conchs. There’s death there too. Jelly fish wash up on the shore with bones, driftwood, and sharks’ teeth. Change is life and death when I come to the ocean. Even the shallows shift. The waves move on all sides of me, saturate me, get into every part of me. Under the board, under my feet the water gets in, even in my thoughts. I can hear the waves like the ones I hear now when I’m walking with Josh, when I’m dreaming, and when I’m breathing. I dream about making my muscles match the ripples of the waves and feeling the bumps of each ripple under my feet through the soft sided surf board. If I could spend more time on the water, I’d never get bored since it’s the same and never the same. The sands aren’t even the same. Each day the sand is a little finer since the crystals get worn down by the water, but new shells are breaking down to make more sand which starts again as coarse grains.

Josh told me that I could store my surfboard at the Surf Shop, so he doesn’t have to drive my equipment. I found out that I could have rented the board, but Josh said he wanted to donate it to the Surf Shop to teach kids who can’t afford to rent a board. The surf shop was cool with that and is going to store my board and equipment until I go back to Ohio and then they’ll use it for poor kids. I signed my dad’s name on the insurance form and waiver. I put Josh’s name down as the emergency contact, because I would want him to help me if I got hurt—not my dad and definitely not my step-monster.

It’s the beginning of my fourth week on the beach, and I’m starting to get the hang of the board. I’m not quite hanging ten, but I’m riding waves for a little longer more than just to follow it to shore and paddle back again to catch another wave. I haven’t been wiping out much either. It’s hard to make me fall, since I’ve got so many older brothers and sisters. I learn quick how to stay on my feet when they try to trip me up or push me down, even when it’s on my bike at the top of a hill with gravel under it on a bike that’s way to big for me.. I have a good sense of balance. That’s why I’m having such a great time.

I’m eating this last week up. I want to get all the surfing in that’s possible. If I can get out of the house like I did today by saying I’m going to go read by the swimming
pool, I will be in heaven. I’m getting tired of making excuses, so it’s easier to tell Sunny I’m going to read out by the pool. I’m not allowed to actually swim in the pool unless she is there with me or vice-versa, so I have to keep my street clothes on, but she’s OK with my going down to sit on a chaise lounge next to the pool. I just sneak away when I know she’ll be watching her soap opera.

Today, I’m with Mark who has set me free on the waves but is nearby to watch out for me. I’m not as into him as I am Josh, but he likes me a lot. I think he’s a little crazy about me. He keeps glancing over at me when he thinks I’m not looking and checks out my body. With my short wet-suit, all he can see is curves and no flesh. I can see his though, and he’s got seriously developed muscles. He’s lean and hairless and buff, like fourteen-year-olds can be. But he does look at little like Josh might have looked at his age. That makes me stare back at him, smile and nearly fall off my board looking at him. Then he comes over and sits on my board with me to anchor it as I stand on it. He hugs me from behind and kisses my neck. But I tell him that I need to work these waves out on my own and that I’m leaving next Sunday. I say I’ll write to him and he gives me his phone number, e-mail address, and his dad’s name. I tell him that I don’t have a cell phone, because my parents are too cheap. He says that he’ll write me an e-mail and that if I can find a phone, that I can call him.

The hard thing about being me is that just when I’m starting to love someone or some thing, I have to bounce to another school or another town or another parent or the other people bounce away from me. On my own on my board without Mark to make moves on me, I am making my own moves out to the deeper water and calmer but bigger waves. There’s a point where I stop thinking about what I am doing and get into a trance and think only in images that flash into my head of everything and anything. Ice-cream, cold cuts, shark bait, maraschino cherries, rubber trees, silos, corn fields, horses, manta rays, dolphins, pine groves, daddy long legs, archery bows, lantana flowers, aphids, lady bugs, monarchs that fly over the ocean to get to Mexico, and Josh, always Josh and all his expressions, his love for me.
The sky starts to cloud up a little and the waves start to break harder and higher. The clouds are still puffy and white when I get out to the good waves. Mark shows me how to move on the board, and I actually stand for the first long time on a wave but fall off the board after a couple seconds then get back on and yell, LOOK AT ME! I’M DOING IT! I’m DOING IT! when I finally get it again for more than a few seconds.

The water is getting choppier, but it makes the waves come faster, so I keep missing them. I’m focused on riding for longer and faster. I get sort of obsessed. The water is better than any person I’ve known. It’s rocking and rippling with such a force that I can’t stop when the sky darkens. But I’m not that worried when Mark shouts, COME ON, ALEX. WE HAVE TO GO!

But there are still surfers out by the pier who found some rollers that crest in white and crescendo over their voices. COME ON, ALEX, Mark shouts again, YOU CAN’T SURF IN THAT.

YES I CAN! I shout back. IT’S AMAZING OUT HERE. COME ON, LET’S TRY IT. JUST LIKE THEM! I say, over the noise of the wind as I point to the surfers closer to the pier. IT’S OK, WE’LL BE FINE! I yell above the crescendos of waves.

Kurt stays with me and calls Mark a chicken and does the BOCK BOCK BOCK flap with his scrayny elbows. We go further into the deep and toward the big waves where the other surfers are. I paddle with my arms scooping and splashing the salty water into my eyes and mouth trying to keep up with Kurt. I watch the smaller waves and roll over them as I concentrate on the getting out to the high waves that are turning white. I feel the softness of the board and the prickle of the water getting colder on my hands, glad that I have gloves but wish I had a full wet-suit instead of a short one. I get ready to spring to my feet but the wave is taller than me and I time it wrong so I go under and into it with my board, but I hold on and the wave washes over me. The next one looks like a wall, but I hold onto my board and don’t worry about anything but how my feet will feel for the board, grip it though I can’t feel much in them because they are so cold. I squint to look through my hair that gets in my eyes with the salty water. I feel the power of another wave and all the rocking and think about how far this ocean stretches and where it has
been and where it will stretch maybe to Ohio to the Bahamas to Islands, but the water is moving faster as I wait for a wave to get tall for me with one massive roll. I take advantage of a moment, stop thinking, spring up, start to feel off-balance and center myself, my body my feet and ankles, lean in and out. I start to sing the song from the travel bureau, *I love New York. I love New York* while every muscle adjusts magically for me to stay up for as long as the two lines of that song. I ride the wave until it crests and stings my face in a wall of spray that knocks me away from my board and pushes me deep, deeper than I imagined it could into the dark. I didn’t take a deep enough breath. More water suctions me further into the dark and I can’t tell which way is up. I can feel my ankle strap, but I can’t hold my breath much longer, or I’ll pass out. Another current pushes me further in another direction. It feels like I can’t move because waves keep sweeping me in all directions until I’m disoriented. I’ve been trying to let my last reserves of air out slowly. It’s silent and cold. My body is numb. I can’t see anything but blackness. My shoulder scrapes splintered wood and I know that I’m under the pier, I try to grab it, but my hands won’t grip, and my head hits the cement at the bottom of the pile.
When I wake up, I’m in a bright room that blinds me with white. I feel pretty awful—a combination of hunger and nausea. The hunger is stronger, and I try to focus my eyes to ask for food. The pain in my head is growing. I lift my hand up and feel a needle stick my arm. So I put that hand down and feel my head with my other hand. There are stitches on top, but my hair is still there, even though it’s matted and a little sticky with some kind of jelly. There’s a little clear plastic tube going into my arm. I look at the TV with some kid-show on it, so I won’t freak out about the tube sticking out of my arm. Someone says something, but the pain is too loud that I can’t understand them. I can hear, but I can’t comprehend anything but how my body feels, how it’s too heavy to move. It punishes me when I try to move. My throat hurts. I can see that I am wearing a cotton smock with little blue letters placed in boxes like diamonds on a white sky. I don’t think I have any underwear on.

Alex, what in the hell were you doing? Where in the hell’d you get that surf shit? A voice I recognize as an agitated, ready-to-explode, hurt yet muffled tone of a man acting like my father makes me want to roll over and die.

What? I ask and look over to see my dad’s angry face. He’s royally pissed off, but I’m too tired and too hurt to care. He isn’t going to hit me in my hospital bed. He hasn’t hit me since the divorce, but he looks like he wants to. He gets up from one of the chairs next to the window where the sun is shining and then sits back down. His hands grip the chair with their movie-star tan and some white places from where the sun missed. His eyes dart from me to the sky and to Iris and back as if they were beads bouncing in his head to make his thoughts fly faster.
Iris with authoritative inflections exhales the words: Alex! WHAT in the WORLD have you been doing, at the BEACH? You were supposed to be helping Sunny at home or reading or occupying yourself in the house until we got home. Why would you do this to us? And WHERE did you get that surf get-up? Who was that man who called us? I want to know right now! This is intolerable! I can’t believe you did such a stupid thing. You know you weren’t supposed to leave the house!

A man called you?

Yes.

Did he say how he got the number?

Uhn-Uhn-Uhn. No way, young lady, you’re not going to be the one to ask the questions here! Now I want to know how you had a SURFING accident. How did you get a SURF board?

I borrowed it from a friend.

What friend? A boy?

Yeah.

Don’t say YEAH. When you answer me, I want you to say YES or NO but not YEAH. I’m sick of your teenaged sloppiness.

Dad? I try to get his attention but he’s staring out the window at a puffy cloud. My throat aches so my voice can’t quite reach him, Dad? I try to say a little louder, but Iris is talking over me with her complaints and questions.

Dad! I try to yell but my voice cracks into scratchy nothing.

He looks over and looks away again. I want him to push Iris out of the way, but he doesn’t. He lets her keep picking at me with her ice-chipper voice, I want to know what you were doing. A man saved you. When we asked him where you got the surfboard, all he said was, You mean you don’t already know? Iris continues with her tirade, Do you know how stupid that made us feel? How are we supposed to be responsible for you when you won’t be responsible enough to tell us when you are going out? How am I going to explain this to your mother?

Dad? I strain my head to see him past Iris, please talk to me.
Are you being *provocative*, Alex? Iris says, Are you trying to upset me? Iris’s voice sounds flustered that I am not responding. You talk to her, Scott, she’s not answering me. Iris commands and my dad walks over to my bed from the chair by the window.

Why’d you do this? he asks.
I don’t know.
That’s right. You don’t know. You don’t know. Of course, you don’t know.
I just want you to spend time with me, but you’re at work all the time. I don’t get to see you even when I’m here and Iris is always the center of attention or Sunny.
I’m spending time FOR you at work. Hell, ask your mother why she made things this way. I don’t HAVE to spend ANY certain amount of time with you. All I have to do is pay support until you’re eighteen. That’s all I REALLY have to do. Your mother wanted you to spend time here. But God dammit! God dammit! If you’re going to do this kind of crap, then your visits are going to be lots shorter—a few days, a week at the most.
What? I squint my eyes trying to understand things from his perspective. I think about it, OK. He has a crappy kid who ditches an empty house while he is at work. I don’t really get it. It’s like he doesn’t really care. I thought he might, but maybe he doesn’t. I feel numb. I don’t know what he’s thinking. Maybe, he’s just saying stuff for Iris’s sake—so she feels important, more important to him than me.

I should have expected this third-degree from them. There was that time, last summer, when we, my dad and I were going to watch a movie together, just us two, together. Something I chose for us. I had picked something I thought he’d like since he likes boxing movies. I picked *Cinderella Man*. We got through the opening credits with the footage of then Dad said, Hey will you turn off that light? It’s better to watch in the dark with our popcorn. Then it feels like a real movie, like a real theatre.
Iris walked into the room, then and started talking about Sunny and her babysitting job, then plopped down on the couch with the newspaper and flicked on the light beside her.

I said, Hey! We wanted to watch this movie in the dark! It’s really good. Have you seen it?

No…You have though, haven’t you? I don’t know why anyone would want to watch a movie more than once. It’s not useful.

Well, um, I like to watch them twice, I said, Sometimes I miss things the first time. Plus I try to remember the lines so I can use them or think about them more.

Oh, but why? Do you get anything done by watching a movie more than once?

I don’t know, I said. I guess I learn more about people. Try to understand them.

You can learn about people by talking to them at school or on the phone or in a business. Movies aren’t real. They’re just make-believe, a waste of time.

Not to me, I said. And I would really, really like to watch this one with my dad, I said it as politely as I could. I tried to be patient with her.

Well, I get more done by looking up recipes in magazines and newspapers.

Yeah, but I’d just like to spend some time watching a movie in the dark like it’s a real movie theater like you said, Dad. I looked to him for help. But he didn’t respond.

Would you please just let us watch this? We just missed a bunch of stuff in the movie, I begged.

Well, this is MY house and I can sit where I like and say what I like in here.

Yes, you can but you LIVE with my dad, and I only get to see him once a year and he works all the time! I raised my voice and Iris stood up, then my dad stood up and threw his arms in the air, set the popcorn down on the glass table so that the metal clanked loudly, and said, I DON’T WANT TO WATCH THIS GOD DAMNED MOVIE TONIGHT! WHAT I REALLY WANTED TO DO WAS WATCH MY MONDAY NIGHT FOOTBALL! JESUS CHRIST! He stormed into his bedroom. I could hear the TV screen make that low loud hum it makes when it first flips on and then a sports crowd chanting, whistles and referees calling the down and the yard and the penalty.
Iris said, He doesn’t really like movies. Neither of us do.

Then why does he have a collection of DVD’s that covers two full shelves in his closet?

Those are for Sunny’s little cousins who come over to visit sometimes.

I stopped arguing with her then, because my dad had mentioned to me that the cousins already have most of those movies and that he wanted to get the whole *Rocky* series. I knew by then that Iris would deny that my dad had any likes or dislikes that weren’t just like hers. Maybe some people think everyone should think alike and that the people they like already think like them, but with my dad, it’s always been hard to tell WHAT he is thinking about. It’s a mystery as old as the way I used to look up at him looking up at stars on the porch of our house as his eyes darted from star to star, always away from me, and the smoke rose from his heavy breaths of Winston cigarettes.

Now that I’m injured and nauseous, in a *hospital* bed, I want my dad to stand up for me. To push Iris out of the way. To tell her to shut up. To put our relationship above his with her, but how can I get him to do that if she’s always speaking for him? Nothing has worked so far—not being on the honor roll at school, not making the all-star soccer team, not practicing my English horn everyday—not making it into the All Ohio Orchestra. I haven’t been able to get his attention with all the good stuff I’ve been doing. Nothing works and he doesn’t know how hard I’m working just to get up in the morning after the leg cramps and sitting up all night crying because I can’t get to sleep. The alarm always rings when I have finally relaxed and am sound asleep. I even make it to school on time—well, most of the time. I always do my homework without anyone asking. I do enjoy school. Academics is the easy part. The hard part is trying to relate to other kids when they talk about boys. I’m more interested in what ketchup the cafeteria serves than who’s dating who in my school. I’m just trying to keep the older boys, that my brother brings home, from trying anything on me. I have more to worry about than he knows, but if I told him any of it, there wouldn’t be the mystery of not knowing what he might say.
As long as I don’t know what he’s going to say, I can imagine him saying all the right things. I want him to be like one of those movie or TV families—like the family in *Little Miss Sunshine* who, instead of disappointing the kid, all pack into a VW bus and travel cross-country from Arizona to California. The dad in that movie gets on stage and dances with his daughter and cheers for her. That’s not what’s happening here. Nobody’s saying the right thing. Nobody’s ever cheered for me at even one of my soccer games, which I hitch rides to with my teammates’ parents when it’s too far to ride my bike—or I just miss those games.

Still, I know those warm-fuzzy, loving parents are out there. I know that there must be a father somewhere who will take charge, stand up in public and say some things that show that he understands what his daughter has been going through without him, so that they can have a relationship that starts with a tight grip hug and hot, red cheeks where tears fall. In the movies a step-mother would step back and let the dad and kids have the bonds they need, bonds so strong that no one can break them as long as they have each other. The movie-father and his daughter are talking like a team. The movie-father promises to pay more attention to the daughter and everything changes from that day forward. The next day, her father takes her to work with him so she can see the picture of her and her mother smiling together on his desk. All of his coworkers know his daughter because of his collections of newspaper clippings with her picture and headlines from the paper that say “YOUNG MUSICIAN TO PERFORM IN ALL OHIO ORCHESTRA”. His coworkers ask her about what she’s been practicing lately and what her favorite books are. She says, *Bridget Jones’s Diary* and they laugh and say that they loved that movie. The father looks at this daughter like she is the most beautiful person on earth to him and that he’d do anything to protect her.

What is happening in my hospital room is nothing like that. It’s the opposite. Iris breaks in on my dad’s tirade about having a kid who doesn’t appreciate the work he does or what Iris does and thanks them by being a juvenile delinquent. Iris says, Your dad loves you. He really does. He just doesn’t know how to show it, and you are NOT making it easy for him by being so disrespectful.
I close my eyes and think about Josh and wonder what he’s doing, where he is, why he didn’t stay, whether I’ll be able to see him again. His face appears in my thoughts and he is smiling with the dimple on his honey-tan blushing face. His umbrella is back folded and lying close to the bottle-brush grasses that line the sand hills beyond where the tides can reach. Josh shields his light brown eyes from the sun so that a shadow of fingers stretch across his face. He listens as I talk about the jelly fish stings, puffer fish poison, and the stinging nettles that raised my skin into welts when I went hiking with my mom, dad and brother in Ohio.

I can barely hear Iris’s irate voice over the sounds of my memory of my older brother’s laughter when my mom tickled him as he ran into the bathroom when my dad was in the bathtub. Our Labrador and I were trying to get between my brother and my mom. None of us were afraid to be naked in front of one another. We were a family who trusted each other, and we shared the lavender soap. We shared beds when my brother or I got scared at night of the dark or of bad dreams. We would talk and then go to sleep in the same bed with our black Labrador and farm cats, who came into the safety of the house at night after they roamed our thirty-acres. The fleas always bit me more than any of them, and my family would laugh about that. My mom worried about whether I could breathe at night when my body somehow ended up under all the blankets at the bottom of the bed.

I’m lost in that world that was—until I open my eyes to the nurse who is escorting Iris out of the room. My dad is already gone. The nurse comes back after a short while and says that they’ll need to keep me overnight for observation since my head injury is pretty serious. I had heard the doctor tell her, when I was supposed to be asleep, that there was a tiny bit of blood on my brain in the MRI and that I would need to get a few more tests. They want to make sure that I would wake up in the morning, and that I could stay conscious.

I’m hungry. My stomach has that empty pain in it, but I also feel nauseous. I asked the nurse, who is holding my hand, if I can have something to eat. Some Jell-O or
something? Sherri, it says on her name tag. Sherri, I say, could I have some lime Jell-O?

I’ll ask the kitchen, honey. Sherri’s hand feels good holding my hand. She looks concerned and makes me feel like there’s someone who cares. I’m wishing she could be my step-mom, but I don’t say that.

She says, I’ll ask the cooks to make some lime Jell-O but that will take awhile. So, what if I bring you cherry Jell-O now and you can have the lime Jell-O in the morning?

OK, I say.

It’s hard to talk and my body feels like it’s still under water. It’s hard to move.

Sherri gives me an understanding smile and says, Good honey. I’m going to have to leave now, but if you need me, or start to feel dizzy, just push this button.

OK, I agree, because that’s all I have the energy to say. I have to go to the bathroom, so I get up and walk over in my bare feet holding my gown closed, wrapping the excess material around my body. I lift it like a skirt to sit on the split seat but only after putting the seat cover on the bowl. Then I crawl into bed and dream about the waves, the breakers, the sky and the sun as it gleams peach through my eyelids. I imagine the wind drying my wet hair. I imagine the taste of nutty bars, chocolate mousse, the dessert my mom and I shared after an orchestra concert in the Columbus Symphony Concert Hall. My friend Candace’s mother was my mom’s favorite person with her disguised Boston accent, one that would occasionally slip out to expose her as the high classed Easterner my mother admired. I have good memories of Candace. She was intriguing to me because she was interested in science, music, art and constellations, multi-colored nebula that she spotted with her telescope. She showed me Venus.

On the second day in the Canaveral Hospital, I have lime Jell-O, and an MRI. Later that day, the doctor says something to the nurse, and Sherri comes over to my bed and says that my parents will pick me up and bring me a set of clothes. I’m sad to have to go. My eyes tear up, but I don’t cry at the thought of going back to my dad’s house. I
want my mom, my creaky old staircase in Ohio with its honeysuckle-covered hills. I want the park lady and the kids in hoards at the Kahiki Swimming Pool their voices blending into one fabric of noisy squeals on top of chatter and protests that are only for show.

My parents arrive with my clothes and I ignore, once again, their questions. I know they won’t hit me but they would if they could. I’m not fully recovered. Sherri has given them instructions which they carry as far as the car, and then they hand them to me.

Iris remembered my bra, underwear and socks—which impresses me—as I walk to the Buick and get in the backseat. The streets are mostly white from the sun. Everything, the buildings, the light poles, the rocks in the little planters of islands that line the streets with Sago palms look whitewashed compared to the deeper colors in the north. The tap water here tastes fishy as opposed to the ultra-chlorinated Ohio water that I’m used to.

I’m thirsty, I say and my dad opens his window, reaches out with his hand miming the shape of holding a glass, and hands it to me. I smile, because he learned that from my mother, and I take the imaginary glass from his hand, take an imaginary drink, and say, Thanks, Dad!

When we get back to the house, the cat who always avoided me before, comes over and smells my jeans’ leg. There are bars on all of the windows and a new sign near the porch that reads, ADT Home Security. My step-mother tells me that she is arming the new security system tomorrow so that I will not be able to get outside without setting off the alarm. The police will come if the alarm goes off.

They went to a lot of trouble to make sure that I won’t get out when they’re not home, but I know how to disarm the alarm. I just need to find the password.

I wait until they go to work. First, I look in the hampers because I know that’s where my step-father has hidden things in Ohio. It isn’t in the hamper but I check my dad’s pockets and my step-mother’s pockets for where they wrote down the password. I check the kitchen cabinets and the crisper drawer of the refrigerator. I even check under the towels in the bathroom linen closet. Still no password. I feel like a burglar as I rifle
through my dad’s underwear drawer. It’s not under his socks. It’s in the top junk drawer under the penknife that I got him once and the CD recording of my All-Ohio Orchestra. My dad had written it in red and put it face down in his junk drawer.

I’m sly and I disable the system while my step-sister who is on guard duty goes to take her shower. I’ll be long gone and hiding under the boardwalk when she gets done there. She’s getting fixed up because she’s going to have some friends over. She complained to them on the phone that her stupid little sister almost killed herself at the beach, and she’s assigned to baby-sit and make sure her I stay in the house. I don’t even want to meet them. Now that they know that I am a freak. So I punch in the password, change the set up, and get out of there ASAP. My legs are much stronger after just eating my step-mother’s tuna casserole. I’m shaking with the excitement of getting past both guard and system. I’m excited that I’ll see Josh soon.

When I get to the beach, I ask Josh what happened to him when I went under that wave.

He said he ran out and dove for me because I fell off my board. He performed CPR on me to get me breathing again. Then he said he checked my bag and found a tag inside with the names Iris and Scott Nelson with an e-mail address. I wrote to them and told them you were in the hospital that I was a good Samaritan and performed CPR, but I didn’t want to meet your parents. I was afraid of what they might think of me. It’s weird, you have to admit, that we have this relationship.

My heart jumped at the word relationship. I’m not sure what kind of relationship it is but it’s an adult relationship at least that’s how it sounded when he said it. Why else would he have said he didn’t want to talk to my parents. But I’m thinking it’s a romantic one. I don’t say that though. I just think it, as he talks about how he wants it to be a purely platonic relationship. But he feels more than that, feels, more than he should for me. More than my parents would want to find out.
On the last day of my pinball summer in Florida, we, the psychiatrist and I stand all glassy-eyed together in a secluded spot under the pier. I’ve been waiting for this moment. I could tell from the look on his face that he wanted to tell me how much he’s going to miss me, but he tries not to show it. He says, and I can tell he is trying to stay cool, trying to be unemotional, I’ll just give you a fatherly hug, and we can call it a summer. You need to get back to school and learn something useful in Ohio—watch the seasons change, learn about politics.

Then I say, Can I kiss you? I’m so nervous. A chill rushes through me.

He says, Only if it’s a peck on the cheek, and kind of fiddles with the edge of his pants pocket. He steps towards me gathering me in his cotton dress shirt, my cheek against the thin fabric on his chest.

He always looks good. His skin is dark and a little rough not baby-soft like a boy my age. He’s a man. I like that he has responsibilities. He has a car and a house and talks about having had a fiancée, but she said he didn’t make enough money, so she dumped him. I think that’s pretty lame. It’s enough for me that he has a house and a car. Isn’t that the American Dream? It’s mine. I even like that he has a little bit of a tummy. It’s something that distinguishes him from the boys I know. I can see where he shaves. He makes me feel good about myself. I think we make each other feel great about ourselves.

When I look up at his face, our breathing changes. So I kiss him the way I saw lovers on TV kiss. And I feel electric with him. I can tell by the look on his face that he’s feeling something like the tingling that my body has, and he has to feel that wave of blood and air rush in. I do—since we’re finally touching. His lips tighten. He backs away to arms’ length, his hands keeping my arms from moving, and says, You’re a lovely girl, but you’re just a naïve kid. You’re still changing, and you trust me, don’t you?

Yeah, I say.

It could never work—a thirty-seven-year-old and a teenager. You know that; don’t you?

I shrug my shoulders and hold them there for a few seconds as I try to think.
You wouldn’t want to be stuck with me for the rest of your life? Would you? You’re just starting out in the world. You’re in high school. You’re beautiful, imaginative, intelligent, and I would love to marry you. You wouldn’t want an old guy like me when you turn twenty-five, would you? I’ll be almost fifty by then. When you’re fifty, I’ll be seventy-something. You wouldn’t want to be fifty and have to live with an old guy, would you?

I don’t know, I say. Everything, the ground, the clouds, my thoughts start to revolve around me, and I don’t know if what’s happening is really happening. I’ve wanted it to. I’ve wondered about what would happen, but I didn’t think he’d really ask me that stuff. I can’t get my mouth to answer him. All I want to do is talk to him. I just want to kiss him, and I think I might be in love with him. I’m pretty sure my parents wouldn’t like the idea. Maybe I could wait. I want to think things out. I’ll wait for him to wait for me for a few years until I’m old enough to marry him.

But before I can tell him anything, we’re in the sun again, shaking hands, and saying goodbye. Bye, I say without realizing I’m saying it. Bye, I hear myself say.